

T. S. Eliot's Use of Tarot Cards in *The Waste Land*

By Jessie Lokrantz

There is hardly anything written on T. S. Eliot that does not mention *The Waste Land*. But among the numerous interpretations and criticisms of his central work there is to my knowledge nothing that refers to the symbols of the Tarot pack used by Mme. Sosostriis in »I Burial of the Dead.,

This passage seems to me to be crucial to the understanding of the poem and one that requires further analysis. Yet, the only article that I have found that deals with these cards is the one by Miss Gertrude Moakley¹ and she is mainly interested in the type of pack used by Mr. Eliot and not in the interpretation of the actual symbols and the significance of this passage for the poem as a whole. We both agree, however, that Eliot was more familiar with these cards than he implies in his »Notes on The Waste Land.»²

In his »Notes» Eliot states that he used Miss Jessie Weston's book *From Ritual to Romance* not only for the title of the poem but also for the plan and incidental symbolism. But in Miss Weston's book there is really very little about the Tarot cards except for a brief mention that they were used to »predict the rise and fall of the waters which brought fertility to the land.»³ However, she refers in the book to a paper by D. F. de l'Hoste Ranking published in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (vol. 2, 1908/09: London) entitled »The Tarot.»

After having read Mr. Ranking's paper and re-read *The Waste*

¹ Moakley; »The Waite Smith Tarot»: *The New York Public Library Bulletin*, Oct. 1954; pages 471—475.

² Eliot, T. S.: »Notes on The Waste Land»: *Collected Poems, 1906—1962*, Faber & Faber Limited, London, 1963: page 80, note 46.

³ Weston, Jessie: *From Ritual to Romance*, p. 179.

Land I have become convinced that Mr. Eliot was also acquainted with this paper from which he acquired a superficial knowledge of the cards, their names and meanings. This he has then used quite extensively in his poem, adjusting it to suit his purpose whenever necessary.

Using Mr. Ranking's paper as my authority, I intend to show how Eliot used his knowledge of the Tarot cards in his poem. Since the Tarot cards in many instances portray one thing and mean another (for example, Death — card No. 13 in the pack — means not only death but also transformation or change as well) I find that they fit quite well with the inversion that constitutes such an important part of the meaning of the poem.

A brief account of the ancient origins and makeup of the Tarot pack of cards is given in an appendix. The cards are still used by the Gypsies, but the modern packs no longer carry the original figures, which have been replaced by modern scenes. However, Ranking gives in his paper illustrations of the original figures, and they lead to Eliot's use of the cards.

For example, when we turn to lines 43—59 in *The Waste Land* where Mine Sosostris reads her cards we find that they carry the following figures:

1. the drowned Phoenecian sailor
2. Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, the lady of situations
3. the man with three staves
4. the wheel
5. the one-eyed merchant
6. the blank card which is something the merchant carries on his back which Mine Sosostris is forbidden to see
7. the Hanged Man
8. then the prophesy, »Fear death by water«
9. Crowds of people walking round in a ring.

This, then is Eliot's version of fortune telling using a pack of Tarot cards. These are the figures on the cards and they are significant symbols. The nine cards dealt by Mme. Sosostris convey, I believe, the following meanings as divined by Eliot:

1. The drowned Phoenecian sailor takes its significance from a divination of the cards. The qualifier »drowned« means that two

cards have been read together. The Tarot cards are customarily read in pairs and I believe that Eliot concocted a pair to fit his own purpose.

2. Belladonna, the Lady of the Roclis, the lady of situations. Here we touch upon one of the numbered Tarots or keys (see Appendix). This would be the No. 3 card carrying the picture of a Queen, Empress or Woman. The meaning of the card would be Action, consequent on science and knowledge.

3. The man with the three staves. This is No. 5 in the pack, picturing a High Priest or Pope and meaning Mercy and Beneficence. In his Note 46 Eliot states that the figure is associated with the »Fisher Ring himself.»⁴

4. The wheel needs no explanation. It is No. 10 in the pack and signifies Fortune.

5. The one-eyed merchant. Coins in the Tarot pack represent commerce and the ace of coins is known as the one-eyed. It signifies Fire.

6. The blank card carried by the one-eyed merchant is actually the 22nd Tarot card, i. e. the Fool or Blind Man. It signifies Folly and Expiation.

7. The Hanged Man is No. 12 in the pack and signifies Sacrifice.

8—9. »Death by Water» and »Crowds of people walking in a ring» are, I believe, figments of Eliot's own imagination to fit his purpose. These divinations would require two cards, and we do not know which cards Eliot had in mind. But since Death, Water and Rings are represented in the pack, it would not be difficult to arrive at Eliot's reading.

This, then, was the hand the sorceress dealt. How are the symbols applicable to the poem? Are there any allusions elsewhere in it to the Tarot cards? To begin with, there is a symbol used in line 74 of the poem, reading »O keep the Dog far hence, that's a friend to men.» The dog star, i. e. Sirius, is No. 17 of the Tarot keys and symbolizes Elope. It was also used as a fertility symbol.

In »II A Game of Chess,, I think we see the meaning of Belladonna, the lady of situations. Here we have the Queen, Woman or Empress whose meaning is Action as the result of science and knowledge.

⁴ Eliot: op. cit.: page 80, note 46.

Here, too. Eliot inverts the meaning. From the real, splendid Cleopatra we now have a modern, nerve-wracked female who has denied herself of her own fertility through an abortion. Also, the typist in »III Fire Sermon« to whom even love making is an automated action and even her music is machine-made. This, then, is action as the result of science and knowledge!

The title of »III Fire Sermon« goes back to Mme. Sosostris' cards where she tells of the one-eyed merchant. The ace of coins signifies fire. It is also here that we see the merchant for the first time. Here, too, we find Tiresias who is blind just as is the blank card which is called the Fool or the Blind Man. This is the symbol of folly and expiation. The end of this section brings out the meaning of this symbol — folly and expiation. The folly of the ages, Elizabeth and the typist, and atonement by the purification by fire.

In »IV Death by Water« the water imagery itself is easily connected with the Tarot pack as cups signify water. But in this section there is a definite symbol from the Tarots and that is the wheel in line 320. »O you who turn the wheel and look to the windward.«⁵ Not only is this the wheel of a ship but also the Wheel of Fortune or card No. 10.

As for the section »V What the Thunder Said« there is a great deal of Tarot symbolism here. First, the title plus the repeated usage of thunder and tower imagery⁶ are represented by Tarot card number 16 which is called *Maison Dieu* or the Ruined Tower. It is pictured as a lightningstruck tower which is crumbling and its significance is Ruin and Destruction. These images fit quite well with the meaning of this section. Here, too, we find according to Eliot's own notes, the Hanged Man as the hooded figure in line 363.⁷ This is the symbol of Sacrifice, a meaning which ties in well with the whole passage. In lines 423 and 424 there is a reference to the Fisher King which Eliot says that he associates with the man with the three shaves or the Pope or High Priest.⁸ This card symbolizes Mercy and Beneficence as does the symbol of the Fisher King whose death will bring about the rejuvenation of the land.

⁵ Eliot: op. cit.: line 320.

⁶ Eliot: op. cit.: lines 366—376, 391, 399.

⁷ Eliot: op. cit.: note 46, page 80.

⁸ Eliot: op. cit.: note 46, page 80.

There are no doubt other, possibly more subtle similarities between the text and the Tarot cards. Since Eliot himself makes no claim to any deep knowledge of the Tarot pack I have chosen the most obvious references to the cards.

Many people have read and enjoyed *The Waste Land* without being aware of these linkages to the ancient Tarot cards and their significance for divination. It is my hope that some insight into the symbolisms in the poem will enhance the readers' enjoyment and satisfaction. They also constitute an excellent example of the intellectual synthesis shaping the creative process of a great poet.

APPENDIX

The Tarot pack most commonly used consists of 78 cards in which there are 22 numbered cards or keys or tarots. In Italy today these cards are used as playing cards and these keys or tarots are permanent trumps. These keys or tarots all have a constant number except for the Fool which is often without a number or blank. These numbers have remained the same regardless of the pack used over the hundreds of years that the cards have been in use.

The remaining 56 cards are divided into four suits, each containing 14 cards, i. e. running from one or ace to 10 and then four face or court cards. There is a knave and a knight as well as a queen and king of each suit. These suit cards we recognize from modern playing cards as clubs, hearts, spades and diamonds. Each suit, except spades, has many names. Thus clubs as we know them are *coins*, circles or pentacles; hearts are *cups*, chalices or goblets; spades are *swords*; diamonds are *clubs*, wands or sceptres (the italicized word is the word by which I have referred to these suits in this article). The reason for the different names is that Mr. Ranking has found that three main types of these cards, each with its own vocabulary, have been used over the years.

The four suits also represent the four elements: *clubs* represent fire; *cups* represent water; *swords* represent earth; and *coins* represent air. These suits also represent the old classes of society, i. e. *swords* were the sovereign and nobles, *cups* were the priests, *clubs* were the husbandmen and *coins* the men of commerce.

The original figures which were portrayed on the cards have been replaced and the more recent German and French packs have scenes from everyday life on them. The numbers on the keys or tarots have remained the same and it is the number nowadays which signifies the original meaning rather than the pictures on the cards.