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eduem@uem.br

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Cechinel, André Cechinel

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Constructed waste: Eliot's Madame Sosostris

André Cechinel

Departamento de Letras Português-Inglês, Universidade do Extremo Sul Catarinense, Av. Universitária, 1105, 88806-000 Criciúma, Santa Catarina, Brazil. E-mail: andrecechinel@gmail.com

ABSTRACT. Critics have recently addressed the work of T. S. Eliot in an innovative way. Instead of resorting to the same old epithets, 'royalist, classicist, Anglo-Catholic,' Eliot has been described as a poet who constantly challenged the very tradition he wished to preserve, confusing the limits between high and low cultures in his poems. Still, when it comes to introducing his work to the reader, manuals of literature are frequently eager to preserve the traditional image that scholars of Eliot have fought to challenge. From the analysis of Madame Sosostris' appearance in *The Waste Land*, this essay intends to show how this movement of resistance to different Eliot works. In a few words, not to lose control over the place Eliot occupies as a modern poet, some manuals impose interpretations that, at times, cannot grasp the complexity of his lines.

Keywords: Modernism, canon, *The Waste Land*.

Devastação construída: a Madame Sosostris de Eliot

RESUMO. Nas últimas décadas, a obra de T. S. Eliot tem sido abordada a partir de um ponto de vista diferenciado. Em vez de recorrer aos conhecidos epítetos, 'monarquista, classicista e anglo-católico', a crítica passa a ver Eliot como um poeta que, a rigor, desafia constantemente a própria tradição que deseja preservar, desestabilizando, pois, os limites entre o erudito e o popular em seus poemas. No entanto, quando se trata de apresentar sua obra ao leitor, os manuais de literatura com frequência revelam o intuito de sustentar essa imagem rígida que os estudiosos têm questionado. A partir da análise da figura de Madame Sosostris, a célebre vidente de *The Waste Land*, este ensaio se propõe a expor como funciona o movimento de resistência a um outro T. S. Eliot. Em poucas palavras, a fim de assegurar o local estável que o poeta ocupa no cânone modernista, os manuais impõem interpretações que não dão conta da instabilidade fundamental de seus versos.

Palavras-chave: Modernismo, cânone, *The Waste Land*.

Introduction

The *Cambridge Introduction to T. S. Eliot*, written by John Xiros Cooper and published for the first time in 2006, intends to provide "[...] the perfect introduction to key aspects of Eliot's life and work, as well as to the wider contexts of modernism in which he wrote" (COOPER, 2006, p. 1). Of course, such a project would necessarily include one section entirely dedicated to the analysis of *The Waste Land* (1922), arguably T. S. Eliot's most important poem. The section begins with a description of Eliot's personal dilemmas at the time, his 'intellectual and spiritual crises,' and then it offers a brief definition of what *The Waste Land* is:

Firstly, one ought to acknowledge that *The Waste Land* is a text of the First World War and its aftermath. But it is a work that not only reflects the spirit of the times, it is a very personal document as well (COOPER, 2006, p. 63).

It is difficult to tell for sure what this acknowledgement really means; is *The Waste Land* a poem about the desolate postwar world, or is the author just stating the obvious fact that it was published after the First World War? In any case, by saying that *The Waste Land* 'is a very personal document as well,' Cooper is visibly reenacting all the biographical record that any reader of Eliot is tired of knowing:

Worries over money, his wife's abdominal and gynecological disorders, her increasingly fragile mental state, and his own feelings of nervous exhaustion fed a growing sense of despair (COOPER, 2006, p. 63).

As it seems, the structure of the section indicates that *The Waste Land* is a poem about the collapse of the Western World, a result of the poet's own failures.

Dread, desire and, abjection

Despite frequent efforts to remove Eliot's 1922 poem from the condition of a manifesto against

dissolution, this is the very image that manuals of literature still stimulate. Not few are the critics who have completely denied this negative dimension as being the educative background of *The Waste Land*, and yet Eliot remains as the visionary poet, the one who tried to tell good from bad in his epic lines. As an example of the endeavor to rebuff this kind of reductionist reading, Denis Donoghue writes the following:

The poem, it is worth saying against a common opinion, has nothing to do with the alleged breakdown of Western civilization [...]. We hardly know what to make of the relation between marriage and poem [...] (DONOGHUE, 2000, p. 110).

However, it is not just recently that critics have stressed that *The Waste Land* is not a poem about a “[...] moribund society and culture” (DONOGHUE, 2000, p. 65). In his book called *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet*, first published in 1979, A. David Moody argues that “[...] [t]o read the poem only as a critique of its culture, as many have done in print at least, is to be rather simple-minded” (MOODY, 1994, p. 79). And still, once more, most of the attempts to provide the ‘perfect introduction’ to T. S. Eliot and *The Waste Land* resort to the same basic images: “[...] dread, desire, abjection, and depression [...]” (MOODY, 1994, p. 65).

It is true that some critics, with the intention of discarding unilateral readings of *The Waste Land*, end up contributing to the same old nomenclature that has so far been predominant in introductions to the work of T. S. Eliot. In his excellent book called *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, David E. Chinitz mentions that Harriet Davidson’s work, for instance, shows that the poem’s strength “[...] derives from its refusal to resolve the resulting tensions” (CHINITZ, 2003, p. 162). Chinitz refers the reader to Davidson’s essay called ‘Improper Desire: Reading *The Waste Land*,’ which is present in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*. However, any closer look at this text proves that Davidson somehow does not completely escape from a controlling view of the poem. In other words, instead of showing that Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is neither a poem about decadence nor a religious pamphlet, Davidson divides it into two movements, what she calls ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ desires:

[...] the ‘proper’ side of this poem, that is, its scholarly apparatus, its respect for tradition, its recoil from the chaos of life [...]; its ‘improper’ side - its equally apparent lack of respect for tradition and poetic method and its fascination with mutation, degradation, and fragmentation [...] (DAVIDSON, 1994, p. 122).

The problem with Davidson’s reading is that it creates two poles for *The Waste Land*, and even though these poles are obviously interconnected, the division produces some sort of stability for the lines. In other words, this analysis more or less denies the very tension it seeks to highlight – once it localizes ‘what is what’ in the poem, it avoids dispersion:

The strong binary oppositions in the poem between desert and water, emptiness and crowdedness, suggest that the barren waste can be read as different from, and in opposition to, the chaotic life in the poem, not as a metaphor for it (DAVIDSON, 1994, p. 123).

But it is exactly the sense of dispersion that one needs to consider when reading *The Waste Land*; disrupting the hierarchies of events through emphasizing the evident signs of dispersion is the only way of relocating Eliot and his 1922 poem. In Ruth Nevo’s words,

[...] disunification, or desedimentation is the *raison d’être* of the poem; that in it the strategies of self-consumption, *mise en abyme*, and influence of anxiety can be inspected at large [...] (NEVO, 1985, p. 97).

Although Nevo is clearly much more interested in Jacques Derrida and Harold Bloom than in T. S. Eliot himself, she hints at relevant issues.

In his 1995 book on T. S. Eliot called *Eliot to Derrida*, John Harwood suggests that, contrary to what critics usually take for granted, *The Waste Land* and its final version may be more arbitrary than we expect, and therefore the search for an absolutely consistent poem fails to grasp precisely its contingent aspects. Harwood’s convincing argument follows from the famous revision carried out by Pound, which as we know eliminated many lines of the original version. Ultimately, T. S. Eliot might not have had entire control of what he was doing:

[...] just as the belief that Eliot must have known what he was doing derives from the priority of the published text, so *The Waste Land*’s reputation rested, in part, on an illusion, the ‘presence’ of an omniscient, oracular author [...] (HARWOOD, 1995, p. 66).

Therefore, any project directed to the division of boundaries – between ‘proper’ and ‘improper,’ for example – would be willing to attribute more consistency to the poem than it actually has. This is why Harwood concludes that “[t]he history of Eliot criticism – or rather explication – in the academy is largely one of misreadings by systematization [...]” (HARWOOD, 1995, p. 88). As a matter of fact, this is probably what Chinitz has in mind when he argues that “[...] critics of modernism have regularly introduced readers to a T. S. Eliot who is really, I

would suggest, Mr. F. R. Leavis" (CHINITZ, 2003, p. 152). The history of T. S. Eliot would be precisely the history of what critics have made of his poetry.

The Waste Land is not a poem about 'proper' and 'improper' desires; rather, it is a poem about the confusion that follows from the impossibility of telling for sure what is 'proper' and what is 'improper.' To begin with, when we talk about Eliot's poem it is always necessary to state what we are referring to, for not even what *The Waste Land* really is we know with exactitude. After all, do we need to take into account the original manuscript of the poem when we are reading its final version? Can we talk about a poem made of two poles after seeing the original draft and its absolute dispersive mode? In addition to that, are the 'Notes on *The Waste Land*' part of the poem? Should we take these notes seriously? Even though it is clear that these questions have not an answer, many critics insist on presenting the poem as a consistent whole. Any totalizing approach to *The Waste Land*, in order to endure, must impose an alien logic to that of the poem; in Nevo's words, the poem "[...] is totally, radically nonintegrative and antidiscursive, its parts connected by neither causes, effects, parallelism, nor antithesis" (NEVO, 1985, p. 98) – to repeat, its lines play with what is arbitrary, and this is why Pound could cut parts without ruining the whole thing. *The Waste Land* is an open poem.

An unsettling case

It is important to understand what critics usually do in order to preserve this image of a self-contained manifest. For this purpose, we could go back to *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* and take a closer look, for example, at the passage Cooper writes on Madame Sosostris – in fact, we could select different passages; this one is chosen as an illustrative example. For Cooper:

[f]ear is the shadow which rises to meet us at evening (l. 29). It forces us into the arms of charlatans like Madame Sosostris, the fortune-teller, the contemporary counterfeit of the prophetic desert voices (COOPER, 2006, p. 70).

It is significant what the author defends at this point: Madame Sosostris not only stands for fake fortune-telling, but she is also 'the contemporary counterfeit of the prophetic desert voices,' that is, she plays the role of what present is like in this 'past / present' confrontation. To put it in accordance with Davidson's terminology, the whole passage on the fake clairvoyant would be an instance of the 'improper' side of the poem:

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Has a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor.
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something that he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself;
One must be so careful these days (ELIOT, 1963, p. 54).

Naturally, no one would deny that the passage is a parody of fortune-telling practices; the difficulty, in any case, lies in promptly accepting these lines as mere reflex of what Eliot understands as decay, that is, lines that would amount to what is negative in the poem. Before trying to show that this too is a passage that mixes the boundaries between 'proper' and 'improper,' leading to the dismantling of this binary opposition, it is necessary to show the frequent ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of the lines. Although critics in general take Madame Sosostris as a character associated with fraudulent clairvoyance, there is a common implicit agreement that her cards indicate many of the images to come in the subsequent sections of *The Waste Land*. I am not saying that one should undertake deep Tarot learning to grasp what is going on at this point; instead, I defend that Madame Sosostris, even as a fraud, cannot be merely associated with decadentism, for her 'wicked pack of cards' may tell us more than we are willing to assume. Instead of showing the complexity of the character – who in her wickedness can curiously foresee with casual precision – critics address her decadence and then move on, perhaps silently aware that now they are talking about her correct previsions.

In his systematic analysis of *The Waste Land*, available in the book *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*, B. C. Southam declares that the whole passage on Madame Sosostris "[...] represents the ancient mysteries of the Tarot now reduced to the comic banality of fortune-telling" (SOUTHAM, 1996, p. 147). In this sense, if the section represents fortune-telling deprived of any mystic dimension, there is no reason why one should elaborate on Sosostris' partial interpretation of the cards. Curiously, after dismissing Sosostris and her fake abilities, Southam turns his attention to the 'pack of cards,' and he says:

[...] this is the Tarot pack, of 78 cards, [...] first known to have been used in France and Italy in the fourteenth century [...]. [Its Symbols] have been connected with fertility rites and folklore (SOUTHAM, 1996, p. 147).

On the one hand, the clairvoyant represents modern fakery; on the other, the pack of cards she uses is deeply connected with 'fertility rites and folklore.' Interestingly, nothing seems to be made of the relation between fakery and seriousness – not to mix the boundaries between 'good' and 'evil' in the poem, Southam separates Sosostris' usage of the 'pack of cards' from the pack of cards itself.

Similarly, in *The Waste Land: a poem of memory and desire*, Nancy K. Gish mentions that "[...] Madame Sosostris is presented as a fraud," and this is absolutely correct. However, Gish argues that "[...] [a]lthough she points to the characters in the world, she reveals nothing about them." And once more, "[...] [h]er limited function is to introduce the key characters of the poem, but she cannot speak from outside the conditions she describes to offer insight or a warning" (GISH, 1988, p. 53). It is clear that Gish attempts to situate Sosostris within the realm of decay, but there are some problems with the arguments offered. First, even if presented as a fraud, and apparently incapable of revealing anything substantial in relation to the world she unveils, Sosostris is absolutely right about the advice, 'Fear death by water' (line 55), as we get to know when we reach the fourth section of *The Waste Land*, 'Death by Water'. Second, it is true that Madame Sosostris cannot alter the destiny of the characters she addresses; still, can Tiresias do much about what he sees in the third section of the poem, 'The Fire Sermon'? And yet he is supposed to be "[...] the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest," as Eliot tells the reader in his notes. Tiresias is never referred to as a fake prophet, although he usually fails too in his efforts to 'see it all.' Finally, Gish seems to contradict herself when later she says that "[...] Madame Sosostris portrays the people we will encounter as shady, damaged, players in an unexplained but ominous drama" (GISH, 1988, p. 54). If she cannot reveal anything about the characters she introduces, how can this image be of so much precision? Needless to say, this confusion results from the denial of what is the tension of the poem, that is, 'proper' and 'improper' so deeply attached that we can no longer differentiate one from the other.

Elizabeth Drew's 1949 book, *T. S. Eliot: the design of his poetry*, offers another example of an ambiguous treatment concerning Madame Sosostris. According to Drew, the clairvoyant:

[...] is a modern, vulgarized version of the Egyptian diviners and practicers of magic, who professed to control fertility, and to forecast the rising and falling of the waters of the Nile through the Tarot cards [...]. What originated in a technique of mastery has become a masquerade (DREW, 1949, p. 71).

As we have seen before, Drew displays here the opposition past / present, which would follow from Eliot's classicist nostalgia – the past is seen as legitimate, whereas the present is regarded as full of opportunists. Again, no one would deny the trickery behind Madame Sosostris' practices; still, what I am defending here is that at the back of all her falsehood lies some correct prediction that prevents us from reducing the whole passage to a desolate scene – Eliot is actually putting together simulation and reality, so that the reader cannot tell for sure one from the other. Drew admits that Sosostris "[...] introduces us to characters and themes which are developed later [...]" (DREW, 1949, p. 70); nevertheless, not to mix the boundaries that usually sustain many readings of *The Waste Land*, Drew simply dismisses Sosostris by saying that she has no idea of what the cards are talking about. Maybe this is the very complexity of the lines: even not knowing what the cards are showing, the clairvoyant is correct, and therefore the greater confusion.

Few are the critics who direct their attention to this simultaneous occurrence of falsehood and correctness in the lines concerning Madame Sosostris' predictions. To repeat, the density of the passage rests in its subtle mixing of what could be taken as opposite poles, and this prevents the reader from a relaxing settling of terms – it preserves the true tension of the poem. *T. S. Eliot: The Poems*, by Martin Scofield, is an example of a more complex reading. According to Scofield,

Madame Sosostris introduces quite another, and spurious, kind of mystery; although like all the fortune-tellers she may speak more wisely than she knows. The tone places her, and yet she may have her surprises (SCOFIELD, 1988, p. 111).

As we can see, the critic clearly links one aspect to the other, even though the structure of his formulation once again polarizes the passage. Instead of '[...] although like all the fortune-tellers [...],' perhaps saying "[...] 'and at the same time' like all the fortune-tellers [...]" (SCOFIELD, 1988, p. 111) would amount to a more profitable statement, giving full account of this tensioned territory. Still, it is true that Scofield has a clear understanding of the passage: The atmosphere is one of charlatanry; but the Tarot pack is an ancient device, and we cannot be sure what these perhaps traditional

images may, by chance, relate to the listener's life (SCOFIELD, 1988).

'Those are pearls that were his eyes'. As we know, the line is taken from Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; it addresses the drowning of Ferdinand's father, Alonso, who, as a matter of fact, has not been drowned at all, but his son is not aware of that. In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the line follows the card that shows the drowning of the Phoenician Sailor, and the card, in its turn, is taken right after we are introduced to Madame Sosostris, her bad cold, and her wicked pack of cards. In the fourth section of the poem, as it has been said before, we are told about the drowning of 'Phlebas the Phoenician' (line 312), whose body is picked by 'a current under sea' (line 315), leading to his death. Death by water is known to be the most revealing of deaths, specially because it gives you a totalizing view – this is what Eliot develops in the next lines: "As he rose and fell / He passed the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool" (ELIOT, 1963, p. 65). In her book called *From Ritual to Romance*, one of Eliot's basic references (as he lets us know in his notes), Jessie L. Weston declares that in Alexandria, people would throw effigies of dead gods in the water, so that they could be brought up to life again in the future. Death by water would be, in this sense, connected to rebirth and fertility. Be as it may, in *The Waste Land* the topic is introduced by Madame Sosostris, fortune-teller who is too afraid of this historic moment: 'One must be so careful these days'. To conclude, the passage leads us frequently astray, in particular if we are deeply in need of a fixed locus for Madame Sosostris and her cards.

Final considerations

In *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, Chinitz states that "[...] the Eliot we have inherited is the Eliot who has always been needed by his readers" (CHINITZ, 2003, p. 16). As the critic explains,

[...] the last thing anyone has wanted, to put it baldly, has been a messy, intractable Eliot who unsettles, rather than confirms, the received notions of literature, culture, and modernism (CHINITZ, 2003, p. 16).

In the particular case of *The Waste Land*, Chinitz shows that Pound's revision altered considerably the emphasis the poem gives, for example, to the Grail myth in its final version (ELIOT, 2003). Before the cutting of the lines, Eliot's drawing on popular song was much more visible, the poem's relation to American popular culture was then undeniable: "One can only imagine the effect of a long poem called *He Do The Police in Different Voices* beginning,

'First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom's place'" (CHINITZ, 2003, p. 44). These are two different experiences: 1) reading the poem and thinking of Chaucer and 'April is the cruellest month, breeding;' 2) having in mind that Eliot's initial first line was less devoted to the 'great tradition' for which he is best known. Chinitz' conclusion challenges completely the frequent view of Eliot as an author who stands for high intellect and high taste only:

No wonder, then, that the Eliot who seemed significant to his midcentury admirers was the solid traditionalist who addressed himself with great intensity and near-scientific precision to the study of text and culture, rather than the indeterminate, culturally ambiguous character whose shifting outlines [...]. And thus Eliot, as both critic and poet, was domesticated by the academic critical machine he himself had done so much to prime [...] (CHINITZ, 2003, p. 161).

In his analysis of *The Waste Land* and the passage on the 'Shakespearean Rag' ('O O O O that Shakespearean Rag' – line 128), Chinitz proves that some critics, in order not to confuse the limits between popular and high culture, insist that

[...] Eliot used the song merely as a 'symbol of vulgarity,' or a 'critics find lines that may slightly balance what they understand as the opposition proper symbol of public taste' in the early twentieth century (CHINITZ, 2003, p. 47).

In other words, every time between high and low, they include the passage in some sort of aprioristic system, that is, Eliot writes only about the great tradition – therefore, anything different from that is usually there only to offer a possible contrast line. After all, how could Eliot be positive in relation to a song that vulgarizes Shakespeare and his complex literature?

Taking for granted that *The Waste Land* proposed simply to discredit the barren present by comparison with the fertile past, readers have long assumed that the song represented a degraded version of Shakespearean high culture [...] (CHINITZ, 2003, p. 47).

Would it be the same, then, in relation to Sosostris' line 'Those are pearls that were his eyes'? Is it just Shakespeare being vulgarized by modern and decadent fortune-telling?

An interesting and similar movement to that of Chinitz in *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, one that totally transforms our reductionist understanding of Eliot, would be to check how critics proceed in order to preserve *The Waste Land* within the idea of a modern and oracular poem. An appealing

starting point would be to check the way critics refer to the first line of the poem as 'April is the cruellest month', instead of 'April is the cruellest month, breeding'. From its beginning, *The Waste Land* throws the reader into a chain of tension, in which the limits between 'proper' and 'improper' are no longer visible. The 'cruellest month' *breeds*, *mixes*, and *stirs* – we are not only dealing with Chaucer versus contemporary world; rather, we are facing a confusing land, and it is the absence of poles that makes it complex and, at the same time, vivid as literary experience.

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