

Eliot, Yeats and the Anthropologists: The Spiritual Quest of the Moderns

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Introduction

By focusing particularly on Eliot's and Yeats' interest in world religions and the field of comparative religion, this article attempts to re-evaluate the significance of nineteenth and early twentieth-century anthropological literature in relation to our understanding of the aesthetic interests that underpinned the emergence of early Modernist poetry in Britain. In his supplementary "Notes on the Waste Land," T. S. Eliot had famously claimed that "the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem" could be "elucidated" by his "references" to Weston and Frazer.¹ Over thirty years later, however, Eliot renounced these "notes" as a "remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship." Insisting that the poem had always been "structureless," he expressed his "regret" that he had "sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail."² Eliot's retraction has often led critics to ultimately question the validity of his 'notes' altogether, largely polarizing Eliot studies ever since.³

The fundamental purpose of this present article will be to show that Eliot's knowledge of contemporary anthropology was in fact fundamental not only to the structural composition of *The Waste Land*, but also to the formation of the aesthetic principles which underpinned the emergence of early Modernist poetry as a whole. In tracing the origins of this interaction between Modernism and anthropology, *The Spiritual Quest of the Moderns*

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¹ See T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 2004), p. 76.

² T. S. Eliot, 'The Art of Poetry, I: T. S. Eliot', in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series*, ed. George Plimpton (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 96 and his *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957), pp. 109-10.

³ See the introduction to *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, ed. Lois Cuddy (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991).

recognizes Yeats' own comparative religion as a significant "adumbration" of the "mythical method."⁴ By challenging the critical tendency – amongst scholars convinced of Eliot's "structurelessness" – to presume that "*Ulysses, Order and Myth*" (1923) is a statement of the poet's essential affinities with Joycean aesthetics, this article proposes that Eliot's interest in anthropology was ultimately far closer to the sincerity of Yeats' theosophical quest, than it ever was to the de-mythologizing and ironic qualities of Joyce's prose.

Eliot, Frazer and W. H. R. Rivers

In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer had carried out a comparative approach to the study of religion in which he had intended to find a "probable explanation of the priesthood of Nemi," a Roman legend that seemed "strange" because it had "no parallel in classical antiquity."⁵ By comparing the legend to ethnographical accounts of primitive religious practices, Frazer posited that it "probably" had its origins in a "fertility ritual," belonging to a far older belief in "magic."⁶ Frazer argued more broadly that "the myth and ritual of the Dying God" was one which appeared to have "operated widely, perhaps universally, in human society, producing in varied circumstances a variety of institutions specifically different but generically alike."⁷ The Dying God was, for Frazer, "a god of many names" – "Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, Attis," and even "Christ" – but it was of "essentially one nature," and it ultimately "represented the yearly decay and revival of life."⁸ Frazer regularly compared Christ's death and resurrection with these gods of pagan antiquity,⁹ concluding that "the Christian communion has absorbed within itself a sacrament which is doubtless far older than Christianity."¹⁰

This tendency in nineteenth-century anthropology to construct rationalist explanations of how religion initially evolved out of primitive societies, deeply concerned Eliot because it threatened the epistemological validity of the Christian faith. During his graduate studies at Harvard, Eliot had prepared a series of papers in which he discussed some of these

⁴ T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', in *Selected Prose* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 177.

⁵ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1923), p. 2.

⁶ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 11.

⁷ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 2.

⁸ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 325.

⁹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 347.

¹⁰ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 481.

“theories about comparative religion.”¹¹ The young student’s main problem with “the science” was its tendency to not only “describe” religious practices, but also to “interpret” them as data which was part of a wider rationalist theory of origins, in which the possibility of genuine revelation was ultimately dismissed.¹² In this early discourse, Eliot often adopted “scientific” value systems himself as a means of questioning the epistemic validity of comparative religion. The predominant question that he asked was: “on what terms is a science of religion possible? And are these methods even wholly “scientific”?”¹³ He even accused some of this interpretative “theory” as being a kind of “mythology” itself, which he believed was “likely to be eventually superseded,”¹⁴ just as Frazer had believed the Age of Religion to have been ‘superseded’ by the Age of Science.¹⁵ It is possible to draw a direct line from this early adaptive tendency in Eliot towards his pseudo-scientific notions about the “Impersonality” of poetry, and his analogy of the “catalyst,”¹⁶ which found its culmination in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” What these notes ultimately tell us is how deeply concerned Eliot was about religion’s place in an increasingly positivist world.

Once Eliot graduated, he continued to follow developments in the science of religion by reviewing prominent anthropological papers throughout the 1910’s and 1920’s. In *The Sacred Wood*, he ironically summarized the impact of these developments on the intellectual climate of the early twentieth-century:

This day began, in a sense, with Tylor and a few German anthropologists; since then we have acquired sociology and social psychology... a philosophy arose at Cambridge... our historical knowledge has of course increased; and we have a curious Freudian-social-mystical-rationalistic-higher-critical interpretation of the Classics and what used to be called the Scriptures... A number of sciences have sprung up in an almost tropical exuberance which undoubtedly excites our admiration, and the garden, not unnaturally, has come to resemble a jungle.¹⁷

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual’, in *Philosophical Essays and Notes, 1913-4*, from Cambridge, King’s College Library, Hayward Bequest, MS. 1.

¹² Eliot, ‘The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual’, p. 1.

¹³ Eliot, ‘The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual’, p. 1.

¹⁴ Eliot, ‘The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual’, p. 12.

¹⁵ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp. 48-60.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 53-54.

¹⁷ Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, pp. 75-6.

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Although one can detect a tone of bitterness in Eliot's description of the Bible as "what *used* to be called the Scriptures," the thing which strikes us immediately about the poet's criticism is how familiar he was with these "scientists." In the same essay, he insisted that he could not "deny the very great value" and "interest" of their works, acknowledging that "few books are more fascinating than those of Miss Harrison, Mr. Cornford, or Mr. Cooke... M. Durkheim... and M. Lèvy-Bruhl."¹⁸ Eliot often compiled lists of anthropologists which implied an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the field. It was as though Eliot wanted to be able to reduce anthropology into categories – "Spencer and Gillen on the Australians, Codrington on the Melanesians"¹⁹ – in the same way that *The Golden Bough* had tended to categorize and reduce the religious systems of different cultures into a scientific database.

What was most remarkable about Eliot's early interaction with the social sciences, however, was the profundity with which it began to shape the basis of his own social criticism, and his ideas more broadly about Western culture. In one of his "London Letters" in *The Dial*, Eliot's meditation on the "depressing effect" of Marie Lloyd's death suddenly turned into a much wider reflection on the state of modern culture as a whole, in which he referred to W. H. R. Rivers' *Depopulation of Melanesia* as a validation of his concerns:

the great psychologist adduces evidence which has led him to believe that the natives... are dying out principally for the reason that the 'Civilization' forced upon them has deprived them of all interest in life... When every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones... when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians.²⁰

Eliot's reference to Rivers suggests that, by the early 1920's, the literature of anthropology was having a formative impact on the development of his own attitudes towards modern society. Rivers had attributed the "people's lack of interest in life... to the abolition of head-hunting."²¹ What

¹⁸ Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, pp. 75-6.

¹⁹ Eliot, 'War-Paint and Feathers', Review of *The Path on the Rainbow*, ed. George Cronyn, in *Athenaeum* (October, 1919), p. 1036.

²⁰ Eliot, 'London Letter', *The Dial*, vol. 73, no. 6 (1922), p. 663.

²¹ W. H. R. Rivers (ed.), *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 101.

concerned Eliot was not the disastrous effects of colonization, but rather the devastating parallels that he envisaged between the acculturation of primitive peoples in the colonies, and the Death of God in his own society in the West. In both, he recognized the fatal psychological consequences of a culture that had been stripped of its religious and ceremonial traditions.

By the 1930's and 1940's, the ideas that social scientists such as Rivers represented, had become a dominant mode in Eliot's more mature apologies for religion. In "Thoughts after Lambeth," Eliot insisted that "it is not to anybody's interest that religion should disappear." "Without religion," Eliot asserted, "the whole human race would die, as according to W. H. R. Rivers, some Melanesian tribes have died, solely of boredom."²² In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot expressed his nostalgia for cultural "unity" by referring to "primitive communities" in which "the several activities of culture are inextricably interwoven." Eliot cited Layard's example of the Dyak, who exercised "several cultural activities at once – of art and religion, as well as amphibious warfare," in preparation "for the annual ritual of head-hunting." "It is only at a much further stage," Eliot complained, "that religion, science, politics and art become abstractly conceived apart from each other."²³ "Without sentimentalizing the life of the savage," Eliot even went on to insist that "the operation of a social-religious-artistic complex" found in "primitive" societies was something that the West "should emulate upon a higher plane."²⁴

Eliot and Lèvy-Bruhl

The most significant consequence of Eliot's engagement with the social sciences was the way in which anthropology came to influence his aesthetic theory of Impersonality. It was in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that Eliot first formulated the idea that "art never improves," asserting that "the mind of Europe" was a Tradition "which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen."²⁵ "Poetry begins," he later mused, "with a savage beating a

²² See T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 370.

²³ T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2014), pp. 96-97.

²⁴ Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, p. 49.

²⁵ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 16.

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drum in a jungle,”²⁶ suggesting in “The Ballet,” that “anyone who would penetrate to the spirit of dancing should begin by a close study of dancing amongst primitive peoples.”²⁷ In “War-Paint and Feathers,” Eliot reflected that “the maxim, Return to the sources, is a good one,”²⁸ insisting that:
primitive art and poetry can even, through the studies and experiments of the artist or poet, revivify the contemporary activities... For the artist is, in an *impersonal* sense, the most conscious of men; he is therefore the most and the least civilized and civilizable; he is the most competent to understand both civilized and primitive.²⁹

Out of the few critics who have examined this largely neglected essay, the tendency has often been to read it as “an attack on the chic primitivism of the American intelligentsia.”³⁰ The mildly ironic tone with which Eliot reflects that “within the time of a brief generation it has become evident that some smattering of anthropology is essential,”³¹ might indeed remind us of a letter that he wrote around the same time to Mary Hutchinson, in which he complained about the “contemporary taste” for “Polynesian, African, Hebridean, Chinese, etc. etc. say savage and Oriental art.”³² But Eliot never expresses being “annoyed” with “savage and Oriental art in general,” rather with “people who have not the training to know what these have in common with our traditional art.”³³

In a review of *Group Theories of Religion*, Eliot referred to Lèvy-Bruhl’s theory about the “mystical mentality,” when explaining that:
[the Bororo’s parrot totem] is not merely the *adoption* of a parrot as an heraldic emblem, nor merely a mythological kinship or participation in qualities; nor is the savage *deluded* into thinking that he is a parrot... But he is capable of a state of mind into which we cannot put ourselves [according to Lèvy-Bruhl], in which he *is* a parrot, while being at the same time a man.³⁴

²⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1933), p. 155.

²⁷ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Ballet’, quoted in David Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 78.

²⁸ Eliot, ‘War-Paint and Feathers’, p. 1036.

²⁹ Eliot, ‘War-Paint and Feathers’, p. 1036.

³⁰ Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, p. 78.

³¹ Eliot, ‘War-Paint and Feathers’, p. 1036.

³² T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1 (London: Faber, 1988), p. 317.

³³ Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1, p. 317.

³⁴ T. S. Eliot, Review of *Group Theories of Religion and the Religion of the Individual*, by Clement C. J. Webb, *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 27 (1916), p. 116.

The French anthropologist, elaborating on Frazer's ideas about magic, had posited that the "primitive" had access to a "mystic" state of mind in which "things and beings" could be viewed as part of a "synthetic whole." He anticipated Eliot in insisting that it was only "at a later stage of social evolution," that a "dissociation" between the "perceiver" and the "natural phenomenon" takes place.³⁵ The way that Eliot interpreted Lévy-Bruhl's theory was not to acknowledge, however, that the primitive's "state of mind" was a mode of "perception" which was altogether inaccessible to the modern, but rather to assert that it was "available only to or through the poet,"³⁶ – and that the poet could still recover and "emulate" it on a "higher plane." Just as Pound spoke of modern artists as "the heirs of the witch-doctor and the voodoo,"³⁷ Eliot's vision of the poet was, in a sense, as a kind of evolved, or adapted, primitive mystic. He believed that it was only the poet who could still access that deep repository of myth which "make[s] us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate."³⁸

What Frazer and later anthropologists like Lévy-Bruhl had done for Eliot was to "illustrate the stratifications of history that cover savagery;" they had "extend[ed] the consciousness of the human mind into as dark a backward and abysm of time as has yet been explored"³⁹ – and opened the modern poet, once more, to the possibilities of a "participation mystique" – a "synthetic" state of mind which could still "control, order, and give a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."⁴⁰ Eliot wanted to place himself at the centre of this project. By entitling his first published book of criticism *The Sacred Wood* – which alluded to the sacred wood of Diana Nemorensis in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* – it was as though Eliot was staging himself symbolically as The King of the Wood: as the guardian of an ancient Tradition, from which he drew his power. The implication was that Eliot's "Impersonal" modern poet was an "artist" who could "revivify"

³⁵ Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian Clare (New York: Washington Square Press, 1926), p. 31.

³⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1933), p. 148.

³⁷ Ezra Pound, 'The New Sculpture', *The Egoist*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1914), p. 68.

³⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 149.

³⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'A Prediction in Regard to Three English Authors', *Vanity Fair* (February, 1924), p. 29.

⁴⁰ Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', p 177.

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contemporary culture by recovering this primitive consciousness on a “higher plane,” and proposing a remedy to the dissociation of modern culture

Yeats and *The Golden Bough*

It was in 1923, a year after *The Waste Land* was published, that Eliot wrote his famous review of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which he claimed that “psychology... ethnology, and *The Golden Bough*” had “concurred” to make the “mythical method” possible.⁴¹ He recognized that it was “a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious.”⁴² Yeats’ need for a new “mythical method” ultimately originated out of the same crisis as Eliot’s. His grandfather had been an orthodox rector in the Church of Ireland, but in the space of a single generation, his father had become a complete skeptic.⁴³ Yeats grew up having to navigate his own faith through the ruins of his family’s religious uncertainties. In his *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*, Yeats reflected that his “father’s unbelief” had caused him “great anxiety,” recalling that, “I did not think I could live without religion.”⁴⁴ Yeats’ spiritual crisis led him to undertake a more eccentric quest than Eliot into the world of ancient tradition – into folklore, anthropology, magic, spiritualism, Neo-Platonism, Orientalism, Theosophy – in which he sought to “unite the radical truths of Christianity to those of a more ancient world,”⁴⁵ and, out of the shattered fragments of religion, to reconfigure “a symbolical, a mythological coherence.”⁴⁶

In its own right, Yeats’ study of folk traditions was a kind of anthropology. In the preface to his first anthology of Irish folk tales, he celebrated the “unchanged” culture of the “Irish peasantry” in a way which might remind us of Eliot’s nostalgia for the unity of “primitive communities.” He gave the example of “Paddy Flynn” as a kind of archetypal “primitive” Celt, who possessed native “powers” inaccessible to the modern person: having “the visionary melancholy of purely instinctive

⁴¹ Eliot, ‘*Ulysses*, Order and Myth’, p. 177.

⁴² Eliot, ‘*Ulysses*, Order and Myth’, p. 177.

⁴³ Richard Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 7.

⁴⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1915), p. 42.

⁴⁵ Yeats, quoted in Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, p. 125.

⁴⁶ Yeats, quoted in Kathleen Raine, *Yeats the Initiate* (London: Dolmen Press, 1986), p. 54.

natures and of all animals.”⁴⁷ “Have not all races had their first unity,” Yeats asked, “from a mythology that marries them to rock and hills?”⁴⁸ In his essay, “Ideas of Good and Evil,” he declared that he “would have Ireland recreate the ancient arts, the arts as they were understood in Judaea, in India, in Scandinavia, in Greece and Rome, in every ancient land; as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not just a few people.”⁴⁹ Like Eliot, Yeats was aware that he lived in an age in which poetry had “cease[d] to be the expression of the mind of a whole people.”⁵⁰ In order to establish himself as a universal poet, who could encompass the interests of an entire nation, Yeats recognized the need for a universal – or, like Eliot, an Impersonal – system of symbols: symbols which had their source in, and took their power from, a deep and ancient Tradition – the “universal and unanimous tradition.”⁵¹

Yeats was in fact the first of the Modernist poets – as Eliot quite rightly recognized – to demonstrate an aesthetic interest in Frazerian anthropology. In his notes on “The Valley of the Black Pig,” for instance, Yeats interpreted the legendary battle – which had been prophesied by the “Irish peasantry,” “to break at last the power of their enemies” – as “a mythological battle’.” He connected “the black pig” to “the boar that killed Adonis, the boar that killed Attis; and the pig embodiment of Typhon,” before citing Frazer: “(‘Golden Bough’, II. Pages 26, 31).”⁵² By considering this myth in relation to a “fertility” practice mentioned in *The Golden Bough* – in which the “pig’s tail is stuck into the ground” so that “the corn may grow abundantly” – Yeats concluded that “the bristleless boar” was a “symbol of darkness and cold” associated with “the scourging of the man-god.”⁵³ Also comparing this prophesied battle with three other legendary battles of Irish folklore – which he took as symbolic of “the annual battle of summer and winter,” between “the manifest world and the ancestral darkness at the end of all things” – Yeats suggested that “all these battles are

⁴⁷ Yeats, quoted in Len Monteith, *Yeats and Theosophy* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 167-71.

⁴⁸ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 194.

⁴⁹ W. B. Yeats, ‘Ideas of Good and Evil’, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 6 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908), p. 252.

⁵⁰ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 12.

⁵¹ Yeats, qtd. in Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, p. 125.

⁵² Yeats, in *Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 516-7.

⁵³ Yeats, *Poems*, pp. 516-517.

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one, the battle of all things with shadowy decay.”⁵⁴ By relating the “black pig” to a more universal “type,”⁵⁵ Yeats was clearly demonstrating a Frazerian understanding of mythology, which was later to interest Eliot. What excited Yeats about these myths was that their symbolism had a universal power to “possess the imagination of large numbers of men.”⁵⁶

An interest in the relationship between the “fertility,” or the “shadowy decay,” of the natural world, and the fate of human or divine beings, is a “myth-motif” that recurs throughout Yeats’ poetry. In *Anashuya and Vijaya*, as an early example, the fate of “all the lands and flickering corn” (line 1) relies upon the harmony of the priestess’s relationship to Vijaya.⁵⁷ When Anashuya trusts Vijaya’s “love” (3), her “prayers” protect him and “all the sacred flocks” from “trouble” (84-87), but when she suspects that he “love[s] another” (40), we worry momentarily that she will become like “the unforgiving hound” (58) – like the “boar that killed Adonis, the boar that killed Attis” (a symbol of “shadowy decay”). In “Vacillation,” a speaker announces: “Let all things pass away” (line 61).⁵⁸ This preparation for death is associated with the “image” of Attis, which “hangs” in the “topmost bough” of “a tree” (11-6). The necessity of the Dying God’s sacrifice in the poem appears to derive from the central problem that the “man” has not “had enough” of “woman’s love” (26). In “Her Vision in the Wood,” we find ourselves once again in Frazer’s “sacred wood” (line 2), and this time it is a female speaker – “too old for a man’s love” (3) – who becomes the “victim” (32) of some kind of sacrificial ritual (her body is “torn,” like Adonis or Attis).⁵⁹ Lurking behind all of these scenes is the archetypal “myth and ritual of the Dying God” – in which the relationship between the male and the female beings becomes closely related to either the “fertility,” or – more often in Yeats’ case – the “shadowy decay” of the natural world. Half a century later, Robert Graves was to find this same underlying “Theme” in *The Golden Bough*:

The Theme, briefly, is the antique story, which falls... of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing year; the central chapters concern the God’s losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of

⁵⁴ Yeats, *Poems*, pp. 516-517.

⁵⁵ Yeats, *Poems*, pp. 516-517.

⁵⁶ Yeats, *Poems*, pp. 516-517.

⁵⁷ Yeats, *Poems*, p. 44.

⁵⁸ Yeats, *Poems*, p. 367.

⁵⁹ Yeats, *Poems*, pp. 388-389.

the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess.⁶⁰

Yeats' poems often feel like fragments of this archetypal "Theme." The hope that comes out of these poems, is the prospect that the victim will "lie undecayed in tomb" (80),⁶¹ or that out of death and "old age" (the Waning Year) will come some kind of life and rebirth (the Waxing Year) – some "harvest" or "summer," out of the "ancestral darkness of battle in "The Valley of the Black Pig." What Yeats so often insists upon in his poems, is the necessity of the "battle" – of the death of the Dying God – before a reunion with the Goddess, the "glimmering girl," is possible. The "power" of Yeats' poetry often derives from the way in which these fertility symbols function on an archetypal level: they are symbolic "types" which Frazer had recognized to be "universal."

Perhaps Yeats' single most remarkable allusion to Frazer occurs in "Sailing to Byzantium." Yeats later reflected that, "Byzantium was the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city."⁶² One of the things that drew Yeats to Byzantium was "the Academy of Plato,"⁶³ an institution which, above all, symbolized the kind of syncretic religion which Yeats was interested in. Just as Eliot wanted to conceive of a society in which a "social-religious-artistic complex" might still be possible, Yeats envisaged ancient Constantinople as the only city in "history" in which "religious, aesthetic and practical life" had all been one; in which the "artist" was at his most "impersonal."⁶⁴ Many of Yeats' poems are interested in the quest-motif, often drawing upon heroes from Celtic mythology – Oisín, Cúchulainn, Aengus – but "Sailing to Byzantium" was his most archetypal expression of the "spiritual journey." What is most striking about this poem is the way in which Yeats associates the archetypal quest with a sacrificial ritual, in which the speaker's passage into "eternity" involves being "fastened to a dying animal" (line 22).⁶⁵ "Once out of nature," the speaker wishes to "be set upon a golden

⁶⁰ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 8.

⁶¹ Yeats, *Poems*, p. 368.

⁶² Yeats, *Poems*, p. 576.

⁶³ Yeats, *Poems*, p. 576.

⁶⁴ Yeats, *Poems*, p. 576.

⁶⁵ Yeats, *Poems*, p. 302.

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bough,” so that he might sing “of what is past, or passing, or to come” (30-2). The symbol of Frazer’s Dying God becomes an archetypal expression of the speaker’s desire to transcend into timelessness and universality.

Dissatisfied with the liturgy of the orthodox church on the one hand, and with the implications of “Victorian Science” on the other, Yeats developed an obsession with “the need for mystical rites – a ritual, system of evocation and meditation – to re-unite the perception of the spirit, of the dream, with natural beauty.”⁶⁶ Although the poet became very quickly skeptical of the Theosophical Society in the late 1880’s, he never lost this “obsession” with the occult and with syncretic forms of comparative religion; and it was through his gradual initiation into the Order of the Golden Dawn in the early 1890’s that Yeats eventually found a “system of mystical rites” which would best accommodate his eccentric spiritual quest as a young man. The central ceremony which introduced Yeats into the Inner Order of the Golden Dawn involved the mystical death and resurrection of the adept, as a kind of “Christian Rosenkreuz.” In 1893, as part of the initiation of the Path of the Portal, Yeats re-enacted this symbolic death and rebirth in a tomb.⁶⁷ As was the case in many of the rituals of the Order – in which masks of deities, such as Osiris, were worn – the purpose of the initiation was that Yeats actually *became* a manifestation of the Dying God.

Eliot’s *The Waste Land*

The central argument of this article is that *The Waste Land* marked the beginning of Eliot’s own quest to “Byzantium;” it was his own symbolic initiatory passage through the Path of the Portal. The significant point being that: in order to understand Eliot’s intentions as the author of *The Waste Land*, it is more useful to think about his “mythical method” in the early 1920’s as a kind of Yeatsian quest, or as a “mystical rite,” than as part of a de-mythologizing project, which we might more readily associate with Joyce. In *Ulysses*, by manipulating a parallel between the Ithacan quest of Homer’s epic hero, and a day in the life of the Dubliner Leopold Bloom, Joyce had adumbrated the “mythical method;” and, in both Joyce and Eliot, their interest “in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” was to ironize the absurdity of modern life.

⁶⁶ Yeats, quoted in Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, pp. 125-126.

⁶⁷ Yeats, quoted in Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, pp. 98-99.

But the difference between Eliot and Joyce is that in *The Waste Land*, the hero's descent into Hades – unlike Bloom's visit to Glasnevin Cemetery for Paddy Dignam's funeral, or Finnegan's fatal fall from the ladder – was meant to be part of a "serious" soteriology. *The Waste Land* articulates a desire to transcend the absurdity and futility of the contemporary modern world by dramatizing a quest to recover an ancient mystical experience.

In his chapter on "The Ritual of Death and Resurrection" in *The Golden Bough*, Frazer referred to a remarkable initiation rite, recorded by J.G.F. Riedel in Indonesia towards the end of the nineteenth-century, which may remind us of the essential nature of Yeats' initiation into the Order of the Golden Dawn:

The Kakian house is an oblong wooden shed, situated under the darkest trees in the depth of the forest, and is built to admit so little light that it is impossible to see what goes on in it... Thither the boys who are to be initiated are conducted in blindfolds... Immediately a hideous uproar is heard to proceed from the shed... As soon as each boy has disappeared within the precincts, a dull chopping sound is heard... This is a token that the boy's head has been cut off, and that the devil has carried him away to the other world, there to regenerate and transform him... it is then said that the devil has swallowed them. The boys remain in the shed for five or nine days... and are taught the traditions and secrets of the tribe. After these initiatory rites the lads are deemed men, and may marry.⁶⁸

One might think of the initiate's entrance into the "dark" Kakian houses of western Ceram as comparable to the experience of entering into the Paleolithic caves of southern France, which Eliot visited in the summer of 1919.⁶⁹ In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell talks about the dark caves at Lascaux as 'temple-caves', in which shamanic initiation rites of death-and-resurrection – like those described by Frazer – would have been performed.⁷⁰ Campbell has tended to interpret these rituals and their related myths, like Jung, as psychological "symbols of transformation."⁷¹ In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), he claimed that the myth of the Dying God, was a universal "monomyth:"

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation-*

⁶⁸ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 696.

⁶⁹ Eliot visited the Dordogne in August, 1919. See Eliot's Letter to Lytton Strachey (6 August, 1919), in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1, p. 327; Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), p. 30.

⁷⁰ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

⁷¹ See Joseph Maddrey, *The Making of T. S. Eliot* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), p. 108.

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*initiation-return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth: A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*⁷²

Campbell in fact coined the term “monomyth” in relation to Joyce. In his *Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (1944), he hailed Joyce’s late novel as “the first literary instance of myth utilization on a universal scale,” celebrating that *Finnegans Wake* had “tapped the universal sea” of “mythological symbolism,” which “Western scholarship” had only recently “proven” to be “[essentially homogenous] throughout the world.”⁷³

It can be said, however, that in *The Waste Land*, Eliot was trying to manifest this archetypal narrative structure – of initiation-and-return, of symbolic death-and-resurrection – with much more sincerity than Joyce had ever intended. *The Waste Land* is an attempt to construct a modern textual rite, a modern mythology: in which the poet stages his own initiation into the ancient Tradition as a sacrificial ceremony. The “plan” of *The Waste Land* ultimately takes its shape from the myth and ritual of the Dying God (or “the Hanged God of Frazer”, as Eliot wrote in his notes),⁷⁴ and Eliot’s “references to vegetation ceremonies” do help us to elucidate the meaning of the poem’s “symbolism.”

The Waste Land is dominated by images that imply that the landscape of the poem is ultimately hostile towards vegetal growth. The speaker’s question in “The Burial of the Dead” – “what branches grow?” (line 19) – fails to find an answer. The singular and only “tree” that is mentioned in the poem – which can be taken to be the sacred tree of Frazer’s *Golden Bough* – is “dead,” “the last fingers of leaf clutch and sink into the wet bank” (173-174). The implication is that the death of natural life becomes symbolic of modern man’s “dissociation” from the vegetal myths and rites which used to spiritually sustain him. “The nymphs are departed” (175-179), a voice repeatedly laments. This recurring image of a landscape of “stony rubbish,” in which all spiritual life has “departed,” is one which finds its culmination in the climactic and apocalyptic vision

⁷² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 30.

⁷³ Joseph Campbell, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), pp. 360-362.

⁷⁴ Campbell, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*, p. 76.

(“Here is no water but only rock”) of “What the Thunder Said” (331-359), where we find a violent disintegration not only of all vegetable life, but also of syntactical and formal structure: both of which are meant to represent simultaneously the resultant mental fragmentation of Eliot’s speaker, and the spiritual decline of the modern West as a whole.

The speaker’s inability to “connect” with “the hyacinth girl” (36), in a very Prufrockian sense, is a central concern in “The Burial of the Dead,” symbolizing the speaker’s yearning for the magical, life-giving powers of nature, and his need for some kind of spiritual reunion with the female divinity. When they have returned “from the hyacinth garden,” we are told that he “could not speak” and his “eyes failed” (38-39), leaving the speaker in a lifeless state – “neither living nor dead” – in which, “looking into the heart of light,” he finds “nothing” but “silence” (40-41). The “indifferent” relationship between “the typist” and “the young man carbuncular” (215-248) also assumes a central focus in “The Fire Sermon.” The implied meaning is that the problematic relationship between the speaker and the girl is deeply connected to the infertility of the landscape. The logic of *The Waste Land*, in Frazerian terms, is essentially “magical.” It assumes that the fate of animate beings is causally related to the condition of the vegetal world. Out of the “broken images” of *The Waste Land*, an archetypal “symbolism” does emerge. The speaker of the poem shares a relationship with the hyacinth girl which we might associate with Graves’s archetypal Waxing God and Goddess, or the speakers and their lovers in Yeats’ “sacred wood” scenes, all of which ultimately derive from Frazer’s “mythical archetype:” “Diana of the Wood herself had a male companion Virbius by name, who was to her what Adonis was to Venus, or Attis to Cybele.”⁷⁵ In representing a vision of the pastoral and Edenic, the Goddess becomes a symbol of the life-giving powers of a primal vegetal religion. One of the underlying concerns of the poem is that the mystical reunion of the God and the Goddess is not possible until some kind of Yeatsian quest, or initiation rite – of disappearance into the abyssal darkness of the Kakian house, and return from death, so to speak – is complete.

It was Jessie Weston who first applied Frazer’s ritualist theory to the study of Arthurian materials. By comparing the “varying” legends told

⁷⁵ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 8.

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about “Gawain, Perceval, and Galahad,” Weston claimed to have identified, like Frazer, an “underlying uniformity” to “the Grail legend.”⁷⁶ For Weston, the “literary evolution” of “the Grail Quest” could be traced back to an “essential identity” – much like Frazer’s “mythical archetype” – which ultimately had its origins in pagan and primitive ritual.⁷⁷ Weston identified two fundamental and significant points of similarity between all the legends that she compared:

(a) There is a general consensus of evidence to the effect that the main object of the Quest is the restoration to health and vigour of a King suffering from infirmity caused by wounds, sickness, or old age;

(b) and whose infirmity, for some mysterious and unexplained reason, reacts disastrously upon his kingdom, either depriving it of vegetation, or exposing it to the ravages of war... the aim of the Grail Quest is two-fold; it is to benefit (a) the King, (b) the land.⁷⁸

Out of the “broken images” of *The Waste Land*, a definite Quest structure does emerge, through the “winding,” mountainous, “road” of the “dead land” (line 333) – in which the fundamental “aim” is to “restore” the land to fertility, and ultimately reunite with the Goddess. In Eliot’s version, the speaker is both the dying Fisher King and the heroic God-savior at the same time.

The spatial imagery that is employed in “The Burial of the Dead,” intimates the enactment of a *katabasis* into the Underworld. “And *down* we went” (16), the “frightened” (15) voice tells us at the beginning of the poem, “*under* the shadow of this red rock” (27). The epigraphic words of *The Waste Land* – ἀποθανεῖν θέλω (“I want to die”) – are spoken by the Cumaean Sibyl who had Aeneas retrieve the Golden Bough – before his “perilous journey to the world of the dead” – from the same “grove” which Frazer associated with Diana Nemorensis, and her Dying God.⁷⁹ In his notes, Eliot also connects his speaker’s exclamation that “I had not thought death had undone so many” (63), with Dante’s descent through the circles of *Inferno* (“si lunga tratta di gente, ch’io non avrei mai creduto che morte tanta n’avesse disfatta”).⁸⁰ When an uncertain voice asks “are you alive, or not?” (126) it becomes quite apparent that the “alley” into which the

⁷⁶ Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2011), p. 12.

⁷⁷ Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p. 19.

⁷⁹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 77.

speaker has descended may not be in the world of the living; it is “where the dead men lost their bones” (116). Of course the title of the first section of the poem itself, “The Burial of the Dead,” suggests that this descent is related to a burial rite. The speaker’s conversation with “Stetson,” for instance, revolves around the question of whether or not the ‘corpse’ that was “planted last year” has “begun to sprout?” (71-72). Both the *katabasis* of Classical and Christian mythology, and the ancient “burial” ritual, co-exist, on the archetypal plane, as a myth and ritual of the Dying God. The enactment of descent becomes figurative of the symbolic death of Eliot’s speaker into the “whirlpool” (318) of formal fragmentation, and “nothing[ness]” (120).

When the speaker asks “Stetson” whether or not the corpse “will bloom this year,” the implication is that the death of Eliot’s speaker is not the end of the soteriological process, but rather a necessary stage in the ritual of rebirth. “The Fire Sermon” is where this process begins. Eliot explains in his notes that he had originally taken the name for the third section of his poem, and the line “burning burning burning burning” (308), from “the Buddha’s Fire Sermon.”⁸¹ Having also acknowledged his allusions to “St. Augustine’s *Confessions*” (309), Eliot asserted that “the collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident.” Like the co-existence of the *katabasis* and the burial rite in the poem’s first section, the “collocation” of the Buddhist and Christian narratives of spiritual rebirth here, articulate the start of the quester’s regeneration out of death.

The motif of *The Waste Land*, and the soteriological need for renewed fertility does also have a strong Biblical resonance. We think of Hebraic legend – of Moses and the chosen people, in *Exodus*, wandering for forty years in “the dead land,” on the borders of Canaan, in search of *Ha’Aretz HaMuvtahat*, the “land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 33:3); or of the Temptation of Christ (Matthew 4:1) in “the wilderness” – where we surely imagine that, as in *The Waste Land*, there “is no water but only rock.” Both of these histories are, of course, essentially typological of Christ’s death and resurrection, like Yeats’ initiation as Christian Rosenkreuz into the Order of the Golden Dawn. Eliot’s “dead land” motif alludes specifically to Biblical narratives that centre on the spiritual crises

⁸¹ Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 79.

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of both an heroic individual, and his people. The implication is that the speaker's purpose in *The Waste Land* is – like that of Moses and Christ – to recover, in himself, and in the “Son of man” (20), the sustenance of the spirit. It is as though, with the death of “what used to be called the Scriptures,” Eliot was trying to find a *new* heroic identity, a new mythopoeia, through the syntheses of old heroic motifs – one which could revive the spirit of the West – by tapping into a series of primordial images that Frazer had proven to be at the foundations of religious thought.

On the narrative plane, then, *The Waste Land* simultaneously enacts: 1) an initiation or burial rite; 2) the hero's separation from his divine consort; 3) a mythological descent into, and a return from, the Underworld; 4) the knight's Quest to the Chapel Perilous; and 5) the spiritual death-and-rebirth of the ascetic, or the exile-and-return of the prophet. Because the symbolism of Eliot's poem functions on an Impersonal plane, it is also possible to think of all of these actions co-existing on the same “mythical” or archetypal level, as essentially one narrative: the myth and ritual of the Dying God. It is as though Eliot's *The Waste Land* is like an archeology, or an anthropology, of mythological motifs. The mythologies of Mesopotamia, of Medieval Europe, and of primitive Melanesia, although at different historical levels, are still able to co-exist; to all express the same timeless soteriological need. The archetypal, primal symbolism of the infertile “dead land” cuts across cultural and historical boundaries; it becomes a universal “objective correlative.” Eliot's speaker *is* Odysseus, or Aeneas in the Underworld; or even Yeats' Culchulain; he is Dante in *Inferno*; Moses in the “Wilderness,” or Christ crucified; he is the Kakian initiate, or the shaman delving into the abyssal darkness of the primordial ‘temple-caves’ of Lascaux. Eliot's speaker is *all* of these figures from mythology simultaneously. Because he sacrifices himself to the Tradition, the speaker's identity dissolves into, and becomes “swallowed” up by, some kind of absolute entity.

By the time we get to “What the Thunder Said,” we have eventually left the claustrophobic “alleys” of the Underworld, and are now up “among the mountains” (333). Finally passing through an Indian “jungle” (399), the speaker finds himself “sat upon the shore/ Fishing, with arid plain behind me.” The implication is that he is now in a position to “set [his] lands in order,” and the poem ends with the Upanishadic Peace-prayer, “Shantih shantih shantih” (424-426). Eliot's speaker does return from his quest, but

because he only has visionary “fragments,” it is not until *Ash Wednesday* that salvific images of the Goddess begin to appear once more.

Conclusion

Out of the “whirlpool” of symbols, a monomythic soteriological pattern does emerge. *The Waste Land* stages Eliot’s quest for an Impersonal poetic voice as an initiatory descent into the caves of the collective unconscious: the primal Tradition. The descent into abyssal nothingness resembles a process of disintegration into the epistemological uncertainty of a modern age, in which new modes of scientific knowledge had relativized truth, and challenged the singular authority of the Biblical tradition. Eliot’s erudite quest into the world of comparative religion is symbolized by the shattering of his speaker’s identity into a “heap of broken images.” Out of the “fragments” of the destroyed God, Eliot’s speaker strives to construct a new mystical symbol. *The Waste Land* dramatizes this quest as an attempt to synthesize all rituals, all mythologies, into a single, universal, all-encompassing, modern ritual, or modern mythology, in which ancient soteriological traditions are all reconfigured as symbols of an archetypal process of ordering and controlling “contemporary history.”

The logic of *The Waste Land*, then, mimics the “mystical mentality,” or the “magical” belief, of the primitive: out of the “broken images,” or the “whirlpool” of *The Waste Land*, one archetypal Dying God does emerge as a new “synthetic whole.” Eliot’s hero becomes an anthropological synthesis of all heroes; who, in a state of spiritual and psychological crisis, seeks to articulate his recovery of the spirit in universal terms. In attempting to incorporate all heroic identities, it is as though Eliot’s speaker dissolves out of identity: he becomes Impersonal, transcendent of all symbols. By sacrificing himself to the Tradition, he initiates himself into the immortal Sacred Wood of verse; the grove of the Goddess. Out of this anthropological quest into pagan antiquity – in which he “pursued skepticism to the utmost limit,” Eliot eventually emerged from darkness, “climbing the third stair” (119), with a pattern of death-and-resurrection that ultimately re-affirmed his faith in the rituals of the Anglican church, and the “holy mother” (211) who “made fresh the springs” (130).⁸² As with Yeats, Eliot’s theosophical quest – his initiation

⁸² T. S. Eliot, ‘Ash Wednesday’, in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 94-98.

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through the Path of the Portal – ultimately led him back to a primal vision of Christ as the archetypal Dying God.