



The Artist as Bodhisattva Figure in Eliot's *The Waste Land* and La Gravenese's *The Fisher King*

*¹Maria-Ana Tupan

¹Doctoral School, Alba Iulia University Alba Iulia, Romania.

Abstract

The artist figure of late modernity is commonly seen either as the constructivist self-reflexive subject of modernism (Valéry: "je me voyais me voir") or as an open series of subject positions in language in the post-deconstructionist age. The artist as agent of enlightenment, as shepherd figure, guru or other spiritual guide sounds like an outdated legacy confined to premodernity. Nevertheless, despite tropical heterogeneity and ontological hybridity, the most celebrated epic of the earlier twentieth century, T S Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and an emblematic movie of 1991, *The Fisher King*, directed by Terry Gilliam and written by Richard LaGravenese, revive the figure of the artist as sage and teacher of mankind modelled on the hero of the Grail romances whose roots are shown to reach back in time to Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

Keywords: The Fisher King, T.S. Eliot, Richard LaGravenese, Upanishads, Bodhisattvas, Theravada Buddhism

Introduction

The twentieth century began by aestheticizing the planes of history and reality, and ended up in a heterotopic mix of ontic layers for which Max Augé found a negative definition: *non-places* [1]. Nevertheless, the existentialist quest inherited from Kierkegaard and enhanced by Sartre and Camus in midcentury modulated the religious drama of salvation through divine intervention and sacrifice into a self-centred script of personal enlightenment. Both Eliot and La Gravenese set in polarity the Christian divine comedy of salvation through mediation or divine grace and the medieval script of the hero called upon to prove himself, guided by a sage figure towards self-realization. The gradual rise from material to spiritual light seems to follow a pattern established by the lineage of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the Theravada Buddhism of Middle Indic Pali literature.

The changed order of the different answers Prajapati receives from his offsprings-gods, men and demons-when he asks them to interpret the DA syllable he had uttered in response to their demand for instruction (*The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.2.) [2] is not T.S. Eliot's single deflection from orthodoxy in his treatment of the best known Upanishad (Sanskrit: Upaniṣad) of the Vedic tradition. The alteration must have been deliberate, as Eliot errs again when referring the passage to Part 5.1 instead of Part 5.2 in his annotations to the poem. Was it just a "pedantic trick," as suggested by Harish Trivedi [3] who seeks endorsement for his own critique of Eliot's presumed knowledge of tradition he was publicly extolling and imposing as a fashionable idea in a posthumous (1986) essay by F.R. Leavis ("T.S. Eliot's Influence")?:

As we all know, this ["Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata"] comes from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, even if some commentators on Eliot and/or their copy-editors still cannot spell *Brihadaranyaka* correctly and consistently). Many critics have pointed to the puzzling fact that the order in

which the three injunctions occur in the Sanskrit, "Damyata, Datta, Dayadhvam", has been reshuffled by Eliot to become "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata", but as we do not have even a persuasive surmise much less a reasonable explanation as to why he should have done so, there is perhaps some reason to suspect a little private trick on Eliot's part, a little harmless pedantic joke (Trivedi 1995, p. 126).

Trivedi's criticism of the enthusiastic reception of T.S. Eliot by the "tribe" of Macaulay's children" is undertaken in the name of a postcolonial revisionism which reminds contemporary Indian intelligentsia of Macaulay's speech in Parliament in which he pleaded for the creation of a class of colonial subjects possessed of Indian bodies and a British mental make-up shaped through schooling. There is a difference between knowledge and use, though, the poet having the freedom of modifying sources in intertextual practices. In this case, "modifying" is not the right word, Eliot limiting himself to selection and juxtaposition in order to bring forward the analogy of the eastern and western mythical structures. Whereas Trivedi speaks in terms of us and them blaming the uncritical Indian borrowings from western paradigms, such as the modernism of the twenties, the progressivism of the thirties and the absurdism of the forties, Eliot turned to Frazer and Jessie Weston searching for paths to the collective unconscious and its universal archetypes in a way apparently suggested to him by C.G. Jung's 1916 essay, "The Structure of the Unconscious," [4] where the new concept is pitted against Sigmund Freud's personal unconscious governed by sexuality. The "nerves scene" in the second section of the poem ("A Game of Chess") is played by a Freudian couple, in the sense that, whereas the woman is hysterical in her search for escape from the boredom of daily routine, libidinal obsessions or her partner's indifference, the male partner, blessed with imagination, is seeking compensation in a parallel world of artefacts. This Freudian

binary appears in his 1930 *Civilization and Its Discontents*, but the theory of sublimation had already been made public by 1920.

It was not sexuality, however, that was laying waste Eliot's contemporary society. The evils he puts on record are wars, racism, collective psychoses, poverty, lack in spirituality, etc. He was searching for a solution to the chaotic world in which he could "connect nothing with nothing." As a totalizing narrative, myth absorbs the world into universal connectivity. Why did Eliot choose Hindu or Buddhist mythology along with biblical topoi?

The narrator of the last section of *The Waste Land*, who identifies himself with the *Fisher King*, includes himself among the interpreters of the supreme mysteries of existence coming up with his own answer to "the voice in the thunder". The *Fisher King* signifier is sliding under the fishing apostle signified. Resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus is revealing himself to his disciples. In like fashion, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* closes with a lineage of "apostles" (Prajapati's disciples) becoming teachers:

The line of teachers is the same up to the son of Sanjivi. The son of Sanjivi received this knowledge from Mandukayani. Mandukayani from Mandavya. Mandavya from Kautsa. Kautsa from Mahitthi. Mahitthi from Vamakakshiyana. Vamakakshiyana from Sandilya. Sandilya from Vatsya. Vatsya from Kusri. Kusri from Yajnavachas, the son of Rajastamba. Yajnavachas, the son of Rajastamba, from Tura, the son of Kavashi. Tura, the son of Kavashi, from Prajapati (*Hiranyagarbha*). Prajapati received this knowledge from his relationship to Brahman (the Vedas). Brahman is self-existent. Salutation to Brahman. (6.5. "The Line of Teachers").

Writing on the power of art to redeem and restore to life a ruined civilization, T.S. Eliot too enters a lineage of authors writing on related topics (sometimes with a laying in the abyss: Weston writing about the *Fisher King*, Dante writing on Arnaut Daniel as one of a triad of Provençal poets, the other ones being Bertran the Born and Folquet of Marseilles, the anonymous author of *Pervigilium Veneris*, Gerard de Nerval, and Thomas Kyd. By moving, as Weston says, "from ritual to romance", Eliot brings forward men leaving gods and demons in the background. The mundane strategy of writing (and thereby fishing readers, converting them to faith in the artistic illusion) and the autonomy of the artist (a modernist Bible) are the objective correlatives of the Christian apostolate and of the self-existent Brahman, the two mythical structures being woven together. Eliot modifies the order of divine offsprings so that men take priority over gods and demons. As pointed out by Joyce Mason [5], whereas knowledge of only parts of the Vedas can be imparted to the highest castes, Buddhism was "the first universalist religion--the religion that was for all, the religion in which neither caste or colour was a barrier, founded by man called Gautama who was born in the present-day Nepal territory." (p.8). Any human can decide to become Buddha (escaping out of the life circle to Nirvana), or give up on personal salvation in order to teach others the way to enlightenment which makes them "men of light" (Bodhisattva: *bodhi* meaning enlightenment and *sattva*, being).

The post-apocalyptic mode of existence in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.1. is "the Infinite Brahman alone.[...] the Akasa Brahman-the primeval akasa.[...] It is the Veda." In 2.3., this Brahman is to be distinguished from the "mortal, limited and definite" one. It is Brahman who decided to give himself a mind and to create a second self in

speech. Prajapati (*Prajāpatihṛdaya* in Sanskrit) is this heart (intellect), the father of gods, men and demons, to whom all of them refer in several ways.

Prajapati is this-the heart (intellect). It (the heart) is Brahman. It is all. Hridayam (the heart) consists of three syllables. One syllable is hri; and to him who knows this, his own people and others bring presents. One syllable is da; and to him who knows this, his own people and others give their powers. One syllable is yam; and he who knows this goes to heaven. (5.3.) By being worshipped, judging creation and mediating access to heaven, Prajāpatihṛdaya resembles Christ, light, through whom the universe was created. In the fifth part of the poem, Eliot plays upon the theme of creation, both divine and artistic, weaving together several mythical traditions. The *Upanishad* begins with the primary scene of Sacrifice and Creation. He quotes from the *Brihadanaryaka*, so called because it was composed in the forest. Eliot mentions Himavat, the personified Himalaya Mountain, and his daughter, the river Ganga. Himavata is also a forest where the *Triphumikatha* was written, the book of Buddhist cosmology. Water is a generational element in both scriptures. In *Brihadarnaryaka*, I.2 ("The Process of Creation"), water is created by Brahman while worshipping himself and is the origin of both earth and fire. As the earth is born out of frost on the water, Brahman feels fatigued and heated, and his essence comes forth as brightness.

Eliot's *Fisher King* is sitting on the shore, ordering his own lands (fragments of a world library) against the formless leviathan, posing as divine creator. They are the pure lands of an immaculate conception. Paul O. Ingram [6] is looking for arguments in Mircea Eliade's essay "Experiences of the Mystic Light" in his own gloss on "The Symbolism of Light and Pure Land in Buddhist Soteriology", which is, however, at the centre of all the three religions under consideration.

According to the *Buddhavarhsa*, a book of the *Tripitaka*, the pilgrim on the way to enlightenment does not run into incarnations/avatars of the Supreme Being but into enlightened beings (Bodhisattvas) who teach others the way to salvation by fulfilling the ten perfections (the number varies in other versions of the myth). These virtues are no longer related to a divinity's sacred name and essence but to ideal human conduct. They sound similar to the qualities building the profile of the ideal knight, member of a lay fraternity, in the Middle Ages:

In the *Tripitaka* we find a book entitled the *Cariyapitaka* which is completely dedicated to teaching the ten perfections [...]:

- i) Perfection of giving (ddna),
- ii) Perfection of morality (sila),
- iii) Perfection of renunciation (*nekkhamma*),
- iv) Perfection of wisdom (pannd),
- v) Perfection of exertion (viriyā),
- vi) Perfection of patience (khanti),
- vii) Perfection of truth (sacca),
- viii) Perfection of resolution (*adhithana*),
- ix) Perfection of loving kindness (mettd),
- x) Perfection of equanimity (upekkhd) [7].

Eliot's *Fisher King* is in no need of being saved by Perceval bringing him the Grail. He is saving himself under the Virgilian guides of world literature. The image of the boat responding gaily to controlling hands symbolizes, not only the texts (*Upanishads*) in which the soul is voyaging to eternity but also the harmony between teacher and disciple. A spiritual teacher is like a boat that helps the disciple along on his

pilgrimage to self-realization, to identification with Brahman who is one and many, who is present in each individual soul. Eliot's correlative of the one Brahman is, as suggested in this *gran finale* of the poem, the mind of Europe, which, in "Tradition and Individual Talent", he sets above any individual mind.

Harish Trivedi speaks of period terms as fashions. There may be fashionable ideas at each time in history, but what makes them fashionable is neither random nor conventional. It is deeply grounded in the movement of ideas, in the prevailing episteme of the time. Eliot is here drawing upon contemporary versions of psychoanalysis for his incursion into the mythopoetic tradition.

Seventy years later, *The Fisher King* was to become again a narrative device in a quest of remedies against the conditions that prevent the exercise of ethical values (Buddhist "perfections") which can only be fulfilled in peace (The *shantih* closing the upanishads). In 1991 this romance hero lent his name to a movie directed by Terry Gilliam and whose screen play was written by Richard LaGravenese.

In his book on *The Poetics of Otherness: War, Trauma, and Literature*, Jonathan Hart ^[8] speaks about a poetics of otherness in contexts pretty similar to those woven by Eliot in his polyphonic epic: war, violence, xenophobia, trauma, cross-cultural tensions. Hart says we bring to the landscape a grammar of our language, a history and images from our culture. Living in America but of Italian ancestry, Richard LaGravenese seemed to feel different in the New World, and deeply attached to his family's cultural roots. His New York, therefore, is not a unitary landscape, as it probably appears to generations of natives. It has four layers of reality:

- **Reality in its Place:** We see people sitting down to have dinner, caring about table manners and so on.



Fig 1:

- Semiotic landscape, because here we see Jack Lucas, the protagonist, horrified to hear that he had unwittingly caused many deaths by working up a man to killing people of the upper class, of elegant, smart society, on the basis of a reductive ideological agenda: *it's them or us*, he had emphatically cried out to his invisible audience, his injunction to violence targeting social reasons, class differences. With a guilty look, he holds a Pinocchio doll in his arms, which he had received from a child who had taken him for a bum. Jack asks the doll, have you read any Nietzsche? He has in mind Nietzsche's binary speaking about a master soul and a slave soul. *Pinocchio* is the story of a doll which, thanks to good conduct, is finally gratified to become a child, to become human (*The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) by Carlo Collodi). This is a *mise-en-abyme* device, as this is also the story of Jack who finally acquires a soul, is humanized by his friendship with his victim (the former husband of one of

the fatalities in the shooting) who had gone crazy and now imagines he is the Fisher King, a hero of chivalrous romances.



Fig 2:

- A hybrid space, which is a mix of contemporary New York skyscrapers and the fake architecture of a tower built in medieval style. Crazy Parry, the former Henry Sagan teaching at Hunter College, is obsessing with romances, like Don Quixote. He feels the need to be saved, as in the Grail romances, seeing in the former radio broadcaster



Fig 3: Jack Lucas God's elected for the Grail quest.

- An imaginary world haunted by the Red Knight, a destroyer figure-but the scriptwriter does not say that this is all imagination, he only says: Now we see from Parry's perspective, therefore, we may assume that this too may be real. This is a phenomenology of perception, not an ontologically certified reality.



Fig 4:

Similarly to all romances with a pastoral tinge, *The Fisher King* starts from strife, conflict, discontent and ends up in universal reunion and reconciliation.

The film opens with a radio talk show in which Jack is addressing a caller:

Edwin... Edwin... Edwin... I told you about these people. They only mate with their own kind. It's called Yuppie-In-Breeding... that's why so many of them are retarded and wear the same clothes. They're not human. They can't feel love. They can only negotiate love moments. They're evil, Edwin. They're repulsed by imperfection and horrified by the banal-everything America stands for. Edwin, they have to be stopped before it's too late. It's us or them. (our emphasis)

These are the words which drive that caller, who till then had been a timid and inoffensive man, to committing that terroristic attack on the upper class consumers in a restaurant. The drama of salvation and expiation is performed by Jack, proud of his body-handsome, aggressive, intelligent-, and Parry, a gothic patchwork of college teacher, architect, bam, romance, don Quixote, quotations, psycho. Jack Lucas's story may be that of an Italian immigrant speaking pig Italian: "Il Nouva Esta Fuckin' Pinicko"

LaGravenese is casting about for images to illustrate his story, and they are cultural stereotypes: the Irishman, associated with the Celtic heritage of romances, is reading a Chaucer passage in Old English; a black is protesting constitutional rights, because Afro-Americans are also obsessing with being persecuted, and not being granted their legal rights; a hippie, who is a universal subculture inhabitant, admires the marvel comics displayed by the Super-Bum, that is, by Parry, the former professor, banished now to the basement of the house which he had once inhabited. Jack visits it, and notices three levels of reality again:"a handmade collage mural: pictures cut out and pasted in a haphazard manner, all medieval in origin; grassy landscape with castles, knights and maidens on horses, crests and symbols of the Crusades, and various renditions of the Holy Grail.." [9]. On the other side of this heritage of medieval romances, there is the hell of his nightmarish Red Rider. The style is violent and erratic, and this violent image of the red knight is being looked at by the Pinocchio doll, in line with that gothic discontinuity between animate/inanimate, human/subhuman. Finally, there is Parry's arsenal, his weaponry, which is medieval in intent but, of course, banal in the stuff he has used, a real/textual hybrid underworld: New York and Dante's Inferno. On the one hand, there are images of the New York underworld under Manhattan Bridge, or the basement where Parry lives, on the other, there are quotes from Dante which Parry is producing in front of two youngsters, Leather and Windbreaker (reduced to disembodied garments). They are like Pinocchio, the naughty doll, that is, worthless, sub-human, violent, trying to burn Jack alive: "Curst wolf! Thy fury inward on thyself pray and consume thee! "These words are addressed by Virgil to Pluto, the raging ruler of the underworld (Canto VII). Then he turns to the youngsters, who are rich, but wasting their wealth, being compared to the holders and wasters in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*: "O beings blind! What ignorance/Besets you?" (Ibid.)

LaGravenese pities American musicals-such as Gershwin's "I like New York in June, how about you?-against his Roman and Italian tradition of "the best which has been thought and said" according to Matthew Arnold, that is, a European museum. LaGravenese capitalizes on the European cultural tradition going back to the Middle Ages, unified by the romance imaginary: the Irishman recites Chaucer, Parry

quotes *The Divine Comedy*, while the romance of *Floire et Blanche -Fleur* refers the audience, not only to the Western countries, where it was circulated-Italy, France, Spain-but also to the whole Holy Empire and even to ancestral eastern mythical sources mapped onto the New York landscape. The romantic story beaming with esoteric meaning becomes a resonance chamber for the Echo of God Pan, that is, the whole of the earth and the whole of humanity: Parry's knight in shining armour ("In the name of Blanche de Fleur, unhand that errant knight!"), courtly culture, the Knights Templars, the druid assemblies of Wales, King Arthur and the Round Table, Parzifal and Lohengrin, and, finally, the great teachers of the European initiates: Manes, Scythians, Buddha and Zarathustra-the originators of European mysteries of the Rosy Cross according to Rudolf Steiner ("The East in the Light of the West" lecture dating back to Munich the 31st of august 1909). Parry too possesses a rosy cross, but on a garbage cover ... All members of this glorious company were the originators of the Rosicrucian mysteries. Myths descended into history: Charibert von Laon (born ca. 690 A.D.), maternal grandfather of Charlemagne and founder of the Brotherhood of the Holy Grail, was represented as Floris in the medieval tale *Floris and Blanchfleur*. A magus of Egypt, named Ormus, was converted in the year 96 by Saint Mark. He founded the society of the Sages of Light to the members of which he gave a red cross as a decoration. About the same time the Essenes and the Jews founded the school of Solomonic wisdom, to which the disciples of Ormus united themselves (Rudolf Steiner, *ibid.*). Edward, the son of Henry the Third, was received into the Society of the Rose Croix by Raymond Llul. He was crowned as King Arthur. Scythians was considered the Bodhisattva of the West, that is, the enlightenment of being, the illuminate, for whom the self is identical with the community.

The transgression of boundaries, the primary scene of the fantastic, is no longer seen as ontological but rather as a clash of identity narratives, which sometimes show some cultural other as irreducible as another planet. When the encounter of clashing narratives is not rendered absolute, there is, cross-over, fertilization.

The final image of *The Fisher King* movie shows Parry and Jack lying naked, exposed to the idyllic Central Park in New York. In between them, there is the Pinocchio doll. As Parry (Henri Sagan as Percival figure) had urged Jack, addressing him as a Virgilian guide (Son!), Jack has become a man instead of a voice, a face, with or without a body in the dark of the. He has risked his life out of compassion for Parry, has healed the would-be Fisher King, and brought him back to life with the help of a chalice which had once been given as a Christmas gift to billionaire Carmichael in his childhood. The happy end is a mise-en-abyme of a Christmas miracle. The two protagonists have exorcised the non-human difference symbolized by the doll, which had been grafted on their gothic, hybrid bodies. For Jack, the doll had symbolized the lack in humaneness; for Parry, his fear of the Red Knight. Tamed, freed from its eerie connotations, the doll is lying between them as harmless as it appears to Pinocchio the child in Carlo Collodi's book.

References

1. Augé, Max. *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe. London & New York: Verso, 1995.
2. *The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda

- <http://sanatan.intnet.mu/upanishads/brihadaranyaka.htm>
3. Trivedi, Harish. *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, 126.
 4. Jung CG. "The Structure of the Unconscious," in Jung, C.G. *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967, 7.
 5. Mason, Joyce. "The Basic Beliefs of Hinduism and Buddhism". Honors Theses, 1970, 437. https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses/437
 6. Ingram PO. The Symbolism of Light and Pure Land Buddhist Soteriology. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*. 1974; 1(4):331-345. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30234422>
 7. Shanta Ratnayaka, "Shanta. The Bodhisattva Ideal of Theravada," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*. 1985; 8(2):89.
 8. Hart, Jonathan. *The Poetics of Otherness: War, Trauma, and Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
 9. Richard LaGravenese. Shooting Draft of *The Fisher King*, 1991. https://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/fisher-king_shooting.html Rudolf Steiner Archive. https://rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA113/English/RSPC1940/EasWes_index.html.