Ionian and Doric initiation in *The Waste Land*

By Andrei Dirlau

*April is the cruellest month*

T. S. Eliot

*‘In my beginning is my end’*

I should like to begin this particular reading of *The Waste Land* from that which has been maybe the most neglected element within the framework of the poem: *The Man With Three Staves*. Indeed, there seems to be an agreement among Eliotean scholars to unanimously ignore this symbolic character. The fact is understandable if we take into account the difficulty with which it yields to critical interpretation. It seems to be an obscure symbol, performing hardly more than a decorative (and, for some exegetes, even questionable) function. In the context, it sounds exotic enough to reinforce the “extravagant” associations of the whole passage. And yet, I hold it to be a key element for deciphering the anagogical level of the poem.

Eliot’s own note to this entire key episode in *The Waste Land* is somewhat misleading: “I am not” – he pretends – “familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience.” He associates *The Hanged Man* with *The Hanged God* in Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, and with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus – i.e. with Jesus Christ. While “*The Man with Three Staves* (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate” – he pretends – “quite arbitrarily with the Fisher King himself.”

I said that this note is misleading because – as I shall try to prove – Eliot didn’t, in fact, depart at all from the true significance of the Major Arcana of the Tarot pack, and the associations he makes are not as “arbitrary” as he claims.

And this is due precisely to the fact that these associations were previously made by the esoteric tradition itself, which Eliot is here poetically encoding, more or less aware of what he is doing (as Jung has shown, mental processes involving archetypal patterns occur at a level not only below that of the ectopsychic and endopsychic functions of consciousness, but also even below that of the personal unconscious).

I suggest that, in fact, *The Man with Three Staves* corresponds to the Fifth Arcanum of the Tarot pack, bearing the – let us say – ‘technical’ names of *Magister Arcanorum* (Teacher of the Arcana) or *The Great Hierophant*, as well as the ‘vulgar’ name of *The Pope*. Let us recall that Eliot was a Catholic, so that this symbolism may have been, up to a point, not entirely uncongenial to him. At the same time, let us bear in mind that Tarot symbolism is far from overlapping with the Christian one.

Its picture is a seated man, in the robes of a High Priest, holding in his left hand, and higher than his head, *The Cross of the Great Hierophant* – a vertical sceptre with three horizontal staves:
With his right hand he is blessing the two disciples kneeling in front of him, onto whom he is bestowing initiation. Because the Great Hierophant is the giver of initiation, and the two columns between which he is sitting (Jachin and Boaz\(^1\)) correspond to the two kinds of initiation, as we shall see later on.

In the Kabbala, the Hebrew letter of this Arcanum is \(\text{He}y\), its numerical value is 5, and its hieroglyph means ‘Breathing’ (the symbol of life).

\(\text{He}y\) is the 5\(^{th}\) letter of many Semitic alphabets (Phoenician, Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic). The Phoenician obviously resembles the 3 staves of the Hierophant. And in the poem we have Phlebus, the Phoenician Sailor.

In Judaism, \(\text{He}y\) represents the name of God, as it stands for Hashem, which means The Name, being a way of saying God without actually uttering His name. The Sacred Name, the 4-letter-word Tetragrammaton \(\text{יִהְוָה}\) (read from right to left YHWH, vocalized Yahweh) includes the letter \(\text{He}y\) twice.

Since the basic idea of this Arcanum is Initiation, its symbol is the mysterious pentagram.

Like Tiresias, the Great Hierophant is a seer of hidden truths, a prophet. He possesses initiatic knowledge or Gnosis. That is why the letter “\(G\)” is inscribed in the middle of the kabbalistic pentagram:

But in its turn, “\(G\)” comes from another Semitic letter, the Phoenician Gimel \(\text{ג}\) which gave the Greek letter Gamma \(\Gamma\), the square of masonry \(\text{Ｇ}\) where “\(G\)” stands for God and Geometry, at the centre of the ‘blazing star’\(^2\).

In the poem, Phlebus, the Phoenician Sailor, “forgot the cry of gulls” – i.e. he lost the Gnosis or initiation, and therefore he is “a fortnight dead” (two 7-day cycles), drowned in the sea of hyle, or matter. His death is one reason for the spiritual death reigning in the Waste Land.

That is because The Hierophant, The Man with Three Staves, no longer performs his initiatory function, i.e. no longer is a Hierophant. This is symbolically paralleled by the sickness of Amfortas\(^3\), The Fisher King in the Grail legend (the guardian of the Holy Grail and its mysteries). He is severely wounded, maimed, and it is his spiritual disease that afflicts the entire land, sterilizing it, rendering it barren or “waste”.

The “\(G\)” in the middle of the “flaming star” is written in silver on a purple background. However, in the Waste Land, silver is degraded into tin. Indeed, the Fifth Arcanum, of initiation, is ruled by Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian god Thoth. (Hence, the “fake-Egyptian name of Madame Sosostris, the famous clairvoyante” – the ‘sorceress of Ecbatana’ – herself a demoted Sibyl, a feminine Tiresias, and likewise impaired (by a ‘bad cold’)).


\(^{2}\) Gershom Scholem shows that both the 5-pointed star and the 6-pointed star originated in Babylon or Palestine, being endowed with magical powers by adepts of occult sciences (*The Curious History of the Six-pointed Star. How the "Magen David" Became the Jewish Symbol*). See also Gregory Peters, *The Sacred Pentagram*, Golden State College, 2004.

\(^{3}\) Wolfram von Eschenbach calls the Grail King *Enfermetez*, “ailing, afflicted.” Gallic versions soften this name to Amfortas.
But Hermes, or Mercury, is not only the patron of Hermetic lore (and of the alchemical *mysterium magnum*), but also the merchant god; and, in the Waste Land, he is half-blind (a “one-eyed merchant”), *i.e.* he doesn’t have the inspired blindness of Tiresias, which would make him a prophet, foreteller, or hierophant. And therefore, the initiation that he is imparting can only be a ‘one-eyed’ initiation, with a her(m)etical bias, leading askew. Finally, his cargo is tin (“*la cargaison d’étain*”), as we find in *Dans le restaurant*.

Even the initiatic androginity or hermaphroditism of Tiresias has become debased to the homosexuality of "Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant", who asks the speaker in *The Fire Sermon* to spend “a weekend at the Metropole.”

In the distressed *Waste Land*, to “describe the horoscope, riddle the inevitable with playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams... have become usual pastimes or drugs, and features of the press.” The astrologer cannot be too “careful these days” and the Sibyl hangs in a jar and can only pray for death.

One more thing here: in the modern Tarot, the Hierophant is associated with Jupiter. But Jupiter’s metal is tin, and he is known to be the master of lightning and thunder. The archetypal symbolism, at the deep level of the structures of the imaginary, is again revealed to be consistently coherent throughout the poem.

The Tarot typology permeates *The Waste Land* through and through. It is not very relevant for this analysis whether it is consciously or unconsciously embedded within the semantic structure. What matters is that it provides total symbolic coherence to the entire edifice, underlying the apparent disconnectedness of episodes juxtaposed as a „broken heap of images,” and underneath the ‘cubist’ effects obtained by the modernist technique of collage.

Thus, the ‘strangely perfumed’ Lady of nerves (Part 2, *A Game of Chess*) sitting on a burnished throne, between two columns or “standards wrought with fruited vines,” and facing the typically Hebrew ‘sevenbranched candelabra,’ is reminiscent of the Second Arcanum, The High Priestess.

She is the Great Hierophant’s complement, and associated with the goddess Isis. This isomorphism is echoed in the poem in lines 77–96, which refer to the famous passage about the Egyptian queen Cleopatra (herself an ‘avatar’ of Isis) in Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*, as referenced by Eliot in his endnote to line 77.

Finally, The High Priestess is also associated with the Holy Virgin Mary (disguised in the poem as the Austrian Countess Marie Larisch von Moennich, of the Habsburg royal family: “Marie, Marie, hold on tight”, line 15).

Together, the Fifth and the Second Arcana stand for the two complementary ways towards initiation, which in its turn is twofold.

**Dorian and Ionian Initiation**

According to Oswald Wirth and Papus, there are two paths towards initiation, corresponding to the two types of initiation.

The first is called active, masculine, rational or *Doric* (Dorian) initiation. It is also, and above all, known as active or *magical* initiation. It is related to the first eleven Arcana in the Tarot pack.

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4 Regarding, of course, “dear Mrs. Equitone’s horoscope” (line 58).
In this type, “theory precedes practice. It is based on exalting the principle of individual initiative, on reason and will-power. It suits the disciplined person who is always in control of himself and only depends on the resources of his own personality without waiting for any help from external influences, developing all that one has in oneself, and acting according to the full and total growth of one’s inner energies.”

Its model is the First Arcanum, Shakespeare’s Prospero, the self-confident Magician, master of himself and therefore of all magic forces, who inspires the music of Ariel, which crept by Ferdinand “upon the waters” (as quoted in The Fire Sermon). Its corresponding Hebrew letter is Aleph א, which presides over Ariel’s name.

The second path – and the second type of initiation – is the passive, or mystical initiation. It is also called feminine, or Ionian initiation, and is related to the Arcana 12 to 21.

In this type, of “mystical abandon, the subject is urged into practical activities before he is given understanding.” For the mystic it is a question of being ready to empty himself of his own will, to yield it and receive the divine will and grace, cultivating purposefully a state of mind offering complete receptivity.

This Ionian initiation explains the otherwise “inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold” held by “the walls of Magnus Martyr.” Because the model for this Ionian type of initiation is indeed the martyr, symbolised by the 12th Arcanum – The Hanged Man – which Eliot is not the first to associate with the Hanged God in Frazer’s Golden Bough – Attis, Osiris, Adonis – and with Jesus Christ, “the hooded Figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus”.

Its corresponding planet is Saturn, the planet of sufferance and sacrifice. Because this is the superior pattern of initiation through sacrifice: The martyr effaces himself in order to receive and obey influences from above. His passive renouncement and complete surrender of his own will make him a victim of his own accord. His supreme choice is an act of foregoing any individual choice.

To understand this type of initiation we shall refer to another work by T. S. Eliot – Murder in the Cathedral, where it is illustrated by Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, who died as a martyr in the 16th century. The meaning of martyrdom is perfectly expressed in Eliot’s play by a quote from the Archbishop’s sermon before his death:

“A martyr, a Saint, is always made by the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and lead them, to bring them back to His ways. A martyrdom is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God. The martyr no longer

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5 Cf. O. Wirth, op. cit., 13.
6 Ibidem.
desires anything for himself, not even the glory of martyrdom... In Heaven the Saints are most high, having made themselves most low, seeing themselves not as we see them, but in the light of the Godhead from which they draw their being.”

This is exactly the meaning of the Twelfth Arcanum, The Hanged Man, whose ’technical’ name is Sacrificium and secret names – Messia, Caritas and Zodiacus. Its sign is the Hebrew letter Lamed ה, whose hieroglyph represents an outstretched hand in an act of giving, even at the price of one’s own detriment, like surrendering one’s own vital force.

One must let oneself be “plucked out by the Lord” – like Saint Augustine – obeying the first command of Prajapati in the Brhadaranyak Upanishad, repeated by the thunder:

“DA! Datta! What have we given? The awful daring of a moment’s surrender which an age of prudence can never retract / By this only we have existed.”

It is the Christian command: “Give to every man that asketh of thee”; “Love your enemies, and do good, and lend hoping for nothing again” (Luke 6:35).

This is why the Hanged Man holds under his tied arms two bags pouring out “gold” – spiritual treasures and ultimate redemption. It is the “Ionian gold.”

As to the “white,” it relates to the purity of soul, as well as the immaculate birth of Christ?.

The hanging is also a crucifixion; the man’s left foot is bent behind the left one, to form a cross, above the upturned triangle made by his arms and head.

It is the alchemical sign for Opus Magnum, the Great Work. It means the moral readiness to make the supreme sacrifice of his personality and self, or in alchemical language, to destroy his fixed nature by fire so as to volatilize it. This is the meaning of burning burning in Buddha’s Fire Sermon, of Saint Augustine’s “Oh Lord Thou pluckest me out”, and of the fire of voluntary refinement in which Arnaut Daniel dives back in Dante’s Purgatorio XXVI, 148 (“Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina”).

One last element here, to make this esoteric reading of The Waste Land complete. It is a crucial distinction (which I owe to Oswald Wirth), in the light of which it acquires perfect coherence, as well as spiritual significance and universality.

Doric initiation is called ”dry”, corresponding in alchemy to sulphur – an ”infernal” principle of substance and egocentricity.

Ionian initiation, on the other hand, is called ”humid,” corresponding in alchemy to the sublime or celestial water, to purification through sacrifice.

I will call the first, the Doric type, a ‘technological’ kind of initiation, following a suggestion offered by Mircea Eliade in connection with the Biblical figure of Cain, who was a ‘blacksmith.’ Cain is thus regarded as the ‘forefather of all the technical inventions, which are intrinsically ’magical,’ of all industrial and technological activities.

It is this ‘dry,’ technological and materialistic initiation, that is characteristic of The Waste Land, with its deserts of dry rock and stony places, and sandy roads winding among dead “mountains of rock without water”, with the “dry sterile thunder without rain”. Here the

7 Attis, the Hanged God, had also been born of a virgin, who conceived him by a pomegranate.
displaced Hierophant, the sick Fisher King, sits on the shore, with the arid plain behind him, hopelessly waiting for redemption. And of course, it is even more characteristic for our own post-modern, secularized, desacralized world.

The second, the Ionian or mystical type, is precisely what he is waiting for – fertility through sacrifice:

"Verily I say unto you: except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." (John 12:24).

This is the answer to the illness which afflicts the Fisher King (and his land): compassion expressed through sacrifice. Datta, damyata, dayadvam. Give, sympathize, control.

"If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink. Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall never thirst. But the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14, 7:37).

When he discovers this answer, Parsifal becomes King of the Grail, and the metamorphical protagonist of the Waste Land, who is Everyman, finally finds "the peace that passes understanding" gaining eternal deliverance and salvation through love.

*I.e. – through ...feeling 😊*

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