Rejecting the Impulse: The Grail Quest in T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land

David Glaesmann

Malcolm Cowley, a renowned American social historian, has written brilliantly and insightfully about the Lost Generation's plight after World War One. Coming home to neither the idealistic world that Woodrow Wilson had promised them nor the old world they had known in their youths, this generation of disillusioned writers, he explains, found itself trapped in a numbing transitional time period in American history, where old traditions were slowly giving way to new ones, leaving them with the strange and desperate task of piecing together a meaningful life from the old and new fragments of their society:

> Its members were . . . seceding from the old and yet could adhere to nothing new; they groped their way toward another scheme of life, as yet undefined; in the midst of their doubts and uneasy gestures of defiance they felt homesick for the certainties of past. (592)

John W. Aldridge concluded that for many of the members of this post-war generation, like Ernest Hemingway, F.Scott Fitzgerald, and John Dos Passos, this new scheme of life would not be found by staying in society but through self-exile instead, leaving the artistically dead climate of the United States in favor of Europe, where it was hoped they might recapture in their writing some of the poetic passions that their native land had lost during the war (12).

And they made their lives passionate again, at least artificially. Now that society was no longer bound by an absolute code of right and wrong, they reasoned, this group of disillusioned poets, novelists, and intellectuals spent most of their days indulging in reckless love affairs, drinking heavily at parties, and writing extensively in their spare time. In many respects it was a life dictated by self-impulse, everything being done with the sole purpose of satisfying the artist's most immediate desires, needs, and wants.

It was this direct defiance of society's social conventions which informed the second part of their revolt against the modern world. Finding passion in only what they did for themselves, writers of the Lost Generation reoriented literary art in tune with Dada Surrealism, a philosophy which venerated radical individualism above social obligation, to serve the exclusive personal needs of the artist, instead of society. Adhering to this

literary philosophy, novelists, poets, and intellectuals created art with the intent of confusing and befuddling society; in effect, it was their way of thumbing their noses at a modern culture that was equally inexplicable.

Interestingly enough, T.S.Eliot, who is often included in this group of highly visible American writers, did not find any kinship with the lost generation's artistic cause. In personal interviews, he made clear that he was not a spokesman for "the lost generation," and did not lament the failure of Woodrow Wilson's idealism. He himself commented: "I dislike the word `generation.' When I wrote a poem called The Waste Land some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the `disillusionment of a generation, which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention" (Martin 8). Eliot's refusal to partake in the Lost Generation's antiquest in literature may suggest that his motives for writing The Waste Land extended far beyond an impressive experiment in modernist poetics.

To deny that Eliot lamented the dramatic fraying of American society's social fabric would be an inaccuracy. Unlike the members of The Lost Generation, however, he did not believe that the modern artist, despite the despairing conditions he lived in, should succumb to a popular impulse for social and literary self-exile. Regeneration of the artist, which he did consider a distinct possibility, would start when each writer was courageous enough to break his isolation from society and start a new grail quest for decency, poetic passion, and meaningful love in the world. It was only this quest, he implies in The Waste Land, that will help the post-war artist confront the emptiness in his life, and reunite once again his poetic experiences with humanity to bring order to the chaos of the contemporary world.

Literary analysis of the grail quest in The Waste Land falls into two broad categories: (1) autobiographical implications of the poem and (2) anthropological explanations. Christina Froula, among the several noteworthy Eliot critics, extracts an autobiographical reading of the grail quest using evidence from the original version of the poem, "He Do the Police in Different Voices," to argue that Eliot, the implied protagonist in the poem, is embroiled in a personal quest to overcome two contradictory forces controlling his life, sexual desire and social restraint. Froula's psychoanalytic/feminist interpretation bears considerable fruit for Eliot scholars, elucidating the importance of gender and sexual dysfunction that are rampant in the poem. However, Froula may be pursuing an impossible thesis--that being to divorce Eliot's community of readers from the poem, which seems to be an outright violation of the objective correlative, a concept which most recognize as informing the bulk of Eliot's poetic technique.

The anthropological elements of the poem, namely the seasonal imagery, the biblical allegory, and, of course, the Arthurian Romance Legend, illustrate that the grail quest in the poem is to be understood within the context of Eliot's conception of tradition, time, and history, not his personal turmoil, as distressing as it was. John Fowles, in an exploration of Celtic myth in the Ebony Tower and The Waste Land, lends

considerable credence to the idea, arguing that the grail quest in the poem is one that many questers have undertaken throughout time--to restore the fertility of a society by finding the legendary chapel perilous and asking the right questions about his/society's existence (Wilson 303). Uniting contemporary society with a timeless noble tradition not only appears to inform Eliot's poetic strategy but also his social outlook as well. Breaking with the past, Eliot contends in his literary criticism, will create a universe in which time itself spins chaotically out of control, leaving authors and individuals reeling for some form of certainty. While Fowles highlights a crucial element to Eliot's poem, he ignores the interesting array of personae we hear in each section, and its connection to Eliot's own generation.

We cannot, however, overlook the interpretative frame, Jessie L. Weston's From Ritual to Romance, that both Eliot and his critics used to unearth the significance of the grail quest in The Waste Land. In her anthropological work, Weston examines vegetation rituals and their connections to the waste land theme in the Grail legends of Celtic Romance. She traces the theme to a source in India's ancient Rig-Veda, where she found the story of Rishyacringa, a young man who is raised in the forest apart from women, and when the land falls into ruin, a temptress leads him into the city, where the King gives him his daughter in marriage, and as soon as the marriage is consummated, the curse is broken, and "the rain falls in abundance" (30-32).

In the Grail legends of Celtic Romance, Weston believes that the quester is a knight who searches for the Grail, Christ's cup of the last supper. In the Perceval version of the legend, the knight is raised apart from women in the forest, and faces, like Rishyacringa, the temptation of a woman on a luxurious barge (32). Upon entering the waste land, the knight discovers that the Fisher King is dead or excessively aged or suffering from a sexual wound, and to restore the King's youth and the fertility of the land, the knight must go to the Chapel Perilous and ask questions about the objects he sees there, which usually include a lance and a cup (178).

In The Waste Land, Eliot's Perceval knight appears to be an odd variant of the one in Grail romances. Neither dead nor alive, the artist hero in the poem has presumably withdrawn from his society for reasons similar to those articulated by the Lost Generation artist. Sexually sterile, socially fragmented, and emotionally dead inside, his adult world is a different place from the one he grew up in. Understandably, beaten down by his remorse for society's decay, he has built and spent the entire winter (whether winter means one season or a lifetime, we are never certain) living and functioning in a state of emotional hiberation. Yet, even within this self-imposed hermitage, he cannot suppress the two forces welling inside of him--his memory of a vital childhood and his desire to relive it. In the "Burial of the Dead," the first section of The Wasteland, Eliot's artist begrudgingly acknowledges these intense feelings, admitting that he is not completely dead, at least not yet:

> April is the cruellest month,
> breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land,
> mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain.
> (1-4)

As Derek Traversi points out, the opening in Eliot's poem is a bleak contrast to the invocation of spring in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: "The `sweet showers' of April have `pierced the root' the `draught of March'" (24). Spring, in Chaucer's work, is a time of renewal for people, its beauty compelling them to pursue life's activities again with a renewed sense of vigor and vitality.

In Eliot's poem, however, April, normally the month of rebirth, becomes the "cruellest month," whose showers mix the memories of a now deceased childhood with the protagonist's desire to relive them (Traversi 24). The incident from his childhood that torments his memory is the recollection of a sledding incident with his cousin, and the exhilaration, fear, and freedom that it gave him. Safe in his hibernation, he lets himself travel, sliding down into the most intimate regions of subconscious:

> And I was frightened. He
> said, Marie, Marie, hold on
> tight. And down we went.
> In the mountains, there you
> feel free. I read much of the
> night, and go south in the
> winter. (14-19)

It is not surprising that the protagonist now associates comfort and safety in the adult world with the winter season, explaining that "Winter kept us warm, covering/ Earth in forgetful snow, feeding a little life with dried tubers" (5-7). The association, of course, justifies Eliot's apparent inversion of these seasonal symbols, death coming from spring rain and life germinating from winter. Along with its power to annihilate life, winter, in terms of its psychological potency, has the power to preserve it as well. By keeping memories of a more vital past buried beneath the snow, he does not have to confront change, risks, or chances, elements which he fears will disrupt the certainty of his emotional deadness. April rain, represented here as "personal change," thus becomes cruel in the sense that it disrupts the empty routine that he has become accustomed to. With the snow melted, and his hibernation over, he is forced to contemplate the turmoil in his world and step out once again to find something worth living for.

Reflecting on his adult life, however, he decides that he can no longer remain emotionally dead. Although the memories that spring rain stirs frighten him, he desires relief from his empty existence. Early in this section, he perceives his adult life as "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" (5-8). Traversi argues that the protagonist's impulse to take up the quest for a more vital life is evident in this early section. The rain which stirs `dull roots' and forces `branches to grow' suggests that memories may be able to revitalize his own dull spirit and force him to reach out to others who are in the same predicament (26). Moreover, he finds some relief from the waste land in the shadow of the red rock:

> (Come in under the shadow
> of this red rock),
> And I will show you
> something different from
> either your shadow at
> morning striding behind you
> or your shadow at evening
> rising to meet you. (26-29)

Traversi believes that the desire may be an illusion, but it is a strong intention to step out of the Waste Land, and share

again in a meaningful human relationship (26). Furthermore, the emphasis on the `shadow behind' and the `shadow rising' is one of the dominating ideas of the poem; in order to begin living again, the individual must confront his memories of the past and the uncertainty of the future (26).

Memory and water, elements each representing separate sides of the protagonist's divided consciousness, are personified further by separate male and female personae. Yet, Froula believes that the voices merge into a single consciousness, the feminine voice representing both the desire for and loss of meaningful sexual relationships and the masculine voice representing what she calls an internal police, which serves to represses the sexual self (237). The connection to the Perceval legend is particularly important here. Using sexual desire, as we recall, women in the Perceval legend were responsible for guiding the quester to an "intuitive" knowledge of his society's decay. Furthermore, with the women submitting to his sexual desires, the quester is moved to action and restores fertility back to the wasteland. Similar to the protagonist in "The Love Song of J. Edgar Prufock," the quester in The Waste Land remains paralyzed by these forces momentarily. Throughout the poem, action towards desire often results in raging self-doubt followed shortly by personal discovery, resulting in a weird and vicious cycle of self-entrapment.

Letting his desire rule for the moment, he recollects one of his love relationships. The flower of love, it appears, may have blossomed at one time for the quester, as he recalls a potentially passionate moment :

> `You gave me hyacinths first a
> year ago;
> 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,
> Looking into the heart of
> light, the silence. (35-41)

As one can see, the passage carries massive loads of emotional freight, yet the memory and its impact on the protagonist remain ambiguous, since the episode does not indicate whether he found fulfillment in the experience or another disappointment (Traversi 27). The ambiguity of the passage, however, may illuminate something important here. Silence does not necessarily mean "deadness"; in the context of his quest, it may suggest deep reflection towards a new end, indicating that the protagonist, while emotionally frigid, has not yet abandoned his desires, just suspended them for the moment.

The question, of course, becomes one of connection, to find answers to a personal riddle that eludes the quester's understanding. Appropriately, the quester does not turn to scientific reason (suggesting, of course, a momentary rejection of masculine self-restraint), say a therapist or medical professional, to rediscover the vitality that he has lost. To find supernatural faith, he must find someone with supernatural abilities, someone who has the ability to look beyond the secular to the divine. Appropriately, Madame Sosostrsis' tarot fortune readings tie into the water imagery, since her expertise in the "occult world" baptizes the quester in the new knowledge of his society.

Furthermore, the drawn-out nature of the episode implies a type of sexual seduction, a foreplay leading to total sexual arousal when self and societal knowledge finally coalesce.

Betsey Creekmore believes that Madame Sosostris' Tarot fortune may be the most important episode in the poem, since it not only informs the protagonist of his fate in the Waste Land, but also identifies the major themes of the poem. Inevitably, the quester's baptism and seduction begin with water. The first card that the famous clairvoyant lays down is the Significator Card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor. Creekmore explains that the dead Phoenician sailor "represents the query of the protagonist, the death-in-life which is the condition of dwellers in the Waste Land, and the possibility of redeeming death" (911). To justify this connection, Creekmore explains that the Significator Card has the picture of a dead man lying by an ocean, and the image of death, symbolized by a partially hooded man, riding a white horse and carrying a banner with the picture of an emblazoned flower. Yet, Madame Sosostris directs the protagonist's attention to the center of the flower with an allusion to Ariel's song in Shakespeare's Tempest: "Those are pearls that were his eyes." Creekmore says that in the center of the flower are waxy, pearl-like balls which contain the poison of the flower. Furthermore, Ariel's song, which describes a rebirth through death, is linked to the symbolism of the Significator Card, for the card not only has death images on it but also "the sun of immortality," which shines between the pillars of immortality. Thus, Creekmore believes that one of the meanings of the card is that actual death is an instrument of progress or spiritual rebirth (911), a lesson that the modern quester must learn if he is to overcome his despair.

As in the Perceval legend, the protagonist becomes aware of the world's sexual impurity. The second card Madame Sosostris lays down is The Queen of Pentacles, described as Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks. Creekmore explains that this card suggests a dark woman who could have greatness of soul. She is pictured gazing at her symbol (the pentacle) and sits upon a throne carved of rock, so she is the lady of the rocks. The card is to be understood as a reversal of the fortune which appears in the poem, indicated by the word "Belladonna." The traditional meanings of the card are a dark woman, countrywoman, friendly, chaste, and honorable. But in the context of The Waste Land, the card illustrates that the protagonist's world is "characterized by evil, suspicion, suspense, and mistrust" (911). As Traversi believes, it is clearly related to woman's situations where lust "has come to be divorced from any redeeming or humanizing conception of love" (29).

The third card in the fortune raises a more tortuous issue for the protagonist and introduces the theme of meaningless love in the contemporary world. Madame Sosostris lays down the card with the Man with Three Staves, otherwise known as The Three of Wands. In Tarot packs, the man stands in green vegetation interspersed with rocks, and the three staves he holds are living boughs. As Creekmore point out, the color of water in this card is important because it looks like desert sand, while the water is blue in the other cards that are shown (912). The

importance of the card is its relation to enterprise, strength, trade, commerce, and discovery. All of these values are secular values, not spiritual ones, and prevent the protagonist from reaching a spiritual regeneration in the waste land. Indeed, as Creekmore explains, the card is linked to the Significator Card by the stylized ships, to the One-Eyed Merchant by its divine meanings, and to the Hanged Man by the living staves (915).

The readings have taught the protagonist several important virtues. Death, when offered as a sacrifice, is virtuous and will bring regeneration. Sexual impurity, represented by the perversion of the Queen of Pentacles, pervades the wasteland and must be vanquished. Finally, the third card shows him that he must not submit to his material desires, as these will leave him spiritually destitute. Realizing these values, however, is contingent on one thing--accepting chance. As we recall from the beginning of the section, chance disarms the protagonist, fearing that he may lose his certainty. When Madame Sosostrsis lays down The Wheel of Fortune Card, which crowns the Man with Three Staves, the quester learns that he may conquer all evils and achieve virtue if he accepts the challenge of risk. According to Creekmore, the wheel of fortune is a symbol of cause and effect, and if the protagonist denies chance, the card implies fatalism. However, the card also suggests that through a divine purpose, the protagonist can understand the causes of his fate, and seize control again of his situation--the theme of which becomes the quester's grail in the Waste Land.

Overcoming the world's evils will not be simple. As the next card demonstrates, the One-Eyed Merchant Card, known as The Six of Pentacles, links materialism and secular vices to personal frailty. On the picture of the card is a merchant weighing money on a pair of scales, demonstrating his good fortune. The card is represented in the poem by Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, who is linked to the Phoenician and Syrian merchants who practiced the mystery cults (914).

If the world is to survive though, he must risk everything, even if that means his own life. The chance for renewing the land again appears to be good. Although Madame Sostorsis does not find "The Hanged Man Card," Creekmore believes that the Hanged Man has come from the back of the pack reversed, and represents not an upside-down hanged man, but the Fisher King, or Frazer's Hanged God who had died in order to cause rebirth. Furthermore, when the figure is reversed, its definite halo forms the shape of a cross and appears like it is leaning against living boughs (915).

In a more pronounced way, Eliot is outlining the process in which a quester can become a martyr. Through death, Eliot seems to reason, the quester ascends to a higher plain of virtue, a plain which should be lauded. Madame Sosostris says "I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring." According to Creekmore, the Tarot Card being referred to is The Last Judgment, where the "great angel is surrounded by clouds but blows his trumpet to which the banner of the cross is attached" (916). Below the angel is a circle of people standing in "their coffin-barges on a body of water, all of whom exhibit `wonder, adoration, and ecstasy" (916). The card depicts the last judgment but it also symbolizes the resurrection of the natural body and the purifying aspect of

love. It is the card which shows us the hero has undergone a spiritual transformation and will be reborn again for answering the call of a quest for a higher purpose.

Indications of renewal, however, give way to signs of despair. At the end of "The Burial of the Dead," the protagonist looks at the decay of London and laments: "Unreal City," where "Under the brown fog of winter dawn, A crowd flowed over London Bridge" (60-62). The brown fog image echoes Eliot's earlier poetry with the city of Preludes, of a Portrait of a Lady, and Prufrock (Traversi 30). But as William T. Moynihan asserts, the "Unreal City" in Eliot's poem is a symbolic hell (175), with references to Dante's Inferno ("I had not thought death had undone so many"), and Baudelaire's Ennui ("You! hypocrite lecteur!--mon semblable—mon frère!") (63,76). The despair, however, enunciates a change in the quester. Unlike the beginning of this section, the modern quester's laments may actually be psychological probes, a kind of tortuous self-examination of some hidden pain that he is trying to conceal. The self-probing manifests itself in lines 71-75, when the protagonist asks:

> That corpse you planted last year
> in your garden,
> Has it begun to sprout?
> Will it bloom this year?
> Or has the sudden frost disturbed
> its bed?
> O keep the Dog far hence, that's
> friend to men,
> Or with his nails he'll dig it up
> again! (71-76)

James H. Frazer explains that the passage comes from Webster's The White Devil, except Eliot has substituted "Dog" for "Wolf." In previous criticisms it has been explained that "Dog" is "God" spelled backward; thus, the dog digging up the corpse could symbolize the "uncovering of some type of buried truth" (186). The corpse in the buried garden, in Jungian terms, is "the corpse of the consciousness of the people of the waste land" (186). It is the lost consciousness of a generation, a consciousness that was lost in the Garden of Eden, when knowledge of good and evil was gained (186). More significantly, Dog endeavors to dig up the corpse with its "nails," a strange word choice considering Dogs dig with paws, not nails. The word choice unearths another interpretation of the passage. The dog will use his nails, and those nails stand metaphorically for the nails of the Cross; they represent the nails that were driven through Christ's hands. Therefore, the passage shows God in the person of Christ redeeming the "God-consciousness of humankind back to himself" (186).

Whether the protagonist is willing to accept God's redemption appears to be doubtful at this stage. The highly-charged moment of illumination decrescendos into another painful memory of the past. Although the protagonist learns from Madame Sosostrsis that death comes from life, it is hard for him to believe that fertility can still exist in the wasteland. Passionate romantic love is a relic, he observes, and has given way to the contemporary world's lascivious appetites. Eliot chooses to represent the strange manipulation of love in "A Game of Chess," a section marked totally by its sexual sterility, demonstrated by two meaningless sexual relationships. The first encounter recalls Rishyacringa's

encounter with the woman on the barge and the spiritual transformation that he experienced as a result of it. In the first episode the reader encounters a woman seated on a chair "like a burnished throne" (77). As the note says, the line is a reference to the famous description of Cleopatra on her barge in Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra, but in the context of The Waste Land, Shakespearian romance is dead, and the woman's life is marked by artificiality and sterility (Wilson 309). Indeed, the physical descriptions of the scene, with its polished marble, glittering jewels, and its synthetic perfumes show us a material richness, but the woman's sex life is as synthetic as the perfume she drowns herself in.

In fact, the deadness of the scene gives way to an image of rape more sinister than Pope's Rape of the Lock (Traversi 32-3). The protagonist explains that among the elements of the Cupid decoration is a carving which represents the rape of the legendary Greek heroine and her subsequent transformation: "The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king/ So rudely forced" (99-106). Traversi believes that "Rudely" and "barbarous" "reflect the entry of a new and deliberate brutality into the poem" (33). Moreover, the legend illustrates that love and lust are now indistinguishable in the modern world, and is indicated by the change of tense. "And still she cried, and still the world pursues" (102). And yet, the rape of Philomela is played out in this section by the lover's approaching footsteps. According to Traversi, the footsteps "shuffle" with a muted suggestion of the sinister and the bestial, on the stair, as the woman waits with her "hair Spread out in fiery points," and her words become "savagely still" (108-110).

Beyond the petty lust and cold violation of the relationship, there is no meaningful connection between the two lovers. Instead, words, which should be the source of their intercourse, take on the form of anxiety and pronounce the personal disconnectedness between the two people (Traversi 34): "My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me. Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak" (111-112). Indeed, the relationship, arid in its foundation, reflects the sexual sterility of the Waste Land; the lover responds, "I think we are in rat's alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones" (115-116).

The sterile relationship seems to extend outward to the protagonist's society. The woman cries, "Is there nothing in your head? But O O O O that Shakespearian Rag--it's so intelligent So intelligent" (126-130). As Bruce R. McElderry points out the line is a reference to the hit tune "That Shakespearean Rag," which appeared in 1912. The song's lyrics "Bill Shakespeare," and "Brutus/ We'll play a rag today," are utterly tasteless, and with its mockery of Shakespeare, indicates the artistic decay of modern life, and thus merges this symbolism with the poem's dominant theme of the waste land (185-6).

Without life and sexual meaning, Eliot seems to contend here that the modern individual has nothing to look forward to but despair, desperation, and hopelessness. Ingeniously, Eliot conveys this outlook in the most searing expression of pain in the poem, as the woman expresses her fear of the future:

> What shall I do now?
> What shall I do?
> I shall rush out as I am, and
> walk the street
> With my hair down, so.

What shall we do tomorrow?
What shall we ever do?
(131-4)

What the protagonist learns from his recollections is the necessity of consummating the past with the present in order to make his future a fruitful reality. Yet, Eliot suggests in the poem that the past may be on the verge of dying, making historical consummation an impossibility. These fraying elements of historical time appeared to be represented in the second relationship, a working-class couple, whose sexual dysfunction marks the disconnection inherent in present life. As the protagonist informs us, the woman's husband, Albert, has just been demobilized from the war, and has come back expecting a good time. Yet, the woman does not want a meaningless sexual encounter, but the woman's friend informs her "if you don't give it him, there's other will" (149). Eliot again shows the baseless quality of human relationships in the waste land, where sexual meaning is perverted for solely physical needs, and in the process, real human life is lost. Indeed, the wife makes reference to the "quack" medicine she takes that makes her look like an antique at age thirty-one. More importantly, the destruction of human life is symptomatic of the infertility of the waste land, whose post-war value systems finds itself in chaos and disruption. It is interesting that Eliot said that he was not a spokesman for his generation, insisting that his poem was to only order the chaos of contemporary life. Yet, here, as in the tarot section, Eliot captures, with realistic detail and emotion, the psychological landscape of an age whose passion is misdirected, gone, or confused.

Reflecting on his knowledge of sexual relationships, the protagonist grows into awareness that his condition is related to his society's decay. In "The Fire Sermon," the quester links the cause of the waste land's infertility to the crass materialism of modern consumerism. Indeed, he reflects on the past splendor of the Thames River, whose water is now polluted with empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, and cigarette ends. Furthermore, the death of the Thames River coincides with the disappearance of the mythical nymphs, who were the spirit of the land, and who are now replaced with business directors of London who "loiter the city." The quester's understanding of his condition grows as he looks even deeper into the past, finding a connection between his own internal exile and the exiles that people experienced in the past. The protagonist compares his and his culture's condition to the Israelites' exile from the promised land to Babylon (Traversi 39): "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept... Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,/ Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long" (182-84). While the passage appears to be riddled with morose overtones, his descent into the depths of despair produces his most important connection to the past. While fishing in the dull canal, the quester thinks of the fisher king and the restoration of his kingdom. Implicitly, the protagonist recognizes his quest. He must journey to his Chapel Perilous and interpret the objects he sees there.

Traversi believes, however, that the protagonist has made no such commitment to a personal quest,

choosing instead to remain spiritually cautious (Traversi 40). To be sure, the protagonist's self-probing works in a cyclical manner like the seasons, at once moved to regeneration like the spring, he then submits to his prohibitions, like the cold winters. However, the impasse appears to be less distinct, as the two voices merge for the moment into a single consciousness, represented by the figure Tiresias, who has lived as both man and woman. Tiresias's vision of love in the Waste Land exposes the overtly mechanical, routine violation that modern people subject themselves to. Set at the violet hour, Tiresias sees the clerk move with confidence on the typist, and he "endeavors to engage her in caresses" (237). The typist does not desire his advances, yet "his Exploring hands encounter no defence" (240). According to Traversi, the act is a violation, and neither person feels any responsibility for his or her actions (43). Indeed, after the act is over, the clerk blows the woman a patronizing kiss, while the woman thinks: "Well now that's done; and I'm glad it's over" (252). The episode is tactfully brilliant, as the woman's inability to feel her lover's erotic love corresponds to the empty and unsatisfying life that the protagonist feels. Yet, it is interesting to note in this section that the man and woman do join, suggesting that "meaningful" human connection still exists; it is modern love's method which fails to make it erotic.

Ostensibly, Tiresias's vision stirs a personal discovery in the protagonist. If he is to find life again, he must reconnect with the people in his world, but no longer mechanically. The transformation appears to manifest itself in his new outlook on the world. After Tiresias's vision, the protagonist returns to the city, and in an echo of the water music of The Tempest, the he cries:

> "This music crept by me upon the waters"
> And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.
> O City, city, I can sometimes hear
> Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
> The pleasant whining of a mandoline
> And a clatter and a chatter from within
> Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls
> Of Magnus Martyr hold.
> Inexplicable splendor of Ionian white and gold. (257-65)

The new vision of London here is strikingly unlike that which appears in "The Burial of the Dead." It is beautiful in description and its human associations are both heartfelt and genuine. It is no longer a crowd of "dead" souls crossing the bridge in "the brown fog of a winter dawn," and the sound of the clock striking at St. Mary Woolnoth is replaced by the "splendor" on the walls of another of the city churches. Traversi believes that "The Fire Sermon" represents the ascetic tradition both in East and West, where Buddha and St. Augustine saw the fire symbol as both lustful desire and spiritual purification. It is for this reason that we see this section as a turning point in the poem, and the vision of the fire as one "which consumes and, when refined into prayer purifies" (46).

By the end of "The Fire Sermon," the poet looks to be on the verge of a spiritual transformation; however, in the last section of the poem, "What the Thunder Said," the reader is not sure whether this transformation occurs. Like

the opening in the "Burial of the Dead," this section contains a reference to spring; this time, the connotations no longer carry cruel overtones, demonstrated by the mention of thunder. The section also contains a reference to a death: "He who was living is now dead We who were living are now dying With a little patience" (329-330). The passage can be interpreted as Christ's death and eventual resurrection, but the "we" also refers to our death or the collective death of our civilization (Traversi 47).

Contrary to "The Burial of the Dead," the protagonist's desire for water is intense, and the drops of water become a powerful hallucination (Traversi 47):

> But sound of water over a rock
> where the hermit-thrush sings in
> the pine trees
> Drip drop drip drop drop drop
> drop
> But there is no water. (354-58)

And it is in this imaginary state that there appears a vision of "the third who walks always beside you"; in his notes, Eliot himself said that the appearance may be a risen Christ "as he appeared to his stricken followers on the road to Emmaus" (Traversi 48). However, Traversi also believes that this vision is another example of the protagonist's and his society's need to cling to illusion (48) Indeed, the poem swings to an apocalyptic image of the destruction of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London, all linked by the word "Unreal." Some critics have interpreted the passage as a reaffirmation of western culture, believing that western cities regenerate themselves in new civilizations; however, I think a more probable interpretation is that the contemporary world is in danger of becoming nothing more than a mirage, an illusion.

More importantly, the Chapel Perilous, the object of the Grail quest, brings the seeker to an empty, deserted shrine, where only the wind finds a home. The empty Chapel reinforces the idea of a dried up western tradition, but also serves as the greatest test for the contemporary person--the test to face emptiness in his life. Raymond J. Wilson believes that it was Eliot's generation who was the first to face this test after the war, and may find the test neither tragic nor frightening, but merely pointless. Indeed, after finding the chapel, the protagonist remarks, "Dry bones can harm no one," indicating that the quest is neither frightening nor challenging, just senseless (314).

However, Traversi believes that Eliot leaves the reader with some hope at the end of the poem. Rain never comes to The Waste Land, but the black clouds gather in the far distance, suggesting that rain may come if contemporary society learns to control its own world. This hope is imbued in the three Sanskrit words, Datta, Dayadhvam, and Damayata ("give," "sympathize," "control"). In the context of the poem, "give" means to surrender to instinct, and accept the risk in trying to overcome the waste land. "Sympathize" means to break our isolation and share our experiences with humanity, which will give us a new moral order. Finally, "control" comes from accepting the challenge which life offers to us, which in turn, gives our existence meaning (Traversi 48-9). And indeed, the protagonist accepts the decay of modern life, but he has aspired to some measure of control over his world as he sits upon the shore fishing thinking, "Shall I at least set my lands in order" (426).

The Waste Land, undoubtedly, captures the disillusionment and confusion of an age uprooted by war and social change, and it is certainly within the context of this societal fragmentation that the Grail Quest in the poem is to be understood. Yet, unlike the writers of the Lost Generation, Eliot pleads with the modern artist to renounce his/her impulse to abandon society and search for poetic passion elsewhere. The sections of his poem, carrying us through this strenuous resistance, illustrate this point clearly. In "The Burial of the Dead," the protagonist resists his desire to overcome his aimless condition in the waste land, believing that a dead certainty is preferable to the risks he must take. However, in "A Game of Chess," Eliot demonstrates that the consequences of this safety are too severe to ignore. As the lovers demonstrate in the poem, it is a world marred by personal vulgarity, selfish desire, and human frailty. Yet, Eliot offers the reader a new challenge, the object for a renewed quest. As the words "give," "sympathize," and "control," suggest, each individual must confront the emptiness life serves us, and we must remove ourselves from isolation by sharing our experiences with humanity; it is only this quest which can help us regenerate ourselves.

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David Glaesemann recently completed his Master's degree in English at Mankato State University.