

PHILIP WALDRON
UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

The Music of Poetry: Wagner in *The Waste Land*

IN MUSIC CRITICISM, the fundamental centrality of Wagner to Modernism is a commonplace. His transformation of opera from a form alternating between the modes of recitative and melody into continuous unified music-drama is not entirely without parallel,¹ but it was Wagner who demonstrated the possibility of structuring an entire opera into a musical unity. This he did by the use of *leitmotive*,² which, in the course of their development in Wagner's operas, acquire dramatic significance through the constant association of their musical characteristics with the extra-musical details of the characters, their actions, and the physical, emotional, and spiritual worlds which they inhabit. Intrinsic musical characteristics are not irrelevant: some *leitmotive* by their nature can be more evocative of particular extra-musical details than others. But eventually, as Wagner's operas develop, the characteristics of a musical phrase ineluctably evoke extra-musical details as the constant use of *leitmotive* creates a tissue of inseparable musical and dramatic reminiscences, which may serve as a binding structural device. Wagner also radically extended harmonic language, especially in *Tristan und Isolde*, in which the ambiguities of a highly developed chromaticism set the door ajar for serialism—and thus for the music of Schoenberg and the Viennese school of the early twentieth century. Because of this, few musicians would see anything strange in Pierre Boulez, a composer in the forefront of the 1950s *avant garde*, conducting in the Paris of the 1960s and 1970s not only Alban Berg's twelve-tone operas *Wozzeck* (1922) and *Lulu* (1934) but also Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1853–1874) and *Parsifal* (1882).³

For literary critics, the situation is a little different. To the predominantly literary and

¹ See (or hear) for example Act II Scene v of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (the Don's supper), in which the conventional distinction between recitative and aria is continually denied by the music.

² Literally, "leading motifs." The term itself was never used by Wagner.

³ Diatonic music uses the natural scales consisting of five whole tones and two semitones. Music uses chromatic elements when it uses the pitches not present in these scales, through the subdivision of whole tones into semitones. Applied to all of the five whole tones, full chromaticism therefore results in a scale of twelve semitones and the dissolving of normal harmony into atonality. The related use of the twelve tone scale in the twentieth century, along with the rejection of other traditional aspects of music, is described as serialism. Pierre Boulez in *Le Marteau sans Maître* (1955) and *Pli selon Pli* (1960) is commonly felt to have extended serialism beyond the asymmetry of Berg, Schoenberg, and Webern. Schoenberg's music, in turn, is commonly felt to be historically tied to the later works of Wagner. At the time *Tristan und Isolde*, in particular, was an *avantgarde* work and was responded to as such.

historical mind, Wagner can seem a bizarre, even distasteful, curiosity. The appropriation of Wagner by the Nazis and knowledge of the contents and attitudes displayed in his most obnoxious essays, such as the notorious *Jewry in Music*, have been so alienating as to encourage a pushing of Wagner to the periphery of our awareness, in spite of his musical importance to so many of the Modernist writers. T.S. Eliot's most distinguished critics, including Leavis, Matthiesson, Gardner, Kenner, Bush, and Ricks, have had little or nothing to say about the import of the several references to Wagner in *The Waste Land*. Every reader knows that the references are there, but no sustained examination of the relevance of Wagner's musical contexts to *The Waste Land* exists.

Yet Wagner's is the most notable music in the sound-world of *The Waste Land*, which itself is one of the most musical poems we have. An ear, active and keen enough to detect a fault in intonation as Saint Mary Woolnoth rings the final stroke of nine, hears the voices of nightingales, troubadours, a ragtime singer, empty cisterns, a child singing a nursery rhyme, Ariel of *The Tempest*, Olivia of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Dimitri Karamazov, a rooftop cock, taxi horns, and many other items of the natural and urban worlds, both animate and inanimate. The speaking voice which begins to narrate *The Waste Land* recedes after thirty lines as a musical environment is erected so richly and variously that its falling silent is able to provide some of the most desolate moments of the poem. At such moments, lack of musical relief or enlivening merges with and illustrates the imagery of drought; the musical and visual imagery of the poem do not merely complement each other, but become inseparable.

If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water

In his shoring of fragments against his ruins, the Fisher King has identified yearning for the relief of Spring with yearning for the ability to articulate song:

Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow.

In his 1942 W.P. Ker lecture, "The Music of Poetry," Eliot stresses that "the music of verse is not a line by line matter but a question of the whole poem." In 1942, Eliot, obviously, would be thinking of *Four Quartets* rather than of *The Waste Land*; later in the lecture he is to say that "there are possibilities of transition in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or quartet." But few readers would deny the appositeness to *The Waste Land* of his stress upon "the possibilities of contrapuntal

arrangement of subject-matter." Nevertheless, critics have neglected the possibility of the musical allusions of the poem being just that: allusions to music, not simply to words which themselves happen to be set elsewhere to music. The most important single series of musical allusions of *The Waste Land*, the Wagnerian allusions, relate not merely to moments located in the libretti of the operas, but to the operas themselves. Given the strongly aural nature of Eliot's memory and imagination, understanding more fully the musical language involved in these moments as they occur in their original Wagnerian contexts can enrich our response to Eliot's poem. Heard in this way, Wagner's operas sound resonances throughout the poem. They are not mere purveyors of ironic frisson, but intimately echo Eliot's own *leitmotive*.

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There are direct and clear allusions in *The Waste Land* to *Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal*, and *Götterdämmerung*, and each of these allusions evidences Eliot's interest in those works as operas, not merely as mythic structures carrying an interest independent of the music which enacts them. The earliest allusions are the quotations from *Tristan und Isolde* that Eliot interpolates into the text of "The Burial of the Dead." These allusions are usually interpreted as ironically contrasting a romantic, epic, fictionalised love with the impotence of the inhabitants of the Waste Land.⁴ Yet both external and internal evidence encourage one to respond to the quotations more fully than this. The young T.S. Eliot saw a production of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1909, and Stravinsky, in 1956, was to record Eliot's speaking, over whisky and sandwiches, of the impact of this experience:

We managed to talk that afternoon, nevertheless, and though I hardly recall the topics, I remember that Wagner was one; Eliot's Wagner nostalgia was apparent and I think that *Tristan* must have been one of the most passionate experiences in his life.⁵

The anecdote is tantalisingly brief, but in no way cryptic: "*Tristan* must have been one of the most passionate experiences in his life." Stravinsky is speaking of something much more important to Eliot than a frigid knowledge of the mythic material; he is speaking of the musical impact of an opera which many listeners have found to provide a more intense musical experience than any other.

The Wagnerian allusions of *The Waste Land*, followed through the drafts with the facsimile text, the first English and American editions, and the *Collected Poems 1909–1935* and *1909–1962*, show variants which indicate Eliot's correcting small errors made as he worked from memory of the musically familiar rather than from a libretto or score. The 1909–1962 text reads

⁴ A notable exception is William Blissett, "Wagner in *The Waste Land*," *The Practical Vision*, ed. Jane Campbell and James Doyle (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978), pp. 71–85. Blissett's approach is more mythic and less musical than mine.

⁵ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Themes and Episodes* (Knopf, 1966), p. 125. Also noted by Blissett, p. 72.

*Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?*

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
"They called me the hyacinth girl."
—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer.

This itself slightly alters Wagner's punctuation and capitalization:

*Frisch weht der Wind
der Heimat zu:—
mein irisch Kind,
wo weilest du?*

But the facsimile edition records a major initial error. As Bernard Harris noted:

He began to quote the third and fourth lines of text as they appear in his lineation, reverted to the two previous lines and misremembered "weht" as "schwebt"; since the alternative makes sense there is here recorded a tribute to Eliot's knowledge of German, but it is also surely evidence of an aural mistake, a mishearing by one who was working by ear; not reading the libretto but listening to the music. Should we not do the same?⁶

Harris indeed does not stress the point as strongly as he might have: the error is almost inevitably made in aural memory as the confusion is enforced in performance by the singing of "*frisch weht*" in liaison as two syllables without pause.



The interest of the slip goes beyond Harris's useful comment: when sung the line sounds like "*frisch schwebt*," not like "*frisch weht*." And Eliot, accurately remembering the libretto as vocal line, therefore misremembers it as spoken word.

⁶ Bernard Harris, "'This music crept by me': Shakespeare and Wagner" in *The Waste Land in Different Voices*, ed. A.D. Moody (Arnold, 1974), pp. 109–10. A literal translation of the German is "The wind blows fresh / To the homeland / My Irish child / Where do you linger?" *Schwebt* means "sweeps" and therefore, as Harris says, makes sense in this context.

Early editions of *The Waste Land*, such as that printed in *The Criterion* in 1922, quote "*Oed' und leer das Meer*" ("desolate and empty the sea") with the omission of the *umlaut* of the Wagnerian original, that is, they print "*Od*" not "*Öd*" or "*Oed*." This, of course, is not substantive.

The one clear reference to *Parsifal* is made by way of Verlaine's sonnet "*Parsifal*," the final line of which is quoted or, rather, misquoted in *The Waste Land*. The effect of Eliot's misquotation, reiterated without notice by every critic I have read, can be gauged only when the full poem of Verlaine is read:

Parsifal a vaincu les Filles, leur gentil
Parsifal has overcome the Maidens, their pleasant

Babil et la luxure amusante, et sa pente
Babble, and playful lust, and his fondness

Vers la Chair de garçon vierge que cela tente
For the Flesh, as any chaste youth, who is tempted

D'aimer les seins légers et ce gentil babil;
By slight breasts and pleasant babble.

Il a vaincu la Femme belle au coeur subtil,
He has overcome the beautiful Woman, with all her wiles,

Étalant ses bras frais et sa gorge excitante;
Flaunting her fragrant arms and alluring bosom;

Il a vaincu l'Enfer et rentre sous la tente
He has triumphed over Hell and returns to his tent

Avec un lourd trophée à son bras puéril,
With a heavy trophy in his boyish arms,

Avec la lance qui perça le Flanc suprême!
With the spear that pierced the sovereign Side!

Il a guéri le roi, le voici roi lui-même,
He has cured the king, and now is king himself,

Et prêtre du très saint Trésor essentiel.
And minister of the very holy, primal Treasure.

En robe d'or il adore, gloire et symbole,
In golden robe he adores, the glory and the symbol,

Le vase pur où resplendit le Sang Réel.
The flawless vessel in which the Pure Blood gleams.

—*Et, ô ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole!*
—And, O the voices of the children singing in the cupola!⁷

Verlaine's sonnet, published in the *Revue Wagnérienne* in 1886 as one of a series of sonnets by poets, including Mallarmé, under the general title "*Hommage à Wagner*," gives more emphasis to the nature of the trials of Parsifal the character than to the wider import of *Parsifal* the opera. Reflections upon Parsifal's overcoming the temptations of the flower-maidens (*les Filles*) and of Kundry (*la Femme belle*), and his consequent ability to heal the poisonous wound of Amfortas (*le roi*), give way at "*le voici*" to a present vision of the final scene of the opera as Parsifal unveils the Grail. The ecstatic cry of the sonnet's speaker recalls the overwhelming beauty of the boys' soprano choir singing "*dans la coupole*"—from the dome and invisible to the audience. Verlaine moves from the most visually rich material of the opera and focuses on a passage sung by an invisible choir, disembodied from the action, and heard from above. The rapture and speed of Verlaine's final line, and its contrast with the slow paced steadiness and deliberation of the previous verse, is largely dissipated by Eliot's mispunctuation:

Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Verlaine's caesura after "*Et*," disrupting any expected regularity, is discarded, and a new caesura, halting the impetus of the line, is placed at the center, breaking it neatly in half and making it comparatively commonplace. It is hard not to regret this casualness, but it does help to illuminate Eliot's compositional methods: Eliot is not Joycean in his assembly and collage of the material which pre-exists the poem. Joyce carefully checked and documented his references, making few errors, whereas Eliot worked from memory, the imperfections of that memory demonstrating its operation.⁸

⁷ English Translation of "*Parsifal*" by Paul Gibbard, University of Adelaide.

⁸ For an exhaustive discussion of Joyce's documentation and consistency see Robert M. Adams, *Surface and Symbol* (Oxford University Press, 1962). It is difficult to see any possibility of intention in Eliot's errors. As Adams shows, slips are frequently made by Joyce's characters (especially Bloom) as distinct from Joyce. But this is a device which creates character whereas the voices of *The Waste Land* are either too disembodied or too composite to admit of such particularity. The voice which responds to the boys' choir of *Parsifal* is (among others) the voice of Verlaine himself, and he can hardly be expected intentionally to misquote his own poem. Joyceans should note, however, the infiltration of Faber and Faber by Martha Clifford during the preparation of *Ash-Wednesday* (Part V) for Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909–1935*, which prints

"Against the World the unstilled world still whirled."

This is corrected in the *Collected Poems 1909–1962* to

"Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled."

C.K. Stead in *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (Macmillan, 1986) quotes the old errant text and then reprimands Eliot for "empty verbalizing" (p. 221).

The song of the Rhine-maidens, transplanted from *Götterdämmerung* to "The Fire Sermon," is quoted accurately. This is not surprising, for Wagner's meaningless phonetic invention is just the sort of trope one could not hope to get right without checking. It is when Eliot turns to the more easily remembered material that he relies on memory and errs.

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The connections between Eliot's two quotations from *Tristan und Isolde* are stronger than has been recognized. The Sailor's song in *Tristan*, which provides lines 31–34 of *The Waste Land*, is sung from above, as if from the masthead, immediately upon the close of the orchestral Prelude, which acts as overture. It introduces a new musical motif, absent from the Prelude, and is sung without accompaniment. Dramatically, the song initiates the action of Act I: as the Sailor sings of his separation from his own Irish sweetheart, a touchy Isolde misinterprets this as a malicious jibe and imagines that she herself is being mocked. Her rage, without the audience's knowledge of the Tristan legend as it exists independently of the opera—much of it pre-dating Wagner's action—can appear gratuitous. This earlier material, essential to the coherence of Wagner's opera, is also relevant to the resonances of *Tristan* in *The Waste Land*. Tristan, a Breton, leaves his ancestral castle, Kareol, and becomes one of the knights of King Mark of Cornwall. In Mark's service, he slays Morold, an Irish knight betrothed to Isolde, and arrogantly returns the severed head to Ireland. Tristan, however, has been wounded by Morold's sword, and the only person able to heal this wound, Isolde, has sworn vengeance against her lover's killer. Tristan changes his name to "Tantris" and in this, it seems, baffling disguise visits Ireland to be nursed by Isolde. However, Isolde notices that a notch in Tristan's sword matches a splinter extracted from Morold's head and realizes that Tantris is really Tristan. She is, however, unable to slay him with the sword resting in her hand: looking into Tristan's eyes, she is disarmed.

It is against this background, much of it to be retold in the opera though back-narration, that the Sailor's song sounds, unwittingly goading Isolde to rage and self-recrimination. The song, omitting the first four lines and beginning at "*Frisch weht der Wind*," also opens the second scene of Act I, but to different effect. Isolde's eyes fix upon Tristan, present on stage for the first time in the opera, and she sings the phrase "*Mir erkoren/Mir verloren*" (both lost to me and destined for me), using the thematic material underlying the opening dozen bars of the Prelude. These bars are to be basic musically to the love duet of Act II and to the last phrase of the opera, that of the *liebestod*: "*höchste lust!*" ("highest bliss"). Thus, the Sailor's song is the spur to both Isolde's rage and bereavement but also to her rhapsodic embracing of the deathlike transfiguration of passion that is the subject of Act II and of the end of the opera. Further, the Sailor's song itself contains the essential elements of the so-called sea motif and is the musical seed of the aural seascape of Acts I and III. This musical material is used repeatedly by all the characters in contexts in which the sea intrudes upon their consciousness. Within ten bars of the Sailor's finishing, it surges through the cello section of the orchestra as the thematic backdrop to Brangäne's telling Isolde of the ship's destination, Cornwall, and it serves as an important motif, identifiable with the agitation of the ocean, throughout. The initiating of this process can be seen if the Sailor's song (a) is compared with the accompaniment in the vocal score as Brangäne responds to Isolde (b):

(a)

Andante moderato.**Mässig langsam.****THE VOICE OF A YOUNG SAILOR (from above, as if from the mast-head).****STIMME EINES JUNGEN SEEMANNS (aus der Höhe, wie vom Maste her vernnehmbar).**

Tenor.  (energico)
(kräftig)

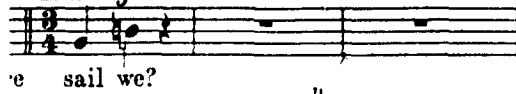
Westward sur - ges slip, eastward speeds the ship. The wind so wild blows
Westwärts schweift der Blick, ostwärts streicht das Schiff. Frisch weht der Wind der

 (calando)
(nachlassend)


homeward now:— my I-rish child, where wait-est thou?
Hei-math zu:— mein i-risch Kind, wo wei-lest du?


(b)

Moderato.**Mässig.**

 (calando)
(nachlassend)

e sail we?
sind wir?

 (calando)
(nachlassend)

 (calando)
(nachlassend)

BRANGENA (at the opening).**BRANGÄNE (an der Öffnung).**

 (calando)
(nachlassend)

Bluish stripes are stretch - ing a -
Blaue Strei - fen stie - gen im

 (calando)
(nachlassend)

 (calando)
(nachlassend)

 (calando)
(nachlassend)



Comparison of these two passages indicates why Eliot should have delayed quotation until the third line of the Sailor's song, for it is not until then that Wagner introduces thematic material of major musical importance to the opera. Moreover, the motif which the Sailor introduces at the point at which Eliot takes up the song is one of the few isolated figures in *Tristan* which is memorable in itself and for itself. It can be heard in the mind as a unit, isolated from its following bars, whereas the unresolved chromaticism of *Tristan* normally pushes on into unbroken and never-ending development. Atypically, the Sailor's motif tends towards Eliot's own mosaic method whereby a fragment has its own identity and interest which may counterpoint other fragments, but nevertheless has a clear beginning and ending, as in "fear death by water" or "unreal city." Usually the Wagnerian motif—and above all is this the case with *Tristan*—denies closure.

The same can be said of the musically less important but dramatically unforgettable line that Eliot quotes at the end of *The Waste Land* passage framed by *Tristan und Isolde*. The line "*Oed' und leer das Meer*" is found, as Eliot commentators point out, near the opening of Act III and is sung by the Shepherd as he looks out over the sea, shading his eyes with his hand. The roles of the Sailor and the Shepherd are sung by the same singer, a tenor, and thus, in performance, there is a reminiscence of the Sailor's song through the coloring imparted by an individual voice. The sea is empty and desolate because the Shepherd is unable to see any sign of Isolde's ship, which is bringing her to Tristan, who is now in the garden of Kareol, his Brittany castle. What is crucial, however, for Wagner and for Eliot, is not the separation of the lovers as lovers but Isolde's being the only nurse who can revive the dying Tristan. Tristan has unresistingly allowed himself to be run through by the sword of Melot (a knight of King Mark's) at the end of the second act after the lovers had been discovered *in flagrante delicto*, betraying Mark who was to marry Isolde when Tristan brought her to Cornwall. This point, obvious and basic to the opera-goer, is easily neglected by Eliot's readers. And the point is crucial because it is this more than physical wound which links Tristan with Amfortas of *Parsifal* and thus with the Fisher King of *The Waste Land*. The desolation of "*Oed' und leer das Meer*" derives from the absence of the one person who can heal a debilitating wound of sexual guilt. This is not a normal wound of combat, for Wagner's stage directions ask Tristan to let his sword unresistingly fall as Melot offers his and then to fall wounded into Melot's arms. The line is set to a musical phrase rather than to a motif, the phrase stretching up a semitone only to fall back a whole tone. Kurwenal, Tristan's companion and liegeman, has asked the Shepherd to pipe his merriest tune if he sights the sails of

Isolde's ship, but this desolate fragment is heard after a long (five bars) pause:



This barest of phrases should be part of the inner ear of the reader of *The Waste Land*. In *Tristan und Isolde*, the ship does come, and the Shepherd gets to sing his vigorous "happy" tune. But in *The Waste Land*, *Tristan* does not extend beyond this phrase of lament: after a break in the lineation, we are with Madame Sosostriis and her Tarot pack. *Tristan und Isolde*, the opera, continues to the reuniting of the lovers, the death of Tristan from his wound (for Isolde arrives too late), and the transfiguration of Isolde through death in the *liebestod*. There is no transfiguration through death in *The Waste Land*: the imagery of "those are pearls that were his eyes" suggests inert beauty but no apotheosis. An ironic relation holds between *Tristan und Isolde* and *The Waste Land*, but it rests on the contrast between what of *Tristan* is present in *The Waste Land* and what is absent, not on the contrast between romantic passion and modern impotence. What Eliot omits is crucial, but this is available only to the reader acquainted with the full opera.

Tristan is closely connected with *Parsifal*, most specifically at the point from which Eliot takes his second quotation: "Oed' und leer das Meer." Wagner himself saw this, and in a famous passage in a letter of 30 May 1859 to Mathilde Wesendonk, he wrote of his realisation that *Tristan* and Amfortas, the wounded knight of *Parsifal*, were closely linked at this point:

It dawned on me recently yet again that this [*Parsifal*] is bound to be another cruel task. Strictly speaking, Amfortas is the centre and the principal subject of the work. And, you know, that's quite a story. Just think, for heaven's sake, what's involved! It has suddenly become terribly clear to me: he's my *Tristan* in the third act, but inconceivably intensified. Wounded by the spear and probably with another wound besides—in his heart, in his fearful agony the poor man longs for nothing but death; to obtain this ultimate relief he is constantly driven to look on the Grail again, in case it will at least close his wound, for nothing else is able to do it, nothing—nothing can help him: but time and again the Grail only gives him this same thing, the inability to die.⁹

The denial of Isolde's healing power at the beginning of Act III of *Tristan* is intrinsically identifiable with the more intense denial of the healing power of the Grail to Amfortas in *Parsifal*. Like Eliot's Sibyl, Amfortas yearns to die. But the Grail reopens the agonizing wound and denies the desired death.

⁹ Quoted by Carl Dalhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, translated Mary Whittal (Cambridge University Press, 1979), and others.

In the preface to *From Ritual to Romance*, Jessie Weston relates that her book grew from two initial sources: her reading of *The Golden Bough* and conversations she had during the Bayreuth Festival of 1911. *From Ritual to Romance* finds the insistence upon the sickness and disability of the Fisher King to be a distinctive feature of the *Perceval* (Parsifal) versions of the Grail texts. In these versions, the task of the hero is, through asking about the Grail, to find the ability to heal the wounded and aged Fisher King. Weston's argument concludes:

To sum up the result of the analysis, I hold that we have solid grounds for the belief that the story postulates a close connection between the vitality of a certain King, and the prosperity of his kingdom; the forces of the ruler being weakened or destroyed, by wound, sickness, old age, or death, the land becomes Waste, and the task of the hero is that of restoration.¹⁰

Readers of *The Waste Land* are familiar with the import of this passage. It summarizes the elements of an unhealing maiming which by sympathetic magic lays waste the land and thus necessitates a cure. This cure, in the case of *Parsifal*, is effected by the Grail hero. In Eliot's poem, the hero is absent, and the people and the land are not redeemed. As in the case of the *Tristan* material, both what Eliot omits and what he includes must be perceived and felt by the reader. In both cases, the incompleteness of myths found complete in Wagner's operas must be understood if the frustrated yearning of the characters of *The Waste Land* is to be understood.

In Jessie Weston's earlier book devoted to the Parsifal legend, *The Legend of Sir Perceval*, she refers to "Wagner's dramatic genius [which] had led him to a reconstruction of the *original* form of the legend."¹¹ Wagner, she says "spoke the truth concerning the Grail when he put these words into the mouth of Gurnemanz:

Bist Du zu ihm erkoren
Bleibt Dir die Kunde unverloren
Parsifal, Act I"

These words, slightly misquoted by Weston, are offered in answer to Parsifal's miscomprehending question "*Wer ist der Gral?*" ("Who is the Grail?") Gurnemanz says that although no answer can be articulated in words, the knowledge will be revealed to Parsifal if he is chosen. Although the significance of the Grail lies beyond the reach of language, it does not lie beyond meaning, and that meaning can be apprehended if one is elected. This conception of the Grail, which fits so well with Eliot's critical stance and poetic practice from *The Waste Land* to "The Music of Poetry" and *Four Quartets*, Jessie Weston believes to carry the stamp of Wagner's genius. *From Ritual to Romance*, written about two years afterwards, never mentions Wagner by name, but it strongly accords with the Wagner operas used by Eliot, and the relation between *From Ritual to Romance* and Wagner as found in *The Waste Land* is always consonant.

The Verlaine line which Eliot borrows refers to the moment in *Parsifal* when the

¹⁰ Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920, rpt. Peter Smith, 1941), p. 21.

¹¹ Jessie L. Weston, *The Legend of Sir Perceval* (David Nutt, 1909), p. 259.

sound of the invisible boys' choir floats from above the drama in space and pitch. At Bayreuth, Wagner wished the orchestra to be heard but not seen, the pit being hidden from view at the foot of the stage. Here an unseen choir sounds from above the action at the end of the opera. The musical material of this passage is associated with the Grail throughout the opera, repeatedly being heard within the orchestral and vocal lines as a particular character refers, even if in passing, to the Grail. The theme opens the opera, sounded by the strings and leading into the Prelude. As the dramatic action begins it is again heard at the outset, providing the musical content of the trombone reveille which wakes Gurnemanz and the squires when the curtain rises. It is sung by the boys' choir when the curtain falls at the end of Act III.



Framing the opera, and continually heard in the musical phrasing of the first and third acts, this motif becomes associated with one of the two opposing worlds of the opera: that of the Grail knights in Acts I and III as opposed to the magic castle of Klingsor in Act II. The action of Act II, set in the precincts of Klingsor's castle, includes the trials of Parsifal as he successfully evades the sexual maiming inflicted on Amfortas when he earlier failed at this stage. This provides the material of the first eleven lines of Verlaine's sonnet. The sonnet focuses on the past up to this point, but at line 12, following the transitional "*le voici*," Verlaine changes focus and tense to the present as he portrays the final scene of the opera in which Parsifal's understanding through compassion enables him to reveal the Grail. As Parsifal uncovers the Grail, it glows with increasing splendor until the boys' choir is heard singing the quiet but firm and joyful resolution,

"Erlösung dem Erlöser!"

This is usually translated as "the Redeemer redeemed." The Grail has been saved, and a white dove hovers above Parsifal's head, for he has recovered Christ for the knights. Verlaine's sonnet sets this moment against the first eleven lines through the change in focus and tense, so that the second act is looked back upon from the standpoint of the end of the third. This reflects a musical as well as dramatic opposition in Wagner's opera. As Carl Dahlhaus shows in *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, the continual unresolved chromaticism of *Tristan und Isolde* gives way, in *Parsifal*, to a contrast between the chromatic and the diatonic. The chromaticism conveys the tortuous illusions of Klingsor's castle and the guilt and suffering of Amfortas, whereas the music of the Grail and of Parsifal, the wise fool, is diatonic and lacks harmonic ambiguity. It is essential to hear the harmonic distinctions and connections which hold between the themes and motifs if the listener is to comprehend the exposition of the dramatic themes and ideas of *Parsifal*. Of course, the hearer need not have any theoretical or analytic knowledge of music in order to hear, respond to, and comprehend the significance of the opposition. Certainly, the structure of Verlaine's sonnet seems to indicate his own sensitivity to the contrasting musical modes.

To put the point succinctly, *The Waste Land*, by quoting Verlaine's line, invites us to see its world for a moment through Wagnerian lenses. The land is laid waste through the maiming of the Fisher King (in Wagner, Amfortas), and it waits in vain for a redeemer (in Wagner, Parsifal), who will again make available to the world the Redeemer (Christ). In *The Waste Land*, Parsifal is without Parsifal. Eliot's poem has much to do with the parallel wounds of Tristan and Amfortas, but the healing figures of Isolde and Parsifal do not appear. In Eliot's different context, the "*voix d'enfants*" evoke something yearned for but not found, and Verlaine's line points to the opening of "What the Thunder said" with its echoes of the journey to Emmaus and the absent Redeemer.

Eliot's use of the Rhine-maidens of the beginning of the final act of *Götterdämmerung*, and thus of *The Ring*, and his contrasting them with the Thames-daughters of "The Fire Sermon" is a narrow and localized thread of allusion, less suggestive than the pervading webs of *Tristan* and, in particular, of *Parsifal*. The content of *Götterdämmerung* and the tetralogy which it completes is comparatively marginal to *The Waste Land*, even if it is appealing to align "London Bridge is falling down" with the overflowing of the Rhine and the destruction of Valhalla at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. The voices of the Rhine-maidens,

Weialala leia
Wallala leialala

in *The Waste Land* hover between allusion and internalized note. In Wagner, the Rhine-maidens sing three different vocal lines, constantly shifting against but echoing each other. The passage is a complex rippling effect rather than a theme or a motif, and it cannot be heard in the mind's ear. A complex unbroken flow of eighteen bars written in three parts can scarcely sound through the consciousness of the reader of "leialala" in *The Waste Land*. One can hear the *Tristan* excerpts as one reads them and Eliot alludes to *Parsifal*, through Verlaine's "*Parsifal*," in such a way as to stress a musical moment. In the case of the *Götterdämmerung* excerpt, it is as if Eliot indicates to the reader that awareness of a substantial Wagner passage might assist the lines of the poem yet finds himself unable to do more than quote the meaningless sounds indicated by the libretto. The allusion cannot be integrated into the poem without the reader's discarding the musical setting which alone gives it interest in the opera. To hear Eliot, or any reader, pronounce these sounds in inevitable monotone is dispiriting; one is being instructed to feel something that the verse cannot in practice evoke. The contrast between Eliot's "leialala" and Wagner's is that between an inert reference and an elaborate musical effect.

Eliot scholars have tended to refer to the Rhine-maidens with excessive gravity. Flirtatious teasers, their singing here irresistibly fragments into giggling laughter and is hardly the doleful lament for lost gold mentioned in some Eliot criticism. The final "la la" is warbled by the Rhine-maidens after they have disappeared and it is heard from very far away. Thus, the effect of the "la la" following the speech of Eliot's third Thames-daughter comes from offstage and is receding into the far distance. It is a fragment because the singing can now be heard scarcely at all, not because of the narrator's fatigued inability to articulate fully, as with some of the source fragments enunciated in "The Hollow Men."

* * * *

The full response to the Wagner allusions in *The Waste Land* as musical fragments

with an aural context, not simply as words, implies a response to Wagner the musician, not simply to Wagner the librettist. And just as opera cannot be understood from the reading of a mere libretto whose words are not informed by the musical content of the opera, so the basic ideas and feelings which live in the penumbra of Eliot's allusions cannot be understood independently of the musical language which gives them interest and significance in their original sources. This is not a matter of some vague emotional response but is tied to Eliot's own *leitmotive* of the Grail, the unhealing wound, loss, the Fisher King, the Chapel, the absent redeemer and so on. Some aspects of these Wagnerian links shore up the other fragments of *The Waste Land*; some ironically contrast with them. But just as in Wagner, the importance of these items cannot be grasped from the words in isolation from the music which structures the operas and washes through those words; it is thus impossible to respond more than superficially to Eliot's allusions without an aural awareness which the musicality of the poem as a whole encourages us to bring to them. Eliot's allusions to Wagner have seemed to communicate less than they can and have attracted less critical and scholarly comment than they deserve.

The indirect or mediated influence of Wagner upon *The Waste Land*, imbibed through the French poetry which was fed by his operas, is incalculable. It is easy, now, to forget the extraordinary impact of Wagner upon the later nineteenth century and thence upon the European and English literature which followed it. The novels of Lawrence, Joyce, Woolf, Forster, Conrad, and (above all) Thomas Mann¹² include explicit allusions to Wagner's operas. One can only guess at the extent of the impact of Wagner on literary Modernism when mediated through Baudelaire (the first French critic to recognize Wagner's importance¹³), Mallarmé, Corbière and the French Symbolists generally (although not Laforgue). One point, however, might be made here. Joyce felt that Eliot had pillaged the method of *Ulysses* in order to write *The Waste Land*. No doubt his reaction was exaggerated, but the use of *leitmotive* to hold together and shape interior monologue is a fundamental characteristic of both works. Joyce elaborately acknowledged his debt to Dujardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés* which, dull and minor as it is, clearly does use this technique. Dujardin was the editor of the *Revue Wagnérienne*, and in 1931 he was to describe the aim of his novel as having been to transpose Wagnerian method to literature so that musical motifs would communicate states of thoughts, feeling, or sensation.¹⁴ If *Ulysses* did enable *The Waste Land* to be written, it was as a conductor of Wagnerian structuring technique.

Eliot, as editor of *The Criterion* Volume 1, Number 1 of 1922, printed the first English edition of *The Waste Land*. All in all, it seems to have been remarkably appropriate that he should place the first part of a long and substantial Wagner-based article by Sturge Moore, entitled "The Story of Tristram and Isolt in Modern Poetry," immediately before his poem.

¹² Mann made a substantial contribution to music criticism in *Dr Faustus*, and his "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner" (April 1933) in Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, translated Allan Blunden (Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 91—148 is of great distinction.

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, "Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris", 1861 in *Oeuvres Complètes* II (Pléiade, Gallimard, 1976), pp. 779—815.

¹⁴ Edouard Dujardin, *Le Monologue intérieur: son apparition, ses origines, sa place dans l'oeuvre de James Joyce* (Albert Messein, 1931), pp. 96—7.

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