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**“THE RIVER IS WITHIN US, THE SEA IS ALL ABOUT US”:  
SYMBOLIST-INSPIRED WATER MOTIFS  
IN T. S. ELIOT’S VERSE**

The motifs of aridity and sterility are among the hallmarks of T. S. Eliot’s poetic *œuvre*, especially as far as his pre-conversion verse is concerned. The themes are central to *The Waste Land*, set in a place where “the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, | And the dry stone no sound of water” (*Complete Poems* 38). In this withering landscape, water is conspicuous by its absence:

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink  
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think (47)

Negativity in the poem is associated with lack of water: nothing seems feasible in a land where even “Sweat is dry,” the mountains “cannot spit” and thunder is “dry sterile” and “without rain” (47). The need for aquatic renewal is voiced through the speaker’s desperate cry “If there were only water amongst the rock” (47). The presence of “A spring | A pool among the rock” (47–48) would make it possible not only to quench one’s thirst, but also, importantly, to think. The overwhelming dryness of the Fisher King’s realm entails a longing for a source, a stream, a body of water, for the sense of completion and appeasement they bring. “But there is no water,” *The Waste Land*’s speaker sadly concludes amid “empty cisterns and exhausted wells” (48), and indeed the longing is not satisfied until *Four Quartets*.

In the body of Eliot’s poetic work, there is a noticeable split into the early part, in which the urban and the man-made dominate, and the later

part, whose setting is nature, with the sea as a *leitmotif*. Even in the poems of the first period, however, Eliot superimposes seascapes on cityscapes. Going “at dusk through narrow streets” (5), Prufrock reflects that he “should have been a pair of ragged claws | Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (5), and it is to a beach that his urban stroll ultimately takes him. As his surroundings change, the speaker of “The Love Song” exchanges his “morning coat,” his “collar mounting firmly to the chin” and “necktie rich and modest” (4) for “white flannel trousers” (7). No longer restrained by formal clothes, he dreams of casual comfort: “I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled” (7). All this culminates in an oneiric vision of “the chambers of the sea” (7) and mermaids, which constitutes a coda to what is otherwise a city poem.

A similar process of superimposition takes place in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.” A permanent fixture in the cityscape, the prostitute wears a dress whose border “Is torn and stained with sand” (14), suggesting perhaps a recent walk on the beach. The sight of “eyes in the street | Trying to peer through lighted shutters” is juxtaposed with the image of “An old crab with barnacles on his back” (15). The city bathed in the light of the streetlamps gives way to the image of a shore upon which

The memory throws up high and dry  
 A crowd of twisted things;  
 A twisted branch upon the beach  
 Eaten smooth, and polished  
 As if the world gave up  
 The secret of its skeleton,  
 Stiff and white. (14)

The image of the skeleton-like branch washed up by the waves corresponds to that of sand and bones in the opening lines of Corbière’s “Paysage mauvais”: “Sables de vieux os – Le flot râle | Des glas : crevant bruit sur bruit” (33). In Eliot, however, the motif plays a significant function. “Rhapsody” opposes the sea-like vision of “twisted things” to the streetlamp: while the former stands for dissociation, the latter plays an associative function, bringing order but also, inevitably, limitations. The light of streetlamps activates memory: the successive images on which the light falls unchain a string of disparate recollections, superimposed on one’s present life as if they were objects tossed upon the shore by the waves. Memory allows for a momentary escape from reality, but the escape is soon cut short. The last streetlamp calls the protagonist back to the present reality and daily routine, urging him to “Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life” (*Complete Poems* 16).

Eliot’s practice of city-sea superimpositions may be traced back to the French symbolist poet Corbière: marine imagery and metaphors recur in

Corbière's *Les Amours jaunes*, even in poems which are *par excellence* urban. The protagonist of "Épitaphe" is described as a "Flâneur au large, - à la dérive" (30): his uselessness and lack of direction in life are compared to those of a boat adrift, and later to a wreck which is never going to reach its destination, an "Épave qui jamais n' arrive" (30). The speaker of "Bonne fortune et fortune" cruises the streets of the city: "je faisais, comme ça, | Ma croisière" (50). In a similar vein, that of "Gente dame" perceives a carriage as a pirate ship, a "fiacre-corsaire" (38), and himself as a buccaneer.

If the tone of the above-mentioned Corbière poems is somewhat flippant, that of "Paris nocturne" is dramatic. It is in the latter poem that the affinity with Eliot is most striking. Both the title and the epigraph, "*Ce n'est pas une ville, c'est un monde*" (243), indicate the poem's urban character. In view of this, the first stanza comes as a surprise:

C'est la mer: - calme plat - et la grande marée,  
Avec un grondement lointain, s'est retirée.  
Le flot va revenir, se roulant dans son bruit -  
Entendez-vous gratter les crabes de la nuit (243-244)

The opening image is that of the tide beginning to turn. A recurrent motif in Eliot's urban poems, the crabs abandoned by the tide are also what is left of the sea in Corbière's city. The surprising Paris-seashore parallel is seemingly clarified if we read the tide as the crowd disappearing from the streets of the French capital at dusk. However, an analysis of the poem reveals further-reaching implications: the low tide has turned Paris into a "Styx asséché" (244). Water being absent, aridity overwhelms the nocturnal city, which becomes the site of vice and corruption. The poem's conclusion reveals that the insertion of marine imagery into the urban setting is ironic: it presents Corbière's protagonist as a dying sea god, "un dieu marin tirant ses membres nus et vers | Sur le lit de la morgue... Et les yeux grand'ouverts!" (244). Symbolically, his death is due to lack of water in the hostile Parisian *milieu*.

In a stifling urban environment, Corbière's and Eliot's protagonists turn to the sea as a source of solace and means of escape. The marine scenes are projected onto the city scenery, and the clash between the two corresponds to that between man's consciousness and the harsh reality which restricts him. In *Les Amours jaunes*, Corbière condemns Paris and idealises Brittany, and this opposition accounts for what Albert Sonnenfeld terms the "moral structure" of the work (105). Disillusioned with the life of the modern metropolis, and thus with the contemporary civilisation it represents, repulsed by the moral and religious vacuum, lonely and desolate, the poet turns to Brittany in search of spiritual redemption. His native province is more than

just a source of picturesque seascapes, though Corbière devotes the first poems in "Armor," the "Breton" section of *Les Amours jaunes*, to the land's mysterious beauty. Brittany offers him a means of evasion, becoming an almost abstract, ideal realm where he may seek refuge and oblivion.

A similar idea of withdrawal, of escaping from pain, torture and suffering is present in Eliot's work. The sea is the salvation of the tormented Prufrock in his flight from spleen and from the society which makes him feel inadequate. Protected by its shell, the crab he wishes to be stands for safety, security and withdrawal. The soothing silence of the sea is opposed to the disquieting commotion of the city. In Eliot's vision, the sea represents the unconscious to which Prufrock turns in his mental escape. He plunges into the sea-world, but he does so only in his fancy; the universe into which he retreats is merely a figment of his imagination, an abstract construct, close to Corbière's idealised Brittany. If in Eliot the image of the sea is directly linked with the unconscious, in Corbière's verse it embodies the speaker's longing for the naturalness, purity and integrity of his native province. The larger connotations are the same for both poets: aridity is opposed to water, the artificial to the natural, corruption and decline to spiritual and moral regeneration.

Evocations of the sea, which Eliot associates specifically with memory and dream, make it possible to escape mentally, be it for a short time, into either the past or an impossible utopian future. The sea gives Prufrock a taste of freedom, implicit in the sartorial metamorphosis he undergoes. It is mostly with liberty that the symbolists too associate the sea. "Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer!" (1: 19), the opening statement of Baudelaire's "L'Homme et la Mer," recurs in Corbière's "Le novice en partance et sentimental," whose sailor speaker declares: "L'homme est libre et la mer est grande" (176). The sea-freedom association is echoed in other symbolist poems such as, for instance, Corbière's "À mon cotre *Le Négrier*." When its speaker mourns his beloved cutter which he is obliged to sell, it is mostly his freedom that he regrets. The sense of liberation that sea voyages gave him can never be recaptured, and neither can the intoxicating dynamism, speed, violence and abandonment of those escapades:

Va-t'en, humant la brume  
 Sans moi, prendre le frais,  
 Sur la vague de plume...  
 Va - Moi j'ai trop de frais. (193)

The wordplay involving the word *frais* – which stands for the freshness of sea air but also for cost – shows that the poem is based on a dualism: on the one hand, there is the lightness and freedom of which the sea is emblematic; on the other, the burden of unpleasant, down-to-earth ob-

ligations, symbolised by the financial difficulties which force the speaker to give up his boat and the sea. This split is reinforced by the poem's final lines: "Mais moi j'échoue aux côtes de la gêne, | Faute de fond – à sec" (194). It is, ironically, in marine terms that the speaker depicts his lack of money and the resulting loss of freedom as he claims to "crush on the coast of financial difficulties." Again, he resorts to wordplay: the word *fond* denotes *sea bottom* as well as *funds*, while *à sec* means not only *without water* but also *broke*. The liberty the sea stands for is fragile and evanescent. Even if attained, it cannot be kept for long: Corbière's protagonist has to sell his cutter, Prufrock's marine dream is brutally interrupted and one can only catch brief glimpses of seascapes in urban surroundings.

Not only loss of freedom, but loss *tout court* is associated with the sea in symbolist verse. It is, first and foremost, amorous loss. In Corbière's "Le novice en partance et sentimental," the uncertainty and instability of love are likened to those of the sea: "Ah! la mer et l'amour! – On sait – c'est variable" (176). In another Corbière poem, "Steam-Boat," woman and ship, love and sea melt. The invocations "Ma sœur d'amour!" and "Ö passagère [de] mon cœur" (41) imply nostalgia and separation, and the association of love story and sea story is further confirmed:

Il n'aura pas, lui, ma Peureuse,  
Les sauts de ta groge houleuse!  
Tes sourcils salés de poudrain  
Pendant un grain! (41)

Though light and somewhat sentimental, the two Corbière poems bring to mind the Hyacinth garden passage in *The Waste Land*. The figure of the hyacinth girl herself, with her "hair wet" (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 38), is associated with water. The theme of love, of which she is the embodiment, is inextricably linked with that of parting, as the references to Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, which frame the passage, indicate. The words of the German *libretto* incorporated into Eliot's poem form the dramatic question "Where are you?":

Frisch weht der Wind  
Der Heimat zu  
Mein Irisch Kind  
Wo weilest du? (38)

The theme of absence is reinforced by the another Wagnerian quotation, which closes the Hyacinth garden passage: "*Oed' und leer des Meer*" (38). This explicit mention of empty stretches of water, where there is no sign of Isolde's ship, which the dying Tristan, a lover and a sailor, awaits, points to the symbolic dimension of the sea, which separates the lovers.

The speaker of Corbière's "Steam-Boat" expresses a vague regret at a lost woman, a passing boat or, possibly, a woman hidden under boat imagery. The mysterious *she* is presented in marine terms, and referred to as the "Passagère" (41). Corbière's combination of nostalgia with sea imagery immediately brings to mind Eliot's "Marina." Pericles' lost daughter from Shakespeare's play gives her name to the title of the poem, a monologue of a grief-stricken father, in which the seascape provides the backdrop for memories of the missing girl:

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands  
 What water lapping the bow  
 And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog  
 What images return  
 O my daughter. (*Complete Poems* 72)

Eliot's poem interweaves the figure of Pericles' daughter with the motifs of water and a fog-shrouded boat. The initial connotations are thus of uncertainty and danger. Gradually, the returning images build up a vision of the lost Marina, "this grace dissolved in place" (72). Dissolution is, of course, connected with water, and indeed the vision is vague, unclear, as if "watery": it resembles what one sees in one's "sleep, where all the waters meet" (72). Dissolution also applies to Pericles' boat, which turns out to be no longer seaworthy. Though similar elements are combined in "Steam-Boat" and "Marina," the implications of Eliot's poem are incomparably graver. Born and lost at sea, Marina personifies life and hope. Pericles' vision and his realisation of the state of his boat are followed by a decision to resign his life for "This form, this face, this life | Living to live in a world of time beyond me" (73). Marine landscapes and his vision of Marina, "more distant than stars" (72), ultimately take Pericles from the earthly to the ethereal, and the poem ends on a note of hope inherent in the mention of "the new ships" and the final call "My daughter" (73), this time serene and affirmative. While "Steam-Boat" is a poem of loss, "Marina" is one of loss and recovery. As it unfolds, it moves away from the relatively light Corbière poem and in the direction of *Four Quartets*.

For the Eliot of "Marina," the sea is life, loss and retrieval. However, seascapes are not only sites of life, but also of death. In his marine poem "L'Homme et la Mer," Baudelaire presents the sea as deadly: "Tellement vous aimez le carnage et la mort" (1: 19). This connection is reinforced in "Le Mort Joyeux," whose speaker anticipates his own death, looking forward to lying "dans l'oubli comme un requin dans l'onde" (1: 70). The association recurs throughout Corbière's verse: most of the poems in the "Gens de mer" section of *Les Amours jaunes* are moving accounts of seamen's life, into which premature death is often inevitably inscribed. This is the case

with "Le mousse," in which a teenage sailor speaks of his father, a "Pêcheur. Perdu depuis longtemps" who now sleeps on reefs, "dans les brisants" (184). Sinking ships and drowning seamen are central to the symbolically entitled "La fin": the eponymous *fin* dramatically suggests not only the ending of *Les Amours jaunes* but also the end of life. In Corbière's collection, "La fin" is followed by only six other poems, all of them dealing with death. The likelihood of "death by water" is indicated, in laconic, masculine terms, in Corbière's "Matelots": "Il finit comme ça, simple en sa grande allure, | D'un bloc: - *Un trou dans l'eau, quoi!... pas de fioriture.*" (160). The lucky ones who manage to survive their voyages are referred to as "bris de naufrage" (160), human wreckage.

The presence of the theme in Corbière corresponds to the motif of "death by water," an expression which constitutes the title of part four of *The Waste Land*, as well as to Eliot's overall preoccupation with "broken images" (*Complete Poems* 38), with fragmentation and debris left in the wake of an unnamed catastrophe. Already in the opening part of his *magnum opus* Eliot introduces the figure of a seaman who comes to a watery grave: "the drowned Phoenician Sailor, | (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)" (38). Similarly, Corbière emphasises the fact that sailors' terrestrial graves are empty because they are buried at sea: "Maman lui garde au cimetière | Une tombe - et rien dedans" (184). The seabed is the cemetery of sailors, who melt into the sea after death, as Corbière implies in "La fin": "Pas de fond de six pieds, ni rats de cimetière: | Eux ils vont aux requins!" (198). If Eliot has the Phoenician Sailor's eyes turn into pearls, for Corbière a seaman's soul fills every wave: "L'âme d'un matelot | [...] | Respire à chaque flot" (198). In "Death by Water," the Phoenician reappears:

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,

Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 46)

The sea takes possession of his body, as it does of the sailors' corpses in "La fin": "Qu'ils roulent infinis dans les espaces vierges!... | Qu'ils roulent verts et nus" (Corbière 198). The bodies of Corbière's sailors become green and whirl in the infinite sea, an image echoed in Eliot's "Mr. Apollinax," where the "worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the green silence" (*Complete Poems* 18).

The fact that Corbière's dead sailor in "Le mousse" is a husband and a father makes one think of a relevant passage in *The Waste Land*, which

presents the Fisher King "Musing upon the king my brother's wreck | And on the king my father's death before him" (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 43). A similar continuity is suggested in Corbière's poem, where the young "mousse" expresses a desire to follow in his father's footsteps and become a seaman too: "Moi: j'ai ma revanche | Quand je serai grand – matelot!" (184). There is thus something fatalistic about death by water, which comes to stand for what man has no control of and is therefore obliged to accept. Such is the message of Corbière's "Lettre du Mexique." The eponymous letter is one written by an experienced seaman to the relatives of a boy in his care, who died of fever in Mexico during what was probably his first voyage. Though the young sailor did not actually drown, associations with *The Waste Land* again spring to mind. Corbière's epistolary account of a premature death is moving and warm in its simplicity and tenderness, with a note of quiet and humble acceptance that resounds in the statement "C'est le sort" (183). The same quietness and simplicity may be found in "Death by Water." It is pervaded by nostalgia and a sense of loss, encouraging humility in the face of death:

Gentile or Jew

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

(Eliot, *Complete Poems* 46-47)

The prophetic tone of the above-quoted lines sounds like an echo of another Corbière poem, "Aurora." This poetic account of a ship leaving port culminates in the fatalistic and laconic closing words "ils ne reviendront pas" (174). As in "Death by Water," the vigour and vitality inherent in the sailors' speech and their energetic movements are contrasted with a prediction of their imminent death. Like the addressees of the above-quoted Eliot lines and the seamen from "La fin," the crew in "Aurora" are unaware of the fate that awaits them: "Partis insoucieux pour leurs courses lointaines | Sont morts – absolument comme ils étaient partis" (197). The tone of prophecy and fatalism is also present in "Le naufrageur," another Corbière poem in which the motifs of sinking, shipwreck and debris recur. Its speaker ominously declares, "Le sort est dans l'eau" (190), and his identification with ill-fated birds, the "Oiseau de malheur à poil roux" and "oiseau d'épave" (190), parallels the premonitory tone. This deterministic association of fate and water recalls Madame Sosostri's declaration in the opening section of *The Waste Land*: "I do not find | The Hanged Man. Fear death by water" (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 38-39). Corbière's speaker too is something of a clairvoyant, one who senses and anticipates what he cannot yet see: "Oh! moi je sens bien de loin le naufrage! | [...] | Moi je vois profond dans la nuit, sans voir!" (190).



To realise the full implications of the motif of the drowned in Eliot, one needs to look at Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*. The very title, which signifies the act of casting a dice, suggests the French poet's preoccupation with fate and coincidence. The setting of this experimental, hermetic poem is marine, and its opening lines show how Mallarmé associates the central themes of chance and destiny with that of a shipwreck, speaking of "DES | CIRCONSTANCES ÉTERNELLES | DU FOND D'UN NAUFRAGE" (459). Mallarmé perceives the naval catastrophe as a paradigm of the human predicament, of its uncertainty and fragility. This is largely the idea which informs "Death by Water," and it is impossible to overlook the parallel between Eliot's account of Phlebas' death and Mallarmé's image of a drowned young man's body descending into the depths of the ocean:

celui  
 son ombre puérite  
 caressée et polie et rendue et lavée  
 assouplie par la vague et soustraite  
 aux durs os perdus entre les ais (464)

Mallarmé and Eliot emphasise the youth of the drowned and the fact that the powerful sea now appropriates the lifeless body. Both scenes culminate in the image of bones lying at the bottom of the sea. In *Un Coup de dés*, the body is caressed, polished and washed by the tide, which implies purification in the spiritual as well as physical sense, the drowned leaving behind his earthly existence to reach the ethereal.

In this light, Eliot's mention of "A current under sea" which "Picked his bones in whispers" acquires a new dimension. That Phlebas' drowning has cathartic connotations becomes obvious when one considers the fact that the "Death by Water" passage was originally the closing stanza of "Dans le Restaurant," a poem Eliot wrote in French, subsequently translating the final lines into English and incorporating them, with slight alterations, into *The Waste Land*. "Dans le Restaurant" depicts a scene between a waiter and a diner: the former relates his childhood sexual experience to the latter. Despite his shock and disgust, the customer is obliged to admit that he has similar memories himself. In a symbolic gesture, he gives the waiter ten *sous* for the bathroom, as if suggesting he should wash himself. With the Phlebas passage which follows, the vision of cleansing becomes complete: free from carnality, the Phoenician sailor is now free from lust and, for that matter, from all earthly passions, of which "les profits et les pertes" (*Complete Poems* 32) he no longer cares about are emblematic.

The author of *The Waste Land* establishes a link between sensual needs and the need for purification symbolised by water. The two themes merge

in the figures of nymphs and mermaids, a motif common to Eliot and Mallarmé. It suffices to read "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune," set on the "bords siciliens d'un calme marécage" full of "les creux roseaux," "sur l'or glauque de lointaines | «Verdurus dédiant leur vigne à des fontaines" (Mallarmé 51), where shades of gold and sea-green melt. From this aquatic setting emerge the Mallarméan "naiades" (51). Much like Eliot's Prufrock, the speaker is captivated by the sight of the nymphs: "Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer" (50), the faun declares. This thematic coincidence which unites the two poets becomes even more interesting when one begins to ponder its symbolic implications. One important aspect is that water goddesses are inevitably bathers and, as Jean-Pierre Richard points out (109–116), in Mallarmé's *œuvre* the symbolism of the bath is of great significance. It is an activity at once sensual and purifying. The nakedness the bath entails and the directness of the skin-water contact contribute to the former aspect; the very aim of the activity assures the latter. Hence the multitude of naked bodies amid fountains and ponds in *Contes indiens*, perhaps Mallarmé's most sensuous work, the female presence the boater in "Le nénuphar blanc" senses on the bank of the river, and the perception of water as "naked" in "Monologue d'un faune": "l'eau qui va nue en sa promenade" (1453). Water is for Mallarmé a female element, favouring a shameless, uninhibited display of physicality, desire and love; an analogy around which the sea scene in "The Love Song" also revolves. While Prufrock sees the mermaids "Combing the white hair of the waves blown back" (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 7), the hair of a female sleeper in Mallarmé's "Tristesse d'été" is compared to a river: "Mais ta chevelure est une rivière tiède" (37). Both poets associate water with the sexual act: *The Waste Land's* hyacinth girl comes back, following what was "most probably a moment after intense love-making" (Perloff 38), with her "hair wet," while in "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune" the nymphs' wet bodies are opposed to the lips of the male speaker, inflamed with desire, their wetness being one of the "signes extérieurs d'une pudeur défaite, devenue eau" (J.-P. Richard 111), an emblem of permeability and penetration. Finally, the lovers' bath is a recurrent theme in Mallarmé's verse, as evident in, for instance, "Le Guignon."

If the bath has sensual connotations for Mallarmé, it also has the power to reconnect and regenerate. Water cleanses both physically and spiritually, washing away all impurities accumulated in the course of human existence. Thanks to the fluidity of water and the ablutions it enables, problems are smoothed away, gaps are bridged and a lost continuity is retrieved. A true rite of passage, the bath marks a return to a primaeval state. This is why the speaker of "Réveil du Faune" perceives water as a source of renaissance, understood as a renewal of the primitive:

A la piscine  
 Des sources, à l'horreur lustrale qui fascine  
 L'azur, je vais déjà tremper l'être furtif  
 Qui de leur glace va renaître, primitif. (1466)

Similarly, the swimmer in "Le Pitre châtié" is motivated by his "simple ivresse de renaître" (Mallarmé 31) and the vigorous movement of his limbs as he swims enables him to disown "le mauvais | Hamlet" and to recover a lost virginity: "c'est comme si dans l'onde j'innovais | Mille sépulchres pour y vierge disparaître" (31). It is water that delivers the swimmer from the limitations of his Hamletism, from a fate marked by inertia and indecision. Though Mallarmé's speaker feels as if he discovers in the water a thousand sepulchres where he can disappear, the fact remains that he emerges out of it a new man, purified and rejuvenated, death becoming a precondition of rebirth. If the bath has allowed him to shake off his burdens, it has also obliterated the birth-death/cradle-grave/beginning-end distinctions. In Mallarmé's vision, immersion in water is immersion in timelessness. The Hamletic limitations the speaker of "Le Pitre châtié" rejects are spatial and temporal. Water means freedom from what troubles the soul, but also lack of enclosure, deliverance from the "here and now." The bath is also a means of defeating temporality, because "Temps, espace y retrouvent leur fluidité originelle" (J.-P. Richard 111). The very act of swimming, through its chain-like, flowing, smooth nature, allows for temporal continuity.

The figures of nymphs and the motif of the bath appear in Eliot's poetry, but largely deprived of the Mallarméan connotations of perfection and plenitude, in both the sexual and spiritual spheres. Prufrock hears "the mermaids singing, each to each" (*Complete Poems* 7), but does not feel he can directly benefit from the sensuality they embody. The blissful state of being "wreathed with seaweed red and brown" (7) is interrupted and, consequently, no fulfilment is attained. Mallarméan images are further distorted in the opening of "The Fire Sermon." Eliot's laconic, twice repeated "The nymphs are departed" (42) is a statement on a modern world where degradation is omnipresent. Water, represented by the Thames, is still there, but "The river's tent is broken" (42). Far from indulging in the beauty of the riverside landscape, the speaker is surprised not to find in the water "empty bottles, sandwich papers, | Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" (42). The myth of the nymphs is shattered too: they are no longer goddesses, but poor girls, seduced and abandoned by "the loitering heirs of city directors," who "have left no addresses" (42). The motif of ablution constitutes an ironic coda to the section, as it is two prostitutes who undergo cleansing:

O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter  
 And on her daughter  
 They wash their feet in soda water (43)

The quotation from Verlaine which follows, "*Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*" (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 43), painfully underlines the impossibility of spiritual elevation.

Sweeney, who is in the habit of visiting "Mrs. Porter in the spring" (43), is the protagonist of another poem in which the motif of the bath receives an ironic treatment. "Sweeney Erect" shows him shaving in a brothel, paying no attention to a prostitute who is having an epileptic fit:

Sweeney addressed full length to shave  
 Broadbottomed, pink from nape to base,  
 Knows the female temperament  
 And wipes the suds around his face. (25)

Just as the *maison close* has nothing to do with the marine landscape evoked in the poem's opening lines, with the "cavernous waste shore | Cast in the unstilled Cyclades," the "anfractuous rocks" and the "yelping seas" (25), the helpless girl is not Nausicaa, the mythic heroine who discovered and secured safe passage for the shipwrecked Odysseus and to whom Eliot refers in stanza three. Neither is Sweeney's morning toilet a purifying ritual. The ablution is a meaningless act: this is the reason why in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," a poetic comment on the crisis of the Church, the image of Sweeney thoughtlessly shifting "from ham to ham | Stirring the water in his bath" (34) ironically parallels baptism.

If Eliot degrades the Mallarméan symbolism of nymphs and the bath in his pre-conversion poetry, in *Four Quartets* he approaches the French poet's vision by associating water with timelessness on the one hand, and spiritual values on the other. Already in *The Waste Land*, "the limp leaves | Waited for rain" (*Complete Poems* 49) and the Fisher King's dream of moral guidance is presented by means of marine metaphors:

The boat responded  
 Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar  
 The sea was calm, your heart would have responded  
 Gaily, when invited, beating obedient  
 To controlling hands (49-50)

This vision of regeneration through water is fully realised in the *Quartets* cycle: the sense of harmony and purity regained which permeates the poems is, literally and metaphorically, a return to the sources. The symbolism of the river, which "is within us," and the sea, which "is all about us" (130),

becomes a carrier for Eliot's circular concept of time, which equates the end with the beginning. As in Mallarmé's "Réveil du Faune" and "Le Pitre châtié," water obliterates temporal distinctions, facilitating a return to childhood and to the origins of being.

The presence of the sea in *Four Quartets* is relevant not only to Eliot's treatment of time, but also to the religious dimension of the cycle. *The Waste Land* ends with the monologue of the Fisher King, the impotent ruler of the arid realm, awaiting salvation, symbolised by water. The wasteland is a place where all religious values and emotional bonds between human beings have withered, and life is barren and meaningless. As his poetic outlook evolves, Eliot rejects this world on account of its terrifying emptiness and turns to metaphysics as a source of guidance. Doing so, he follows in Corbière's footsteps. *Les Amours jaunes* shows how the French poet, disenchanted with the artificiality and corruption of Parisian life, seeks human solidarity and religious redemption in Brittany.

Trading the cityscape for the seascape was for both poets a return to a childhood haven. The Breton-born Corbière spent his childhood and early youth in the seaside province, and came from a family with a long tradition of seamanship. His marine background is the "floating cradle" he refers to in one of his poems:

Mais il fut flottant, mon berceau,  
Fait comme le nid de l'oiseau  
Qui couve ses œufs sur la houle (157)

Similarly, Eliot's passion for the sea was a lifelong one. His biographer, Peter Ackroyd, mentions the poet's plan to write a memoir of his childhood whose title would combine the words river and sea, and points to these two forces of nature as being vital to both his personality and his poetic work. As a schoolboy, Eliot wrote stories about sailors, castaways, whales and sea captains. Together with his family, he spent his holidays in New England seaside resorts, Hampton Beach and Gloucester. It is there that Eliot developed a love of sailing, a sport he still practised as a young man at Harvard. Later, he evoked those times with nostalgia, and the sea's proximity always brought him happiness and a sense of peace (Ackroyd 14, 19).

The house the Eliots owned in Gloucester overlooked a fishing port and the Atlantic Ocean. From its windows, the future poet could see the coastline as far as Rockport Dry Salvages (Ackroyd 14). The Dry Salvages is, as Eliot himself explains, "a small group of rocks, with a beacon, off the N.E. coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts" (*Complete Poems* 130). It is also the title of the third poem in *Four Quartets*. The depiction of the ocean in the opening section of "The Dry Salvages" is a summary of Eliot's various

images of the sea. There is the mention of "the beaches where it tosses | Its hints of earlier and other creation" such as "the hermit crab" and "the whale's backbone" (130) and the reference to loss embodied by the drowned:

It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,  
The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar  
And the gear of foreign dead men. The sea has many voices,  
Many gods and many voices. (130)

The description does more than merely testify to Eliot's idolatrous attitude towards the sea. Water is the dominant element in "The Dry Salvages," first represented by the river, then by the sea. If the former is a microcosm standing for human existence, the latter is a macrocosm symbolising eternity. In Eliot's interpretation, the sea is a perpetual witness to what has been happening since the Creation.

The metaphysics of the poem is further emphasised by the figure of the Virgin Mary, presented here as Stella Maris, patron saint of seamen. Part four takes the form of a prayer:

Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory,  
Pray for all those who are in ships, those  
Whose business has to do with fish, and  
Those concerned with every lawful traffic  
And those who conduct them. (Eliot, *Complete Poems* 135)

This marine invocation inevitably brings to mind "La Rapsode foraine et le pardon de Sainte-Anne," probably the most accomplished and best-known of Corbière's Breton poems. Its essence is the interplay between sea imagery, the province's folklore and the simple faith of the local people who address Saint Anne:

Bénite est l'infertile plage  
Où, comme la mer, tout est nud.  
Sainte est la chapelle sauvage  
De Sainte-Anne-de-la-Palud  
Contre elle la petite Vierge,  
Fuseau frère, attend l'Angelus (138-139)

In Corbière's poem, the Virgin Mary awaits the Angelus, the bell which summons believers to pray. Significantly, it is the same "Perpetual angelus" (*Complete Poems* 135) which Eliot evokes at the end of his prayer. In Eliot's poem, the marine theme is unavoidably linked with a religious message. All the voices of the sea ultimately melt into one eternal voice of experience and understanding, teaching mankind that peace can only be

achieved through accepting God's will, the inevitability of suffering and human mortality. The sea becomes a source of hope and ecstasy; the lighthouse situated amid the rocks of the Dry Salvages turns out to be a beacon of hope in a dark world. The lighthouse is, importantly, a favourite symbolist motif, central to Baudelaire's "Les Phares" and Corbière's "Le phare." In the former, the eponymous "phares" are great artists, who form an eternal chain linking the centuries; in the latter, the lighthouse saves sailors from shipwreck: "Il tient le lampion au naufrage" (Corbière 195). Though devoid of religious connotations, the poems present the metaphorical dimension of the motif: it becomes an emblem of hope and, figuratively as well as literally, a guiding light. Associated with guidance and protection, it acquires existential and metaphysical connotations. It also shows how, for Eliot and the symbolists, the sea stops being a *décor* and becomes a metaphor for life, the universe and the transcendental.

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Alicja Piechucka

## **„Rzeka jest w nas, a wszystko wokół jest morzem”. Motyw wody w poezji T. S. Eliota i francuskich symbolistów**

Wśród motywów krajobrazowych pojawiających się w poezji Eliota szczególną rolę odgrywają motywy rzeki i morza, a sposób ich potraktowania przez autora wiele zawdzięcza wpływowi francuskiego symbolizmu. Wczesną twórczość Eliota przepelnia poczucie wyczerpania, którego wyrazem są wszechobecne motywy jałowości i suszy. We współczesnym sztucznym i zurbanizowanym świecie odnowa poprzez wodę okazuje się drogą prowadzącą do ukojenia i poczucia pełni. Dlatego też w „wielkowiejskiej” poezji Eliota i francuskich symbolistów krajobraz miasta w sposób niemal fantastyczny przeplata się z obrazami morza.

Ponieważ woda symbolizuje wolność, a jej brak śmierć i niewolę, porzucenie przytłaczającego miasta na rzecz morza staje się dla Eliota i symbolistów kolejną formą eskapizmu. Morze stanowi odzwierciedlenie ludzkiej psychiki, a nadmorskie krainy – takie jak Bretania u Corbière'a i wybrzeża Atlantyku u Eliota – ostoję wartości moralnych i religijnych. Kojące milczenie morza przeciwstawione zostaje zgiełkowi nowoczesnej metropolii, a woda ukazana jest jako narzędzie oczyszczenia, odnowy duchowej i zbawienia. Wspólny Eliotowi i symbolistom motyw „śmierci przez wodę” zawiera w sobie paradygmat ludzkiego losu. Żeglarz-topielec, którego ciało zawłaszcza i oczyszcza morska woda, symbolizuje niepewność i fatalizm wpisane w kondycję ludzką, ale także możliwość transcendencji, puryfikacji i jedności z naturą. Ablucje nierozzerwalnie związane z motywem wody są symbolem wyzwolenia spod jarzma cielesności, które to wyzwolenie jest z kolei warunkiem duchowego odrodzenia.