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He Do the Police to the Tune of a Valkyrie

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He do the police to the tune of a Valkyrie

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Abstract

The subject of Wagner’s presence in *The Waste Land* is an area that has received minimal scholarly attention. Aside from a handful of literary studies, scholarship—in particular, musicological scholarship—concerning Eliot’s apparent Wagner neurosis is virtually non-existent. This thesis will be among the first studies to provide a musicologically-oriented examination of Eliot’s literal, as well as implicit quotation of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Götterdämmerung* in his epic poem *The Waste Land*. My study does not propose to use Wagner’s works as a means of explaining *The Waste Land*; my purpose, alternatively, is to consider the following question: How does Eliot’s poem color our understanding of Wagner’s music dramas? In answering this question, my thesis will examine three instances from *The Waste Land* that are linked with Wagner’s *magna opera*. This approach will not provide an all-inclusive analysis of Eliot’s or Wagner’s work, but rather will generate an Eliot-guided interpretation of two Wagnerian masterworks.
In memory of Dr. Donna Mayer-Martin
# Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1.  Hyacinths Grow in Isolde's Garden.......................................................10
Chapter 2.  The Nymphs Depart and the Numbskull Weeps.................................30
Chapter 3.  Flames, Whirlpools, Wheels, and Loops.............................................50

Conclusion......................................................................................................................................72

Bibliography.................................................................................................................................77

Appendix A...................................................................................................................................85

Appendix B...................................................................................................................................88
Introduction

Among the windings of the violins
And the ariettas
Of cracked cornets
Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own

Eliot, Portrait of a Lady (1910)

In 1909, the newly erected Boston Opera House programmed a production of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. The young American poet Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) attended a performance and experienced, for the first time, the sound world of Wagnerian music drama.¹ Forty-seven years later, over tea and Savoyard sandwiches, he and Igor Stravinsky reminisced about Eliot’s encounters with Wagner’s music. “We managed to talk that afternoon,” recollected Stravinsky, “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.”² As indicated in the correspondence between Eliot and his Parisian companion Jean Verdenal, *Tristan* was received as a masterwork that “leaves [one] prostrate with ecstasy and

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thirsting to get back to it again.”

And Eliot did, in fact, get back to it again. Exact quotations from and indirect allusions to Wagner’s Tristan, Parsifal, and Der Ring des Nibelungen appear in Eliot’s 1922 poetic work The Waste Land.

The Waste Land is a famous as well as infamous work. It is both a monumental landmark in literary history and a notoriously difficult hurdle in the understanding of modernist ideology. The celebrated complexity of Eliot’s poem spawns from its kaleidoscopic structuring of allusions; straightforward allusions, ambiguous allusions, fragments of allusions, secondary allusions to allusions, and allusions dovetailing into other allusions exist contiguously, implanting meaning, while uprooting clarity. In 1923, Eliot’s friend and colleague Conrad Aiken astutely described Eliot’s work as “a series of sharp, discrete, slightly related perceptions and feelings, dramatically and lyrically present, and violently juxtaposed . . . [a] conglomerate of mutually discolorative fragments.” Aiken’s description indicates that Eliot’s conflation of allusions in The Waste Land resembles a formless but detailed mosaic, composed of unrelated, emotionally-charged images. This diagnosis is all too true. The Waste Land is a fragmented and, thus, complex work, leaving even the most careful readers confounded by Eliot’s intricate story of man, of the past and present, and, presumably, of Eliot himself.

But amidst Eliot’s chaotic dialogues and ambiguous murmurs, Wagner’s piercing voice resonates through the din. Lines 31-42 of Part I (“The Burial of the Dead”)


4 There is no evidence to support Eliot’s familiarity with or knowledge of Wagner’s Parsifal. In fact, the allusion to Parsifal in The Waste Land is merely an allusion to Verlaine’s Wagner-inspired poem “Parsifal.” For these reasons, my thesis will not include analysis of Parsifal.

reference Acts I and III of Tristan, and lines 266-311 from Part III (“The Fire Sermon”) and lines 312-322 from Part IV (“Death by Water”) reference Act III of Götterdämmerung. Although Eliot’s inclusion of Wagnerian allusions does not necessarily simplify The Waste Land, it at least assigns identities to some of Eliot’s innumerable mysterious voices. Tristan, Isolde, the Rhinemaidens, Brünnhilde, and Hagen appear as familiar faces in a crowd of anonymous silhouettes. They are not original fabrications of Eliot’s mind, but are characters resurrected from a well-preserved theatrical reality. By adjusting our focus onto Eliot’s use of Wagner, we have, then, a starting point for reading Eliot’s epic work and, more significantly, a platform for contemplating Wagner’s music dramas.

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Due to her supposedly superfluous addition to an already massive body of research, Grail scholar Jessie L. Weston “explained herself” in the introduction to From Romance to Ritual: “When the student of the subject contemplates the countless essays and brochures, the volumes of studies and criticism . . . [he] may well hesitate before adding another element to such a veritable witches’ cauldron of apparently profitless study.”7 Though Weston’s scholarly concern specifically pertains to the Grail Legend, many would concur that, like Weston’s topic, discussion and disagreement about Wagner’s music dramas and Eliot’s The Waste Land (as separate works) amount to a boiling vat of “essays and brochures . . . studies and criticism.” From Friedrich Nietzsche to Theodor Adorno to Carolyn Abbate to Eric Chafe to Paul Schofield, theorists, philosophers, historians, and musicologists have mercilessly interrogated Wagner and his

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6 For quotations from The Waste Land, please see Appendix A.

7 Jessie L. Weston, From Romance to Ritual (New York: Peter Smith, 1941), 1.
magna opera. Likewise, *The Waste Land*, for the duration of the twentieth century, has been, as Lyndall Gordon perceptively notes, a “fashionable . . . intellectual game for scholars.”

Why, then, is there a need to indulge in a seemingly exhausted topic, adding ingredients to this overflowing “witches’ cauldron”? Certainly, the innumerable studies of *The Waste Land* have adequately addressed many of the literary and historical allusions in Eliot’s work; Eliot’s references to the Grail Legend, Shakespeare, Buddhism, and Dante are no mystery to the realm of literary scholarship. Yet, scholars have shied away from Eliot’s apparent Wagner neurosis. Presently, the literature on Wagner’s association with *The Waste Land* is virtually non-existent. Of the handful of speculations surrounding this topic, most focus on Eliot’s unspecified use of *Parsifal* or contain blatantly incorrect guesswork. For instance, Robert Schwarz, taking cues from Herbert Knust, remarks: “the actual song [from *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, i] that Eliot quotes appears nowhere in the Ring cycle but comes closest to one sung in the first act of *Das Rheingold*.” Schwarz’s so-called observation is frustratingly incorrect. The quotation

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9 See footnote no. 3.


“Weialala leia/Wallala leialala” in *The Waste Land* is directly extracted from *Götterdämmerung*\(^\text{12}\) and only vaguely resembles the Rhinemaidens’ introductory performance in *Das Rheingold*. In using *Das Rheingold* as an analytic platform, Schwarz’s argument fails to perceive the Rhine as a paradoxical metaphor for salvation, but regards it as a “sterile,” dying shoreline—oversimplifying, in turn, Eliot’s poetic objective.

There are, however, more than enough satisfying analyses of *The Waste Land*, *Tristan*, and *Götterdämmerung* as separate works. Because my research endeavors begin with an analysis of Eliot’s work, studies expounding upon the text of *The Waste Land* itself are most useful in my inquiries. For example, Calvin Bedient’s *He Do the Police in Different Voices: The Waste Land and Its Protagonist*—a study arguing that the mosaic-like spectacle of Eliot’s poem is the perspective of a single protagonist expressing an ironic, faith-based vision of humanity—and Jewel Speers Brooker and Joseph Bentley’s *Reading The Waste Land*—a study devoted to an examination of Eliot’s quotations—provide careful, line-by-line interpretations of Eliot’s poem. But not even the most-intricate interpretation of *The Waste Land* can pacify the curiosity of a student of English literature. As celebrated Eliot scholar Helen Gardner advises: “Ignore any book calling itself a guide to Eliot.”\(^\text{13}\) To achieve clarity beyond the available scholarly digest, my thesis will also examine Eliot’s creative influences and primary sources, including, but not limited to, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Buddha’s “Fire Sermon,” and the myth of Hyacinthus.


\(^{13}\) Quoted in Gordon, *T.S. Eliot*, 148.
Yet, I believe, it would be irresponsible to interpret *The Waste Land* without an exploration of Eliot’s biography. Many scholars have convincingly argued that *The Waste Land* as well as the entirety of Eliot’s poetic output was generated by autobiographical impulses.¹⁴ For this reason, my study will also incorporate discussion of Eliot’s personal struggles and successes, his philosophical beliefs, and his fractured romantic life. It was Eliot himself, the self-proclaimed advocate of the “impersonal” poet¹⁵ who wrote: “In writing other verse (i.e. non-dramatic verse) I think that one is writing, so to speak, in terms of one’s own voice . . . . [I]t is yourself speaking.”¹⁶ In my application of biographical detail to analytical discussion, this “yourself,” the voice of Eliot, stands as one of many revealing forces in my seemingly circuitous journey. My literary methodology, then, can be defined as “biographical criticism.” Eliot biographer and biographical critic Ronald Schuchard describes the advantages of this approach: “the charge [of biographical criticism] is to explore the ways in which art and personality, art and consciousness, are indissolubly linked, the ways in which the reconstruction of biographical and intellectual contexts may indeed change or influence critical evaluation.”¹⁷ Like Schuchard, I do not claim that biographical contextualization unfailingly illuminates artistic intention or meaning. Rather, I do propose that Eliot’s life

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and art are inseparable and that consideration of Eliot’s background provides valuable insight into his poetic speakers’ minds.

In the following discussion, however, I do not wish to provide an exhaustive reading of *The Waste Land*. The principle aim of this study is to cultivate an Eliot-inspired environment that will offer a fresh perspective of two Wagnerian masterworks: *Tristan* and *Götterdämmerung*. My discussion will begin with a detailed examination of the previously-mentioned excerpts from *The Waste Land* and will form, in turn, an interpretative platform for understanding Wagner’s music dramas. I intend to bolster my interpretation of Eliot’s reading of Wagner via the exploration of primary- and secondary-source materials related to *Tristan* and *Götterdämmerung*. In regard to my discussion of *Tristan*, Eric Chafe, author of *The Tragic and The Ecstatic*[^18], as well as Joachim Köhler, author of *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans*[^19], provide convincing analyses and interpretations. Both Chafe and Köhler indentify the redeeming nature of the erotic and the relevance of Schopenhauerian aesthetics in Wagner’s often misrepresented love story. Similarly, in her chapter “Eros and Thanatos: Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde,*” Linda Hutcheon provides a culturalist perspective of the German-Romantic obsession with death, concluding that human passion and human annihilation emerge as kindred spirits in Wagner’s *Tristan*.[^20] Of the innumerable studies on Wagner and *Götterdämmerung*, several publications deserve mention. James M. McGlathery’s *Wagner’s Opera and Desire* challenges the implicit critical denial of illicit


Such scholarly sources, however, are only supplemental to my investigation of Wagner’s music dramas. The aforementioned literary instances will act as the scaffold for my analytic approach. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s remarks best introduce my interpretative technique:

\begin{quote}
We are as much informed of a writer’s genius by what he selects as by what he originates. We read the quotation with his eyes, and find a new and fervent sense; as a passage from one of the poets, well recited, borrows new interest from the rendering.\footnote{Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Quotation and Originality,” [1876] in \textit{Letters and Social Aims} (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), 194.}
\end{quote}
Emerson’s observation suggests that poetic allusions are double-sided constructions. They are, in one sense, an affirmation of literary genius—the poet recycles the past with the same artistic awareness used to orchestrate the future. And they are, in another sense, interpretive guideposts—the poet indirectly elucidates meaning by way of a personalized poetic language. As readers, we often concern ourselves with the first part of Emerson’s statement, asking: What does this allusion reveal about the “writer’s genius,” the borrower? Yet, we rarely ask: How does this allusion cultivate a “new and fervent sense” or understanding of the source material, the borrowed? In my exploration of Wagner’s music dramas Tristan and Götterdämmerung, I propose to use this latter question as my interpretive basis. To reiterate, my study does not intend to interpret Eliot’s work in its entirety or to reorganize the whole of Eliot’s “violent juxtapositions,” and my study does not propose to directly use Wagner’s work as a means of explaining The Waste Land. My purpose, alternatively, is to consider the following question: How does Eliot’s poem color our understanding of Wagner’s music dramas?
Chapter 1

Hyacinths Grow in Isolde’s Garden

In November of 1909, after attending a performance of *Tristan*, Eliot wrote the following poem:

Tristan and Isolde
And the fatalistic horns
The passionate violin
And ominous clarinet;
And love torturing itself
To emotion for all there is in it,
Writhing in and out
Contorted in paroxysms,
Flinging itself at the last
Limits of self-expression.

We have the tragic? Oh no!
Life departs with a feeble smile
Into the indifferent.
These emotional experiences
Do not hold good at all,
And I feel like the ghost of youth
At the undertakers’ ball.  

Here Eliot presents Wagner’s profound music drama as absurd melodrama. The “passionate” and “fatalistic” orchestra, the emotionalism in overdrive, the agonizing pain of love does not move or inspire, but leaves the audience “indifferent,” exiting the opera house with a “feeble smile.” Considering Eliot’s somewhat neurotic obsession with Wagner, this reaction to *Tristan* seems bizarre. How could Eliot, a poet responsible for erecting one of the most infamous literary monuments to Wagner, ridicule a Wagnerian tour de force? In his work *T.S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet*, Eliot biographer

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and analyst James E. Miller ventures to provide an answer: “we may well assume that Eliot was to exchange his contempt for Wagner for profound admiration upon receipt of the letters extravagantly praising Wagner, and particularly *Tristan und Isolde*, from his French friend Jean Verdenal.”

Verdenal was a Wagner enthusiast. He frequented the theater and came to understand that *Tristan* was a sexually-arousing work, capable of producing indescribable, orgasmic feelings. By 1912, Verdenal had become Eliot’s passionately-close friend. Sharing a pension together in Paris, the two like-minded students discussed literature, academia, and the “sensual excitement” of Bastille Day; Eliot shared his attraction to the novels of Charles-Louis Phillipe, and Verdenal, via letter, described his ecstatic enthusiasm for Wagner. They were, if not physically, mentally in love. In this sense, as Miller suggests, Verdenal emotionally re-tuned Eliot, setting the scene for Eliot’s later tumultuous affairs with Emily Hale, with Vivienne Haigh-Wood and, arguably, with Richard Wagner.

Like in the love stories of Verdenal, Eliot, and Wagner, in the “love story” of *Tristan* the notion of love is a complex one. It is all too often, however, that the conception of love in *Tristan* is suffocated by the margins of simplicity. Many commonplace interpretations—often filtered through thick Schopenhauerian lenses—have streamlined Wagner’s notion of love and defined *Tristan* as a cautionary work,

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27 Beginning in October of 1910, Verdenal and Eliot shared a pension in Paris. Though most of the information regarding their friendship is preserved in seven letters addressed to Eliot from Verdenal, there is no doubt, as Miller writes, that “Verdenal’s influence on Eliot was incalculable, both personally and intellectually.” Many scholars have suggested that the pair were kindred spirits and, possibly, even formed a bond that hinted at romantic intimacy. For more information on their relationship, see Miller, *T.S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet*, 117-135.

focused entirely on the futile and tormenting nature of the erotic\textsuperscript{29} or as a romantic work, in which love itself redeems man.\textsuperscript{30} Love, however, as expressed by both Eliot and Wagner, is not easily defined by square-cut definitions or paper-doll terminology.

Specifically examining “The Burial of the Death,” Part I of The Waste Land, I will explore Eliot’s portrayal of love in Tristan and provide, in turn, an alternative reading of Wagner’s atypical love-story. In my discussion, I will present a detailed study of “The Burial of the Dead” as well as consider Wagner’s admiration and digest of Schopenhauer’s philosophies in relation to the composition of Tristan. Using as evidence my analysis of Eliot’s poem and the background surrounding Wagner’s music drama, my study will assert that Tristan is a work in which man’s salvation is not destabilized by or founded in, but rather is \textit{guided} by the agency of love.

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On 17 February 1913, at a small theatrical gathering of family and friends, Emily Hale stole the heart of Eliot. Hale, a polite brunette with a resonate voice and a captivating stage presence, possessed a flare for comedy that earned her a big name in a small town. As the daughter of a wealthy Unitarian minister, however, Hale was professionally stifled by social obligations to her affluent family and never aspired beyond the life of an amateur actress. Yet it was Hale’s love for the stage and Eliot’s

\textsuperscript{29} Nike Wagner, in her book \textit{The Wagners}, writes: “The ‘folly of love’ had been presented in \textit{Tristan and Isolde}.” And Thomas Mann claims in his study “The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner” that “the moral-intellectual component of Schopenhauer’s philosophy . . . is of little significance.” There are, however, scholars, such as Eric Chafe author of \textit{The Tragic and The Ecstatic}, as well as Joachim Köhler author of \textit{Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans} who have identified the redeeming nature of love and the appropriate relevance of Schopenhauerian aesthetics in Tristan. See Mann, “The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner” [1933] in \textit{Pro and Contra Wagner}, trans. Erich Heller and Allan Blunden, 127; and N. Wagner, \textit{The Wagners: The Dramas of a Musical Dynasty},” trans. Ewald Osers and Michael Downes (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000).

\textsuperscript{30} For example, Eric A. Plaut’s survey of “grand opera” from 1789-1939 describes Tristan as “the most romantic of all operas” where “love, and only love, ultimately matters.” See Plaut, \textit{Grand Opera: Mirror of the Western Mind} (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 98.
growing passion for drama that brought the couple together. Although short-lived, the relationship between Eliot and Hale was an involved emotional journey for the young, aspiring poet. Hale immediately became a source of poetic inspiration: a divine muse immortalized in the language arts, and a recurrent figure in Eliot’s writings. For instance, in his 1917 poem “La Figila che Piange” Eliot writes of a girl who “compelled my imagination many days, / Many days and many hours: / Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.” This work, published three years after Hale’s implicit rejection of Eliot, does not suggest hope for a romantic future or a melancholy yearning for a broken past. Rather, “La Figlia che Piange,” offers Eliot’s snapshot of beauty’s ephemeral smile.

In “The Burial of the Dead” Eliot looked back to this rose-colored past, a time when love was a source of fertility and renewal. As proposed by Lyndall Gordon, Hale reappears here as the lustful garden nymph, the hyacinth girl. While Gordon’s interpretation is not directly supported by one of Eliot’s myriad footnotes, the fragmented dialogue between Eliot and the pseudo-Hale suggests that the hyacinth girl is in fact a figure resurrected from the memories of time. Eliot’s demi-goddess, wet hair and arms full, recollects: “You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; / They called me the hyacinth girl.” Here the Hale-as-hyacinth-girl theory is evident from Eliot’s use of past tense and, more notably, Eliot’s return to the love-infused garden imagery presented in “La Figila che Piange.” We have, then, a purple-tinted portrait of Hale, preserved in a

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memorial to love; she materializes from the past, glowing as a symbol of love in its most perfect state.

But where and how does Eliot fit into this recollection? Because this poetic instance is explicitly linked with Eliot’s personal history, it is fair to conclude that Eliot himself is the persona behind the narrative voice. This, accordingly, positions Eliot against a multi-dimensional backdrop constructed of subjective memory and of historic legend. In his reminiscence of Hale, Eliot enters a state of non-being; he cannot speak or see and is “neither / Living nor dead.” He appears trapped between the lines of Greek mythology—specifically, the myth of Hyacinthus. In the myth of Hyacinthus, the sun god Apollo was passionately devoted to the youthful hyacinth boy. Like a committed courtier, Apollo accompanied Hyacinthus on daily excursions, sharing his lyre and entertaining the boy with games and sports. One day Apollo and Hyacinthus jovially applied their strength and speed to a game of quiots. But the jealous Zephyrus (the Western wind) behaved impertinently and caused the discus to strike Hyacinthus dead. From the blood of Hyacinthus’s fatal wound, Zephyrus’s victim was reborn as a beautiful flower, bearing the name of the hyacinth boy. Though the Greeks believed the petals of the hyacinth flower spelled the letters “AI,” a cry for woe, the myth of Hyacinthus, for Eliot, was not a representation of death, trauma, or the consequences of love’s failure. Much like Eliot in “The Burial of the Dead,” the hyacinth boy was momentarily positioned between the living and the dead. Hyacinthus stared agape at Apollo’s fatal discus, “looking into the

34 Ibid.

heart of light, the silence.”36 He reached, notes Calvin Bedient, “the end of desire,” open to “the purely spiritual.”37

In the eyes of Eliot, this abrogation of desire and this detachment from the physical world set the foundation for spiritual consummation. The desires of the body, the forces of the “Unreal”38 world are fetters binding the soul of man. As Eliot later described in his Canterbury-inspired play Murder in the Cathedral (1935), the place of salvation lays:

Where the soul is no longer deceived, for there are no objects, no tones, Where those who were men can no longer turn the mind To distraction, delusion, escape into dream, pretence, No colours, no forms to distract, to divert the soul From seeing itself, foully united forever, nothing with nothing, Not what we call death, but what beyond death is not death.39

Such a perspective is the by-product of Eliot’s intimate interaction with Eastern philosophy. In the fall of 1911, Eliot enrolled as a student of philosophy at Harvard Graduate School. Here he began to devour the teachings of Eastern religion. Within the first two years of his studies, Eliot completed courses in Indic Philology 1A and 1B (elementary Sanskrit), Indic Philology 4 and 5 (Pali, the language of early Buddhist texts), and Indic Philology 9 (Philosophical Sanskrit).40 His was left saturated by the ideas and principles of Buddhist philosophies—including the cornerstone of Buddha’s teachings, the “First Noble Truth.” The “First Noble Truth” defines the world as a place

37 Calvin Bedient, He do the Police in Different Voices (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 33-34.
of suffering. To release the mind and body from such earthly pain and find serenity, one must cultivate *shila* (moral conduct), *samadhi* (mental concentration), and *prajna* (wisdom), seeing through the *veil of illusion* and renouncing selfish desire. Although Eliot never officially affirmed himself as a member of the Buddhist community, his poetry expresses a kinship with Eastern thought. In the aforementioned passage from “The Burial of the Dead,” the meditative trance of Eliot is, if only momentary, the type of epistemic transformation sought by practitioners of Buddhism. Like both the hyacinth boy and Buddha, he peers beyond the realm of desire and overcomes the illusion of existence.

This revelation, crystallized through Eliot’s adaptation of the hyacinth myth, is framed with excerpts from Wagner’s *Tristan*. Lines 31-34 recall *Tristan’s* opening solo:

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

Here a sailor sings an a cappella verse about the heartbreak of love’s transience, contrasted by an eagerness to neglect the past and move forward. He yearns for a future outside of reality, while both craving and despising the amorous sighs of his former lover. Following Eliot’s brief interruption of music with myth, line 42 of *The Waste Land* alludes to a cheerful shepherd’s hopeless proclamation: “Oed’ und leer das Meer.” A superficial reading of Eliot’s text and Wagner’s libretto may assert that human love is futile and only feeds the timeless pain of mankind. True, this passage from “The Burial of the Dead” appears bleak, mirroring the structure of Wagner’s seemingly tragic opera: Act

41 For a more exhaustive study of Eliot’s knowledge of Indian philosophy, see P.S. Sri, *T.S. Eliot, Vedanta and Buddhism* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985).

I, lines 31-34, the sailor sings of the pains and the joys of romance; Act II, lines 35-41, the lovers’ rendezvous is interrupted by the scent of death; and finally, Act III, line 42, the sea, once filled with lustful sighs, is now deserted and empty. We might conclude, then, that romantic love is not possible within the boundaries of The Waste Land or Wagner’s Tristan. This interpretation, however, neglects the subtle presence of meaning beneath Eliot’s written word. First, we must note that the sea, in fact, is not “empty,” as Isolde eventually does emerge from the nothingness, returning to the deathbed of her beloved. And, more importantly, we must recognize that through Hyacinthus’s death—a casualty caused by love—Hyacinthus is reborn as an object of idolized beauty and Buddha-like serenity. With this in mind, we must now ask: What, according to Eliot’s literary cues, is the role of love in Tristan?

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The first traces of Tristan’s philosophical underpinnings appear in an 1854 letter to Franz Liszt:

Since I have never in my life enjoyed the true happiness of love, I intend to erect a further monument to this most beautiful of dreams, a monument in which this love will be properly sated from beginning to end: I have planned in my head a Tristan und Isolde, the simplest but most full-blooded musical conception; with the “black flag” which flutters at the end, I shall then cover myself over, in order—to die.  

As implied by this correspondence with Liszt, Tristan is the product of Wagner’s personal affairs. From 1852-58, Wagner was financially dependent on Otto von Wesendonck, husband of Mathilde Wesendonck. M. Wesendonck and Wagner were close—spiritually, romantically, and artistically. Yet, they were ostensibly never too close, that is, physically close. Wagner’s involvement with and carnally unconsummated

love for M. Wesendonck is arguably the inspiration behind Tristan. As Wagner’s biographical timeline suggests, the climax of M. Wesendonck’s written correspondence to Wagner inspired him to temporarily abandon The Ring and begin work on the Arthurian love story that eventually became his Tristan.

M. Wesendonck, however, was only the muse of the hour. The more prominent catalyst for Wagner’s dramatic rendering of the Tristan legend emerged from another German mind: Arthur Schopenhauer. “I have now become exclusively preoccupied,” wrote Wagner in the same 1854 letter to Liszt, “with a man [Schopenhauer] who—albeit only in the literary form—has entered my lonely life like a gift from heaven.”

Home base for Schopenhauer’s philosophies was manned by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In 1815, only a few years after his first encounter with Kantian philosophies, Schopenhauer admiringly wrote that “Kant’s greatest merit is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself, based on the proof that between things and us there always stands the intellect.” Schopenhauer further philosophized in Book One of The World as Will and Representation about Kant’s distinction of the “noumenal,” the “real” world—or the-thing-in-itself—and the “phenomenal,” the reality of time and space, need and yearning, appearance and experiential phenomenon. With this, Schopenhauer defined man’s world as an illusion of perception and a creation of the self. For both Kant and Schopenhauer, behind this veil of human perception is a definitive, objective reality. But unlike Kant, Schopenhauer believed that man is not hindered by worldly eyesight and claimed that “perception is the first source of all evidence, that immediate or mediate

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44 Ibid.
45 Quoted in Julian Young, Schopenhauer (New York: Routledge, 2005), 4.
reference to this alone is absolute truth.”46 Schopenhauer, thus, acknowledged man’s ability and drive to understand the fixed world beneath the mind’s fog. Yet, Schopenhauer took an antagonistic stance, asserting that this capacity for knowledge, this “thing-in-itself” is tainted by a blind and insatiable force of desire—the Will.

Schopenhauer characterized the individual Will as an “endless striving, eternally becoming flux.”47 It is the infinite echoes of man’s screams in the depth of the night, the raging force of man’s inner being, and the source of man’s everlasting hunger. Mankind, therefore, is trapped in a perpetual state of suffering. In order to fully pacify the Will and escape earthly desire, man must enter “noumenal” reality, finding salvation through death. For Wagner, the “denial of the will to live, is of terrible seriousness, but it is uniquely redeeming . . . . the sincere and heartfelt yearning for death: total unconsciousness, complete annihilation, the end of all dreams—the only redemption!”48

This Schopenhauerian notion, Wagner’s self-prescribed “sedative,” not only allowed Wagner to sleep at night, but also provided the philosophical basis for Tristan. From the lonely sailor’s opening a cappella solo to the final transfiguration of Isolde, the presence of Schopenhauer is all too clear. Tristan and Isolde, lovers trapped in the web of circumstance and aggrieved by the tension of human reality, balance the weight of desire with an obsessive hope for death. In Act I, for example, Tristan and Isolde renounce the value of life and seek atonement in the form of a (pseudo-) fatal draught, the “sole balm for endless grief, oblivion’s kindly drink.”49 Here Wagner clearly personified the death-


47 Ibid., 164.

48 Quoted in Chafe, The Tragic and the Ecstatic, 3-4.
driven philosophies of Schopenhauer. Wagner’s protagonists renounce the phenomenal realm and aspire to awaken from the Schopenhauerian *nightmare* of life.\(^{50}\)

Technically, however, their suicide attempt is a failure. And it is not until Act III that they are released from the fetters of existence. For Tristan, the release is obvious—he dies under the sword of King Marke’s minion Melot. But for Isolde, the release is a metaphysical realization, conditioned by the tragedy of life. Schopenhauer claimed that “at the moment of the tragic catastrophe, we become convinced more clearly than ever that life is a bad dream from which we have to awake.”\(^{51}\) The “tragic catastrophe” of Wagner’s opera is the untimely death of Tristan at the end of Act III. At this moment, Isolde is “convinced” that salvation from the nightmare of life is realized in death. As Isolde watches Tristan “awaken,” she sings of his liberation:

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Gently and quietly
how he smiles,
how sweetly
he opens his eyes –
Do you see it friends?\(^{52}\)
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Interestingly, Isolde not only acknowledges Tristan’s spiritual “pacification of the Will,” but metaphorically correlates it with his physical state. Her words suggest that Tristan experiences both a mental, as well as a bodily alteration—her deceased lover Tristan smiles, shines, and pulsates, unconsciously lost in the melodies of “blissful lament.” Isolde’s capacity to understand Tristan’s death suggests that she has also attained a new


\(^{50}\)“[A]wakening from the dream of life.” In Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 492.

\(^{51}\)Ibid., 433-4.

\(^{52}\)See Appendix B for the complete translation of Isolde’s “Liebestod.”
spiritual self-awareness. Faced with this “tragic catastrophe,” Isolde is now able to transcend desire and deny the Will.

Musically, Isolde’s “Liebestod” solidifies this transfiguration and arguably provides Tristan with its only release from harmonic and, consequently, physical tension. In her “Liebestod,” Isolde floats above the busy murmuring of her comrades, singing with a soft and captivating intensity. She prepares the stage for Wagner’s final significant harmonic shift—a gripping modulation into B major (see Example 1.1). This harmonic shift is more than a commonplace chromatic-median relationship; this final progression out of Ab major to B major is Wagner’s ultimate assertion of the desire motive. The desire motive contains the ascending chromatic notes (G#-A-Bb-B) that open the Prelude. This basic musical unit is a symbol for the root of human existence, the individual Will’s focus. As Wagner states in The Music of the Future, the desire motive is the foundation for his conception of “life and death, the whole meaning and existence of the outer world . . . [and] the inner movements of the soul.” Specifically, in Tristan, the desire motive outlines Isolde’s journey towards consciousness. Isolde enters Tristan as a slave to the “desire of life.” She is ill-fated, destined for misery and attached to her external reality. In her consumption of the supposed “fatal draught,” Isolde compulsively searches for reprieve from suffering and yearning—with little success. In the beginning of the “Liebestod,” Wagner reiterates the nature of her struggle and also harmonically prepares us for the inevitable conclusion of Isolde’s journey. For example, measures 2 and 3 shift to Cb—the enharmonic equivalent of B—and measure 4 continues this sequential drift.

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Example 1.1: Modulation from Ab to B in Isolde’s “Liebestod”
with a brief moment of F#, the dominant of B. Additionally, transposed appearances of
the desire motive (mm. 8-10) drive towards Isolde’s transition into the noumenal realm.\footnote{Also relevant to my discussion is \textit{Meta-Variations} by Benjamin Boretz. In this study, Boretz
considers the relationships between the Prelude as a part and \textit{Tristan} as a whole. Akin with my analysis,
Boretz asserts that “the Prelude’s upper-line Grundgestalt Ab-B may be described as characterizing the
macrospan of the ‘Liebestod.’” Boretz justifies his assertion with a detailed comparison of the trichords and
“chromatic tetrachords” present in both the Prelude and the “Liebestod” and, thus, outlines a network of
melodic parallelisms between the ending and the beginning of \textit{Tristan}. For his complete analysis, see
1: 297-313.}

However, it is not until she completes her ascension to the peak of the desire motive (m. 12) that she can comprehend the resplendence of death’s nothingness. As Eric Chafe explains, once in the key of B, Isolde has come to the “completion of desire’s cycle” and cadences with a “denial of the will to life.”\footnote{For another more thorough and also relevant musical analysis of Isolde’s “Liebestod,” see
Chafe, \textit{The Tragic and the Ecstatic}, 266-284.}

It seems, then, that Wagner concluded \textit{Tristan} with the ideal Schopenhauerian ending. The world of \textit{Tristan} is a place of inextinguishable suffering caused by desire’s insatiable appetite, and Wagner’s protagonists transcend this sorrow-ridden existence through a physical death and a metaphysical transformation. Such events are indisputably consummate with the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Tristan and Isolde, however, do not arrive in Act III as pure symbols of Schopenhauerian idealism. As revealed in Act II, their “path to salvation” is motored by a force that, for Schopenhauer, was “the world’s dearest delusion,” but for Wagner, was the “most beautiful of dreams.”\footnote{Wagner, \textit{Selected Letters}, 323-324.} This paradoxical force, both delusion and dream, is love. In their study \textit{Opera: The Art of Dying}, Linda and Michael Hutcheon articulate the presence of a non-Schopenhauerian, “erotic notion of death” in Wagner’s \textit{Tristan}: “The use of the actual word ‘Liebestod’ . . . presents [Schopenhauer’s] new view . . . . But [Wagner] also contested the philosopher’s
views, specifically those on sexual love in relation to death.” Yet, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* provides a slightly different interpretation of Wagner’s departure from Schopenhauerian thought. Eliot’s work implies that love itself cannot pacify the Will but rather, indicates that love is the guiding agent for man’s redemption found in death.

In “The Burial of the Dead,” Eliot’s variation on the hyacinth myth, wedged between the sailor’s song (Act I) and the shepherd’s call (Act III), mirrors Act II of *Tristan*. As discussed, Eliot’s version of Hyacinthus’s tale expresses a moment of spiritual salvation where there are “no colours, no forms to distract, to divert the soul.”

In Act II of *Tristan*, the lovers experience a similar state of non-being. Tristan and Isolde secretly meet in a garden alongside Isolde’s chamber. Hidden by the darkness of night, fleeing from the material world, they sing of their “supreme joy!”, their “entrancing bliss!”, and their “rapture of the soul!” Though Wagner himself described this intoxicating rendezvous as the “outpouring of long repressed emotion” and as a metaphor for a “beautiful frenzy of caresses,” this encounter ultimately depicts a realm beyond erotic desire—a realm beyond the forces of the individual Will.

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58 Ibid., 61.


In constructing his unique world, Wagner set up a basic metaphorical dichotomy: day, or the phenomenal, is juxtaposed with night, the noumenal. The lovers begin their dialogue by denouncing the principality of day. “O vain slave of day!” proclaims an enraptured Isolde, “how I, loving, had to suffer through you . . . entangled in glittering toils of day’s false glare.” Once the pangs of day (love’s “foe” and life’s “deception”) dissolve in the backdrop, Tristan and Isolde become god and goddess of the night. The night, the “glorious, exalted night,” frees the pair from the delusion of daytime. The concept of an individual “you” and “I,” of a separate “Tristan” and “Isolde” is lost to the uniting power of night or, synonymously, the noumenal state of death. “Namelessly,” the lovers “embrac[e] in love, given entirely to each other!” The concept of the individual Will is sacrificed to the glory of eternal nothingness, where names and desires are nonexistent.

Like Eliot in the hyacinth myth, Tristan and Isolde are victorious over the “veil of illusion.” The impetus behind these victories, although contradictory to the fundamental premises of both Buddhism and Schopenhauerian philosophy, is the force of romantic love. For Eliot, his moment of Nirvana could only be realized in the presence of his beloved—the hyacinth girl, or Emily Hale. Love, as he later defined in “Burnt Norton” (1936), No. 1 of his *Four Quartets*, is the catalyst for the experiences that transcend the framework of existence:

Love is itself unmoving,  
Only the cause and end of movement,  
Timeless and undesiring,  
Except in the aspect of time  
Caught in the form of limitation  
Between un-being and being. \(^{61}\)

In Eliot’s hyacinth myth, love is just that—the key variable in the space between un-being and being, where one is “neither / Living nor dead.” Accordingly, the garden scene in *The Waste Land* is a subtle recreation of the garden scene in *Tristan*. In both worlds, a mortal pair, wide-eyed servants to the power of love, finds refuge from the earthly realm of deception and suffering. And it is this momentary refuge that begins the eternal quest towards Nirvana and the “pacification of the Will.”

Wagner himself proclaimed that love is an element essential in the journey to redemption. In a 1959 letter to M. Wesendonck, Wagner addresses the philosophical fabric woven into the lover’s rendezvous:

> My greatest masterpiece in the art of the most delicate and gradual transition is without doubt the great scene in the second act of *Tristan and Isolde*. The opening of this scene presents a life overflowing with all the most violent emotions—its ending the most solemn and heartfelt longing for death. These are the pillars: and now you see, child, how I have joined these pillars together, and how the one of them leads over into the other.62

> “The one of them” he speaks of is love, and “the other” is the conscious longing to return to a noumenal state of being. Love, therefore, *leads* to salvation—a salvation that exists only in the death.

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If we attempt to identify a fundamental polarity between Wagner the Romantic Titan and Eliot the patriarch of Modernism, it would be the presence, or lack thereof, of individual moral certainty. Wagner, the elder of the two, toted his artistic and moral value systems around with the confidence of an overzealous politician. Beginning in his youth, Wagner proudly lost himself in the frenzy of the theatrical, musical, and literary arts. It was not long before Wagner sought to create images of utopia through art, eventually

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coming to believe that his work could redeem the human race. Eliot, unlike Wagner, was not a poetic superhero concerned with the deliverance of mankind. From his birth into a southern Unitarian family until 1922, with the publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot waded through the squalor of a broken marriage, the loss of Verdenal, and the consequences of a world at war, while, at the same time, gorged on the beauty of his poetic gifts and intellectual curiosity. It is no wonder, then, that *The Waste Land*, a self-titled conglomeration of “personal grumblings,” ends on a deceptive cadence.

The poet and the composer do, however, share an almost universal commonality—the encounter with unconsummated love’s wicked stare. For Eliot, it was Emily Hale; for Wagner, it was Mathilde Wesendonck. As mentioned earlier, in 1914, the year Eliot began work on *The Waste Land*, Hale implicitly rejected Eliot’s proposition of life-long love; in 1858, the year Wagner poured himself into *Tristan*, his “pure” relationship with M. Wesendonck reached a bittersweet climax. Likewise, in *Tristan* and “The Burial of the Dead,” erotic love is not fully realized: the “hyacinth boy” feels love only in the framework of a fading memory, while Tristan and Isolde unwillingly sacrifice their love to the joyless light of day. Such unsated physical angst, however, does not constitute a denunciation of love’s power. As discussed, love is the agent that carries man outside the pains of the earthly realm. And Wagner and Eliot, even as the victims of unconsummated love, both chose to fashion a wreath of laurels for the crown of Eros.

Although in *Tristan* and “The Burial of the Dead” the conception of love glows in the limelight of spiritual victory, it must be reiterated that love is not the representation of

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paradise; it is merely the provider, the linking “pillar,”\(^{64}\) the “cause and end of movement.”\(^{65}\) This is clear from the beginning of the opera. I return now to the opening scene of *Tristan*, in which a sailor abandons his lover for the freedom offered by an unimposing sea. His solo is not so much a simple a cappella song, but a melancholy call to the morning sky. The sailor seems subconsciously aware that his negation of love will only magnify the pangs of existence. His first words reveal such intuition: “Westward strays the eye, eastward flies our ship.” The sun, as any seaman would know, rises in the east and sets in the west. Powered by the breath of his lover’s sighs, his ship challenges the desires of the mind’s eye, sailing away from the sunset, the bringer of night, and into to sunrise, the bringer of day. Here Wagner set up a subtle prelude to the opera’s underlying philosophy, as presented in Act II. The concept of night and day establishes a metaphorical counterpoint—the symbol of life’s deception is contrasted with the idealized beauty of death. Akin to *Tristan’s* love scene, the sailor quietly suggests that it is not the absence of love that generates torment; rather, it is the return to the sunrise, life’s deceit, and the phenomenal realm that prevents man’s salvation.

Eliot was discerning when, in “The Burial of the Dead,” he positioned the sailor’s song directly before Eliot’s encounter with the hyacinth girl. In this garden scene, a poetic mirror of Act II, Eliot reminded his and Wagner’s audience of the poignant reality of the erotic in *Tristan*. Romantic love is not—as Schopenhauerian interpretative lenses indicate—a source of earthly torment, but rather is a golden-winged chariot, flying into death’s beloved sunset. And Eliot, if even for only a fleeting moment, also allowed

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\(^{64}\) Wagner, *Selected Letters*, 475.

\(^{65}\) Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 122
himself to pause in Act II, “looking into the heart of light,” face-to-face with desire’s end, reborn as a flower of the gods.
Chapter 2

The Nymphs Depart and the Numbskull Weeps

According to Germanic legend, preternatural creatures—known as “Nickers” (nixies), “Wassermädchen” (water-maidens), or, more generically, “Elves”—inhabited the waters of brooks, streams, and lakes (see Figure 2.1). These water sprites were half-woman, half-fish; and, yet, they resembled the consummation of human female beauty. Their yellow hair and tanned skin glistened in the sun, as they sang mesmerizing a cappella melodies to wary sailors. Only men could see the water-maidens’ beauty, and, consequently, only men could fall under their spell. This spell, a blend of mystifying music and unworldly, physical splendor, was often fatal. Victims of a nixie’s enchantment lost control of reason and were inflicted with serious pain or were even drowned.

The notion of dangerous, water-bound women is not limited to ancient Teutonic myth. Particularly, the water-nymph motive pervades the literature of early nineteenth-century poets, authors, and dramatists—most notably, Heinrich Heine’s “Lorelei” (1824) and Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s *Undine* (1811). Likewise, in the Ring cycle, Wagner reintroduces the mythological water-sprite as the Rhinemaiden. The members of his deadly trio, Flosshilde, Wellgunde, and Woglinde, act as the immortal guardians of the Rhine’s sacred gold and appear as irresistible, sexual objects. Reminiscent of the

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Figure 2.1: Depiction of the Rhinemaidens by English artist and book illustrator Arthur Rackman⁶⁸

water-maidens of Germanic folklore, their touch is lethal and directed exclusively at men. Specifically, Hagen, Alberich, and Siegfried are the victims of the Rhinemaidens’ sinister sexuality. In *Das Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner’s “faithless brood of nixies” degrades Alberich and Siegfried and, at the cycle’s end, drags Hagen into the depths of the Rhine.

Like his Romantic predecessors, Eliot was attracted to the perverse elements of water-nymphine nature. Eliot, however, did not recycle generic images of the mythological Siren, but rather specifically revived and reshaped Wagner’s Rhinemaidens. Part III of *The Waste Land*, “The Fire Sermon,” contains a clearly-defined allusion to Act III, scene one of *Götterdämmerung*—that is, the Rhinemaidens’ luckless encounter with Siegfried. This allusion presents Wagner’s Rhinemaidens in the guise of Eliot’s Thames-daughters and, thus, presents a trio of Sirens transplanted from nineteenth-century Germany to twentieth-century England. Although historically displaced, the Rhinemaidens retain their threatening persona and appear in Eliot’s world as omnipotent, but criminal-minded prima donas. They tempt the senses and gawk at broken marriage vows; they laughingly recap carnal horrors and sing to the sensual; they live in the present and grin at man’s broken past. They are, in essence, Wagner’s adaptation of Teutonic myth on steroids.

In the following discussion, I explore Eliot’s reconstruction of the Rhinemaidens. Specifically, my study will examine the “Song” of the Thames-daughters, a multi-stanza interlude, performed by the Eliotic conception of the Rhinemaidens at the end of “The Fire Sermon.” This verse, I argue, draws attention to the emotional insensitivity and

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carnal inaccessibility of Wagner’s Rhinemaidens, presenting them as threats to masculine welfare. I will, then, briefly consider Eliot’s representation of the Rhinemaidens in contrast to Wagner’s standard for heroic female conduct. Here I will particularly focus on Brünnhilde, the ideal Wagnerian heroine and, in a sense, the antithesis of the Rhinemaidens. It would be unfair, however, to claim that Eliot monochromatically paints the Rhinemaidens as deplorable monsters or anti-heroes. Thus, by way of conclusion, I will consider the dramatic necessity for Wagner’s cackling water nymphs in both Götterdämmerung and “The Fire Sermon.”

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Eliot’s relationship with the garden nymph Emily Hale was his first, but not last encounter with love and the female gender. In 1914, working towards a doctorate in philosophy, Eliot traveled over the big pond to complete his academic studies at Oxford. He did not, however, devote himself entirely to intellectual pursuits. Women were on the mind—in particular, the enchanting Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Haigh-Wood was not the typical mother-dominated, domestically-bound Londoner. Born into a family of artists, Haigh-Wood lived on the liberal outskirts of society, smoking, drinking, and reveling in the rhetoric of vulgarity. The coy American Eliot was taken by this spontaneous and mysterious English woman. They met on 24 April 1915 and were married at the Hampstead Registry Office on 26 June 1915, without the consent of family or friends—save the encouraging and career-minded Ezra Pound.⁷⁰ Because of impulsive marital vows, their marriage was destined for misfortune from the onset. Bertrand Russell the

politically- and philosophically-charged British writer, mathematician, and the Eliots’ supposed family friend\textsuperscript{71} reported the disastrous nascent stages of the marriage: “It seems their sort of pseudo-honeymoon . . . is being a ghastly failure. She is quite tired of him . . . I found a desperate letter from her, in the lowest depths of despair and not far removed from suicide.”\textsuperscript{72} Coincidentally, only months into the marriage, Haigh-Wood began a long-term sexual affair with Russell.

Haigh-Wood, however, was not alone in the fall towards the “depths of despair.” Eliot, too, was tortured by the nature of his relationship with his impetuous, young bride. Although Eliot wrote to his father that “[she] has everything to give,”\textsuperscript{73} there is little doubt that Eliot’s physical intimacy with Haigh-Wood was tainted with blood. Along with numerous other ailments, such as tuberculosis and violent mood swings, Haigh-Wood suffered from an embarrassingly unpredictable and frequent menstrual cycle. The pairing of Eliot’s particularly over-sensitive nature with Haigh-Wood’s consistent health complications resulted in a marriage stunted by sexual inhibitions. Like much of his early work, Eliot’s “Ode” (1918) alludes to such sex-related tribulations. “Ode” is an ironic lyric poem that describes a disastrous erotic encounter and, specifically, references Eliot’s marriage bed: “Tortured. / When the bridegroom smoothed his hair / There was

\textsuperscript{71} In spring of 1914, Russell taught a post-graduate seminar in philosophy at Harvard. Eliot was enrolled and impressed his professor with his infrequent and terse, but insightful comments. Later that year, while in London, Eliot officially befriended Russell. Their relationship developed quickly, with Russell acting as both a companion and a mentor. Vivienne also fell under Russell’s fatherly charm. In 1915, she began acting as his research assistant and, later, during Eliot’s six-week American sojourn, agreed to be placed under Russell’s guardianship. For more information on Russell’s relationship with the Eliots, see Carole Seymour-Jones, Painted Shadow (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 93-122.

\textsuperscript{72} Quoted in Ray Monk, Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude (London: J. Cape, 1996), 440.

\textsuperscript{73} Gordon, T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life, 123.
blood upon the bed.” The allusion is obvious; Eliot, the constrained, well-groomed newly-wed, hopelessly stares, tormented by his foreseeable future.

Between blood on the bed sheets and the looming reality of Haigh-Wood’s adulterous and suicidal condition, Eliot was fated for a mental-health catastrophe. In October of 1921, Eliot was diagnosed with “psychological troubles” and sought medical help, temporarily sojourning (in almost total isolation) at the Albemarle Hotel, Cliftonville, Margate. Here he composed a draft of “The Fire Sermon.” With regard to Eliot’s condition, it is hardly surprising that “The Fire Sermon” opens with scenes of desolation. As a harsh winter encroaches, a soft-spoken poet provides a panoramic view of his now abandoned “Sweet Thames”:

. . . The nymphae are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphae are departed.

Eliot’s verse ironically alludes to Edmund Spenser’s “Prothalamion”—a sixteenth-century “spousal verse,” composed for the double marriage of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset to Henry Gilford and William Peter. The poetic persona of “Prothalamion” is a quiet, but remorseful outsider. With joy tempered by melancholy, Spenser’s protagonist


76 The bulk of Eliot’s work at Margate is primarily concerned with the closing stanzas of “The Fire Sermon.” This is significant, as these lines include the “Song” of the Thames-daughters. For a detailed breakdown of Eliot’s compositional timeline, see Lawrence Rainely, Revisiting “The Waste Land” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 34-36.

describes a mythological bridal procession of two swans accompanied by a “flock of nymphs.”

Eliot, however, twists this scene of matrimonial bliss into a grim, post-marital desert. Souvenirs of sensuality, of physical frivolity, and of lust are faded memories or, quite possibly, were never even present. There are no testimonies of summer nights and, thus, no reason to believe that Spencer’s world ever existed. Because his descriptions of environmental, sexual, and emotional desolation are enclosed with the phrase “the nymphs are departed,” Eliot’s speaker very subtly points an accusatory finger at the abandoning nymphs. As later sections of “The Fire Sermon” will suggest, this accusation extends to women in general, including, of course, his reckless wife Vivienne Eliot. In particular, this negative association of women and depravity is clearly articulated when Eliot’s nymphs unexpectedly return as the Thames-daughters—Wagner’s Rhinemaidens in disguise.

Upon their return, Eliot’s nymphs, now the Rhinemaidens, sing a long and complex song. The formal design and “orchestration” of this musical interlude are noticeably ambiguous, prompting numerous scholars to grapple with its structure and meaning. Calvin Bedient, for instance, understands the Rhinemaidens’ song as a binary form: an “A” section composed of a trio in “brisk, staccato measure” and a “B” section composed of three “listless, lonely” solos. Cleanth Brooks, however, interprets their


79 In his footnotes, Eliot suggests that the Thames-daughters are, in fact, a literal reincarnation of the Rhinemaidens, and numerous scholars, such as Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley, synonymously refer to the Thames-daughters as the Rhinemaidens. For this reason, in my analysis of “The Fire Sermon,” I will refer to Eliot’s Thames-daughters as “the Rhinemaidens.”

80 Calvin Bedient, He Do the Police in Different Voices (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 144.
song as a three-part formal design, with each large section (lines 266-278; lines 279-291; lines 292-306) functioning as a unique solo number. Although Brooks’ argument thoroughly considers the distinct thematic nature of the three identified passages, he fails to address the syntactical structure and poetic design of the Rhinemaidens’ song. Bedient’s interpretation, however, is primarily focused on Eliot’s word play, rhythm and meter, and the connotative or intuitive “feeling” of the text. He explores—not just the meaning of Eliot’s text—but the musicality of Eliot’s poetry. Thus, for the purposes of the following discussion, I will take my cues from Bedient and consider the Rhinemaidens’ song as a binary-from composition. The “A” section (lines 266-291) features a rhythmic trio, critiquing the Thames and its inhabitants, while the “B” section (lines 292-306) presents each Rhinemaiden uniquely clad in the garb of three past and present Londoners.

The “A” section illustrates images of London’s beloved, but now polluted river. The Thames is tainted by the dregs of oil and tar, and floating debris and barges ornament the route along England’s semi-Island, the Isle of the Dogs. As the Rhinemaidens’ verse flows towards Greenwich—the birthplace of Queen Elizabeth—Elizabeth and Leicester appear with “beating oars.” This floating memory of the Elizabethan Era serves two purposes: to highlight the notorious affair between the “Virgin Queen” and the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley, and to subtly recall the wedding procession of Spenser’s

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82 See footnote no. 89.


84 In the immediate aftermath of King Henry VIII’s death, Robert Dudley—the King’s short-term, but close companion—was implicitly appointed to temporarily manage monarchical affairs as Edward
“Prothalamion.” But, unlike Spenser’s procession, the Rhinemaidens’ song is not embellished with descriptions of blissful nymphs and swans; rather, the Rhinemaidens sing of dirty shorelines and sexual scandal. The allusion to Elizabeth and the Earl is therefore a degrading one. They are not a happily married couple, blissfully taking in a Prothalamion-inspired environment, but are filth, growing beneath the surface of the Spenser-centric sixteenth century. Sixteenth-century society, Marjorie Swann claims, upheld a belief that “God had created the female sex to allow men to reproduce . . . neither men nor women were supposed to pursue sexual gratification for its own sake.”

Elizabeth, however, transcended this patriarchal standard, and pursued romance outside of marriage. Eliot, likely, did not comply with either the sixteenth-century norm or the Elizabethan exception. In *The Waste Land*, however, Eliot chooses to belittle the Elizabethan lifestyle. With the allusion to Elizabeth’s disreputable relationship with Dudley, Eliot’s Rhinemaidens suggest that the present world (Eliot’s tarnished world) is governed by the Elizabethan law of love for love’s sake, or—more bluntly—sex for sex’s sake.

This conception of sex, as being autonomous from reproductive function or emotion, is more cleverly expressed in the sensual nature of Eliot’s text—in which sensuality is not merely seen, but heard. Eliot infuses his verse with a Wagnerian

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succeeded the throne. Dudley, thus, quickly rose to the upper echelons of the royal fraternity, and when Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558, Dudley was appointed as Master of the Horse. By 1559, Dudley, despite his dying wife, was considered as a candidate for Elizabeth’s hand, and in 1561 reports of their amorous encounters began to emerge. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot exaggerates the depravity of their relationship. Dudley was not a mere sex object, but, according to Sarah Gristwood, was a man who “had loved her, advised her, understood her, sat by her bed in sickness and represented her on state occasions.” For more information on Dudley and Elizabeth, see Gristwood, *Elizabeth and Leicester* (New York: Viking, 2007).

musicality. In his study *Wagner, The King, and The Waste Land*, Herbert Knust argues that “Eliot quite consciously refers back to Wagner’s language . . . mak[ing] use of Wagnerian rhythm and rhyme effects.” Knust’s observation is an astute one. Consider, for instance, lines 266-272 of *The Waste Land* in comparison with the opening of Act III from *Götterdämmerung*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The river sweats</th>
<th>Frau Sonne</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oil and tar</td>
<td>sendet lichte Strahlen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The barges drift</td>
<td>Nacht liegt in der Tiefe;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With the turning tide</td>
<td>Einst war sie hell,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red sails</td>
<td>da heil und hehr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide</td>
<td>des Vaters Gold noch in ihr glänzte!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.</td>
<td>Rheingold!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Klares Gold!<em><strong>88</strong></em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both texts, the sonic quality of individual words, such as “Frau Sonne” or “Wide,” trumps context in favor of sensuality. The paradoxical elongation of “Wide,” for example, contradicts the word’s rhetorical meaning, while providing oral and aural sensations. Similarly, the alliteration in “sie hell/da heil und hehr” primarily highlights the physicality of pronouncing or hearing the Rhinemaidens’ contemplation of the pre-Alberich Rhine. True, both verses reflect upon the sorry physical and metaphysical state of a lackluster river; the sensual experience, however, is an essential component to—if not ultimately more significant than—the textual meaning.

In an essay about the English poet and critic Matthew Arnold, Eliot himself describes this relationship. His assessment of Arnold considers Arnold’s lack of “sensitiv[ity] to the musical qualities of verse,” an awareness Eliot defines as the

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“auditory imagination.” The “auditory imagination,” Eliot explains, “is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below conscious levels of thought and feeling . . . sinking to the most primitive and forgotten . . . . It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings.” Unlike Arnold, Eliot was blessed with such musico-poetic intuition. This “feeling” for sound is undoubtedly present in the “A” section of the Rhinemaidens’ song and helps, ultimately, to cultivate a profoundly unconscious sensory experience—an experience somewhat similar to hearing Wagner’s libretto or to narrating Elizabeth’s acts of sexual deviance.

The “A” section, moreover, depicts the Rhinemaidens as powerful and omnipotent beings. As Eliot indicates, they clearly understand the sordid state of the Thames and, thus, use sensual music to render sensual debasement. Likewise, the “A” section of the Rhinemaidens’s song solidifies Eliot’s unspoken moral conclusion: because love and marriage are not synonymous, an initially love-less marriage cannot inspire love—or even lust—but rather, creates physical trash and spiritual emptiness. Yet while the Rhinemaidens sing of a broken world with lucid understanding, they do not offer sympathy or advice, but continue to splash playfully along the slimy banks of Eliot’s Thames. Their callousness is especially evident in the “B” section. Here the Rhinemaidens mockingly imitate three heart-trodden members of London society. The first of these musical gestures references, once again, Elizabeth’s sexual lifestyle. But now Eliot’s jeering Rhinemaiden removes Elizabeth from royalty and depicts the Queen as a middle-class woman from Highbury:

‘Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees

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Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe."\(^{90}\)

The mentioned incident at Richmond and Kew—favorite venues of Elizabeth and Leicester—is rather unsettling. The allusion to sexual intercourse is not erotically enticing or even pleasant; the Elizabethan stand-in, rather, is uncomfortably “undone” in a constricting space and position. The sequence of happenings, however, is presented matter-of-factly, almost scientifically, as though the speaker is constructing a recipe or lab report. Similarly, the second Rhinemaiden parodies a woman faced with empty promises in the immediate aftermath of a lust-centric “event”:

‘. . . After the event
He wept. He promised a “new start.”
I made no comment. What should I resent?’\(^{91}\)

Again, woman is “undone” in a state of indifference, but now a man weeps, while the woman (still in his presence) remains stoically detached. Finally, the third Rhinemaiden references Eliot’s own reality at Margate and his attempts to connect “Nothing with nothing”—that is, his attempts to write a draft of *The Waste Land*:

‘On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.’\(^{92}\)

The grime on Eliot’s hands is a product of two possible sources: the labor of writing or the wedding bed of his broken marriage. The latter possibility is consistent with the material of the preceding stanzas, in which the Rhinemaidens parody a victim of shallow


\(^{91}\) Ibid., 41.

\(^{92}\) Ibid.
sexual acts. Eliot’s “dirty hands,” thus, more likely relate to empty sex within an empty marriage, recalling, once again, Haigh-Wood.

Most significantly, these acts are characterized by emotional apathy and disinterest. The individuals here are the antithesis of Eliot’s Hyacinth girl and Wagner’s Isolde. They—the “undone” Elizabeth, the un-resentful bedmate, and the “dirty’ spouse—fail to provide a transcendental link into the noumenal realm and, consequently, fail to metaphysically redeem the male gender. In his final statements about “The Fire Sermon,” Bedient identifies this feminine disappointment:

First doing women who are all nature [i.e. the Hyacinth girl], the protagonist then does women who have lost all “natural” feeling. He thereby suggests that women no longer serve men as a mythic bridge to nature . . . [in women] the senses have fallen into ashes, the flame of eroticism having died.\(^\text{93}\)

This conclusion is compatible with traditional readings of “The Fire Sermon” that claim love is generally absent in Eliot’s waste land. In the place of love (the emotional side of sex) Eliot situates lust (the purely biological side of sex). The reason for this repositioning is not difficult to comprehend. As Eliot’s verse suggests, his scenes of moral depravity are consequential to woman’s inability to service the carnal, emotional, and meta-physical needs of man. Thus, Eliot identifies a guilty party: woman.

But why did Eliot evoke the Rhinemaidens as the mouthpiece for the denouncement of the female gender? Like the London women, Eliot’s verse suggests that the Rhinemaidens are also spiritual failures—not because of their emotional barrenness, but because of two other salient qualities: (1) their lack of sympathy and (2) their infinite, but unattainable sexual allure. Not surprisingly, Eliot’s characterization of the

\(^{93}\text{Bedient, He Do the Police in Different Voices, 152.}\)
Rhinemaidens is consistent with Wagner’s libretto and the opening dramatic action from Act III of *Götterdämmerung*. This scene—launching the final act of the Ring cycle—begins with Wagner’s alluring mistresses of the Rhine. Much like the song in “The Fire Sermon,” the Rhinemaidens’ musical routine in *Götterdämmerung* mourns the loss of a once gilded shoreline. Interrupting their pseudo lamentation, a male interloper, the brainwashed Siegfried, fool turned hero, appears. Siegfried, like the miserable Londoners in “The Fire Sermon,” becomes an object of ridicule in the presence of the Rhinemaidens. They mock his marriage, exaggerate his frugality, and jovially reveal his hopeless destiny. The closing stanza synthesizes their statements of degradation:

Come sisters,
Fly from this numbskull!
He fancies himself
So strong and so wise,
But he’s fettered and utterly blind!95

Akin to Eliot’s Rhinemaidens, Wagner’s Rhinemaidens do not pity the ill-fated male protagonist, but taunt him with their disturbing prophesy. Likewise, for Siegfried and for Eliot, they ignore an opportunity to offer redemption—or to even dry the tears of weeping man. They know all and see all, but do not care at all. Psychiatrist and Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen perfectly describes the Rhinemaiden phenomenon: “[a Rhinemaiden is] without compassion for unrequited love, hurt, anger, and pathetic or

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94 It is worth noting that the Rhinemaidens degrade Siegfried’s relationship with Gutrune—a phony marriage, performed for career-advancing reasons, rather than authentic love-based desires. In this relationship, Eliot possibly saw his own image.

desperate measures . . . To be otherwise requires empathy and understanding, which she has not developed.”

While Wagner’s Rhinemaidens are emotionally-challenged sub-humans, The Waste Land spotlights their incongruous superhuman trait: supreme female sexuality. As discussed, the “A” section of their verse is infused with an aural and oral sensuality that parallels the physical squalor within “The Fire Sermon.” This sensuality reveals not only the condition of Eliot’s Thames, but also the carnal appeal of Wagner’s Rhinemaidens. Consider, for example, the closing stanza of the “A” section. The Rhinemaidens set their melody with motion-oriented words: “brisk swell,” “rippled,” “southwest wind,” and “carried.” They describe an unsettled scene where they can dance wantonly, flaunting their femininity. And, yet, these water nymphs are barely tangible; their physical forms and actions are indefinite and their only direct exclamations are merely colorful vocalize: “Weialala leia.” This poetic intangibility is aligned with the Rhinemaidens’ carnal inaccessibility. As the source material for Der Ring (Teutonic myth) reveals, these water-sprites are determinately unattainable, dragging any sexually-tempted man down to a watery grave. This fatal attractiveness is a trait that Wagner dramatically exploited and that Eliot sought to highlight.

It is hardly shocking, however, that “The Fire Sermon” depicts Wagner’s Rhinemaidens as threats to man’s welfare. Along with The Waste Land, the menacing mermaid motive appears in other poetic works by Eliot. For example, in his 1917 poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot describes Prufrock, a socially-puzzled individual both alienated from and uncomfortably integrated into bourgeois society. As

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Rachel Potter argues, women are the cause of Prufrock’s struggle: “Eliot configures alienation as a gendered issue: it is women who fix Prufrock in formulated phrases, whose sensual perfume makes him digress.” Potter’s observation is evident from the opening to the closing stanzas of Eliot’s poem. “The Love Song” begins with images of lower-class, heteronormative romance—including “one-night cheap hotels” and “sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells”—and ends with a cameo appearance of the infamous water-nixies:

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding on the waves

... 

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

This verse contains two striking moments: the mermaids’ disinterest in Prufrock and his (as well as mankind’s) final watery demise. The mermaids first ignore man entirely, mockingly dancing on the waves, but soon become a fatal attraction to the conscious observer. Like the Rhinemaidens in The Waste Land and Götterdämmerung, the mermaids of Prufrock’s world are heinously uncompassionate and, ultimately, only offer death to men who “linger” too closely and too carelessly.

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We have, then, a clear depiction of the women from “The Fire Sermon,” in general, and the Eliotic conception of the Rhinemaidens, in particular. But how does Eliot’s reading of the Rhinemaidens fit into the larger context of *Götterdämmerung*? How do Eliot’s *femmes fatales* compare with the quintessential Wagnerian heroine? The basic, nearly clichéd understanding of the Wagnerian heroine is widely-understood; Wagner’s operatic heroines reflect “the master’s” idealized taste in women: women willing to redeem a man and/or mankind in an act of self-renunciation. In a letter to Franz Liszt, referencing Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner plainly articulates his conception of the ideal woman:

> The love of a tender woman has made me happy; she dared to throw herself into a sea of suffering and agony so that she should be able to say to me “I love you!” No one who does not know all her tenderness can judge how much she had to suffer. We were spared nothing—but as a consequence I am redeemed.\(^9\)

Many of Wagner’s heroines perform such “tender,” sacrificial acts and provide man with an outlet for salvation. Consider, more specifically, the tragic heroine of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde. Beginning with Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde appears as a selfless and sexually-intoxicated being. She is accompanied by the new and improved Siegfried who—after the trials of *Siegfried*—is now decidedly heroic and knowledgeable of love’s blissful power. His transformation is, in part, a product of Brünnhilde’s actions. She articulates this in their opening dialogue:

> I have given you [Siegfried] my wisdom from the gods,
> . . . yet you have robbed my strength,
> my maidenly might.

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Now it is gone,  
and I live to serve you.  

As she describes her happy sacrifice, it is evident that her love for Siegfried is emotionally deep as well as indispensable to her own well-being. She lives to serve, and her sense of self and happiness are purely dependent on Siegfried’s welfare and the realization of his true heroic being. Like in Wagner’s Tristan and Eliot’s “The Burial of the Dead,”101 this co-dependence is the dramatic denial of individuation, when “I” and “you” become one. Brünnhilde’s dedication to this state of being proves to be incorruptible; she possesses an inner strength that allows her to remain compassionate, even when Siegfried betrays her. Her ultimate love-guided death confirms this god-like potency. When Brünnhilde plunges into Siegfried’s flaming funeral pyre, she transcends earthy politics and exhibits a concentration of humanitarian altruism, distilled from erotic desire.

The Rhinemaidens, as “The Fire Sermon” presents them, are Brünnhilde’s wickedly-polarized counterparts. From the onset of the Ring cycle, the Rhinemaidens emerge as inadequate beings. They fail on two accounts: to physically or spiritually pacify the groping Alberich and to attentively guard the Rhine gold. These lapses are repeated in Act III of Götterdämmerung with Brünnhilde’s beloved Siegfried. As discussed, the Rhinemaidens mock and curse the fated hero in his weakest moment. They use their sexually-charged personalities to create an irresolvable tension and mercilessly test the fidelity of this misguided “numbskull.” These shortcomings and this cruelty position the Rhinemaidens in direct opposition to Brünnhilde. When the Rhinemaidens

100 Wagner, Götterdämmerung, trans. Stewart Rob, 3.

101 Please see chapter one: “Hyacinths Grow in Isolde’s Garden.”
jeer, Brünnhilde loves; when the Rhinemaidens reject, Brünnhilde accepts; and when the Rhinemaidens fail, Brünnhilde redeems. Yet, also unlike Brünnhilde, the Rhinemaidens are not gods or demigods—they are, rather, symbols of the natural world. If they sacrifice themselves à la Brünnhilde, then they fail in another sense: to assure the restoration of the Rhine to its primordial state. Thus, while the Rhinemaidens are undesirable wicked water nymphs, they are, nonetheless, necessary to the world’s natural order.

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In “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot presents a realm deprived of human emotion, where women perform mechanized acts of sex and men cry by the bedside. These “unnatural” women cannot help man transcend a spiritually-barren landscape, but can merely offer a momentary physical release. Amidst this squalor and depravity, this blankness and emptiness, the Rhinemaidens cackle. Their sensual melodies both emulate and mock the sexually mislead and the emotionally disadvantaged. But, although they are nuisances and spiritual failures (much like Eliot’s downtrodden Londoners) the Rhinemaidens’ presence is crucial. In the world of Götterdämmerung—where love, power, and greed are in a symbiotic relationship—and along the shoreline of “The Fire Sermon”—where lust, love, and marriage are easily confused—at least one constant variable is requisite for the preservation of man’s continued existence. As symbols of the natural world, the Rhinemaidens provide this stability.

Wagner himself credited the Rhinemaidens with some degree of admiration. In Cosima Wagner’s final diary entry, she recollects Wagner’s thoughts before his last night

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102 In the following chapter, I will further explore the idea of renewal and redemption at the end of Götterdämmerung.

103 Bedient, He Do the Police in Different Voices, 152.
of mortal slumber: “He goes to the piano, plays the mournful theme ‘Rheingold, Rheingold’ . . . . And as he is lying in bed, he says: ‘I feel loving toward them, these subservient creatures of the deep, with all their yearning.’”

These creatures of the water-world, like nature itself, are attractive and dangerous, alluring and deadly. But despite their contradictory essence, the Rhinemaidens’ “yearning,” their sexual unrest, and their immortality assures the possibility for a rebirth of “Prothalamion,” for dried tears, and for uninhibited laughter.

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In mid-July of 1911, Eliot’s close friend and short-term Parisian flat-mate, Jean Verdenal wrote to Eliot: “Try, if possible, to hear something by Wagner in Munich. I went the other day to the Götterdämmerung, conducted by Nikisch; the end must be one of the highest points ever reached by man.” When or how Eliot initially reacted to Verdenal’s recommendation is unknown. Eliot may have sighed with disinterest; he may have smirked with mockery—remembering his 1909 encounter with Tristan und Isolde; or, as John T. Mayer argues, he may have begun to compose his homage to Verdenal “to whom he owed his introduction to the riches of Wagner’s world.” In any case, as The Waste Land reveals, Eliot was eventually moved (or was at least intrigued) by the final scenes of Götterdämmerung.

In the coda section of “The Fire Sermon” and in part IV of The Waste Land, “Death by Water,” Eliot presents a dense fabric of symbolic parallelisms between his more clearly-articulated literary allusions and the concluding action of the Ring cycle. These dramatic parallels, however, are implicit and, thus, are also intimidatingly complex. The result of contemplating, of interpreting this analytic enormity cannot yield a truth greater than the implied parallelism itself. The interpretation merely brings the

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107 Eliot did not include a footnote—as he did with his other allusions—linking the finale of Götterdämmerung to “The Fire Sermon” or “Death by Water.” However, with a close reading of “Death by Water,” the allusion to Wagnerian material becomes unmistakably present.
reader back to where he started, back to his object of contemplation. This cyclical process of analysis is defined by Eliot scholars Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley as a “hermeneutical loop”:

When a text is decentered through the assignment of meaning . . . the text is pushed aside . . . [and] an external thought, the reader’s thought, takes its place. After considering the thought, the reader often decides that it is insufficient or aesthetically less desirable than the initial textual fact. As a result, the interpretation dissolves, and the original item in the poem returns to the center of focus.\(^{108}\)

While this principle is a somewhat disheartening manifestation of any honest reading of *The Waste Land* or the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung*, I do not propose that such interpretations are futile or meaningless. On the contrary, I argue that the experience of interpretation and its inevitable dissolution secure the continuous rebirth of the interpreter and advance the consummate, often autonomous truth of Eliot’s and Wagner’s art. With the following discussion, this is the experience I hope to cultivate for myself and for my readers.

In the course of my circular analytic journey, I explore two significant moments in *The Waste Land* and their Wagnerian counterparts from *Götterdämmerung*. First, I consider the correlation between the final lines of “The Fire Sermon” and Brünnhilde’s self-immolation. Particularly, my discussion examines the dual-sided symbol of fire—a symbol of both human sensuality and superhuman redemption. With specific consideration of the purifying nature of fire and its juxtaposition against Eliot’s water motive, I then speculate on the relation between “Death by Water” and the closing water-oriented moments of the Ring cycle. In an attempt to merge the numerous avenues of my winding exploration, I conclude by very briefly examining the controversial ending of

Götterdämmerung; I ask: Does the ending promise an optimistic, renewed sense of life? Or does the ending reveal humanity’s inescapable destiny—a repetitive cycle of merciless destruction? Or, perhaps, does the end offer a reconciliation of both?

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In “The Fire Sermon,” the Rhinemaidens end their song with a subtle diminuendo and a final jeering gesture: “la la.” They do not bid farewell, but rather apathetically glance at man’s sordid shoreline and re-submerge into the waters of the Rhine. Following their departure, a new poetic persona appears. This voice speaks of medieval settings, God’s saving grace, and a tension caused by metaphorical flames:

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest burning

This codetta to “The Fire Sermon” includes three poignant allusions: a quotation from Buddha’s Fire Sermon, quotations from St. Augustine’s Confessions, and a more discrete reference to the immolation scene from Götterdämmerung.

The paraphrases from St. Augustine’s prose are drawn from Book III and Book X of his Confessions. In these sections, Augustine reflects on his years spent in Carthage as a young adult. Carthage, for the inexperienced Augustine, was a city crawling with sinful temptations for the skin. Augustine “desir[ed] to be scraped by the touch of objects of sense . . . . [defiling] the spring of friendship with the filth of concupiscence.” Like the other miserable characters in “The Fire Sermon,” Augustine is tormented by a sensuality


unmitigated by human pathos or love. The quotation from Buddha’s *Fire Sermon* echoes Augustine’s observations, declaring that “all things . . . are on fire.”\(^{111}\) The symbolic fire described by Buddha represents man’s attachment to the material world—or, in Augustine’s case, the world of the senses. The only way to smother such flames, Buddha states, is to avert desires prompted by man’s sensory faculties. In Carthage, as depicted in Book III, Augustine seems to heed Buddha’s advice and finds freedom from material needs. Ironically, after his liberation, he “burns” with a new desire: “How did I burn then, my God, how did I burn to re-mount from earthly things to Thee.”\(^{112}\) He burns—not with physical desire—but with a love for his newfound spiritual way of life. This reconciliation with God allows Augustine to maintain a Christian existence, even when entangled by the alluring pleasures of his exterior realm. As Augustine recollects in Book X, “[I] entangle my steps with these outward beauties; but Thou pluckest me out, O Lord.”\(^{113}\)

In Eliot’s verse, Augustine’s situation almost seems contradictory; Augustine is plucked from the fires of temptation, but still continues to burn. Eliot’s conflation of Eastern and Western religious thought, thus, presents a double-sided manifestation of the fire symbol. In one sense, man burns with an obsession for material pleasure, while, in another sense, man burns with a desire for redemption, granted through the will of a higher power. Further complicating Eliot’s text, the coda section of “The Fire Sermon” extends beyond Eliot’s explicit allusions and suggests a continuation of the reference to


\(^{112}\) St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 40.

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 231.
Act III of *Götterdämmerung*. Although Eliot did not provide a footnote identifying this allusion, his strategic positioning of redemptive, but also erotically-sensual fire motifs implies that Eliot wrote with Valhalla in the backdrop. Consider, for example, Eliot’s narrative of images. From broken marriage vows to the cackling Rhinemaidens to the final apocalyptic fire, the framing moments of “The Fire Sermon” are arguably constructed upon a *Götterdämmerung*-influenced scaffold. With the flames of Siegfried’s funeral pyre burning alongside Buddha’s oration and Augustine’s autobiography, we must ask, then: How does Eliot—in his amalgamation of three seemingly incongruent fire motives—portray Wagner’s multifaceted symbol?

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The use of fire in the Ring cycle is not single-dimensional. Depending on context, the symbol of fire represents numerous images and concepts, such as man’s passionate, virginal desires; destructive love; a purifying, redemptive power; or—most blatantly—the end of the world. Eliot’s dramatization of Wagner’s fire motive, of course, does not encompass all possible meanings of fire in the Ring cycle. Rather, “The Fire Sermon” depicts fire in two ways: as physical desire and as a source of purification or redemption.

Augustine’s Carthage sojourn and Buddha’s admonitions highlight the association between fire and desire. As discussed, Augustine’s venture into Carthage was contaminated with sinful cravings for the sensual—a yearning for materialism that relates, in a broader sense, to the symbolic fire defined by Buddha. Carthage-influenced cravings, thus, are synonymous with the pain of smoldering flames and present the symbol of fire as a depiction of material urges, of raw desires. In considering this Carthage-Buddha fire motive in relation to the final moments of the Ring cycle, we see
that “The Fire Sermon” recalls Brünnhilde’s sacrificial plunge. At the end of

*Götterdämmerung*, the introspective Brünnhilde contemplates the life and death of Siegfried, ultimately deciding to join him in his assumed afterlife. She reunites herself with her beloved hero via a fiery portal—Siegfried’s funeral pyre. Brünnhilde’s call for this ritualistic conflagration suggests that the flames of Siegfried’s funeral will not only metaphysically re-wed Siegfried and Brünnhilde, but will also meld the lovers in a physically-arousing union:

> High and bright
> let the flames flare up
> and consume the noble limbs
> of the most exalted hero! –
> Lead his stallion hither:
> let it follow the warrior with me:
> for my own body yearns
> to share in the hero’s
> holiest honor.114

Brünnhilde physically aches (“yearns”) to be with Siegfried and to experience his noble presence. The platform for this corporeal reunion is, of course, fire. Fire will bond Brünnhilde to Siegfried, allowing her to “share” his honor, his death, and, most notably, his body. Later in her musical soliloquy, immediately before her final plunge, Brünnhilde even more explicitly articulates the connection between fire and her sensual urges.

Addressing her horse Grane, Brünnhilde declares:

> Does the laughing fire
> lure you to him? –
> Feel how the flames
> burn in my breast,
> effulgent fires
> seize hold of my heart:
> to clasp him to me

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while held in my arms. . .  

Again, the fire is a platform for the physical reunion of Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Here, however, the symbol of fire also represents the yearning for erotic pleasure—or, as Augustine would remark, an “entanglement” in “outward beauties.” It laughingly lures Grane and burns within the fated Brünnhilde’s sexual being. And, once she joins Siegfried in death, the fire—like her visceral desires—consumes Brünnhilde and her loyal steed. Because Brünnhilde seems to desire the same material satiation that characterizes the Carthage landscape and that Buddha adamantly condemns, in Götterdämmerung, fire, as presented in “The Fire Sermon,” is not only a bonding mechanism; it is a symbol for Brünnhilde’s last glimmer of lust for worldly pleasures.

“The Fire Sermon,” however, merely provides a keyhole-shaped peek inside Brünnhilde’s farewell. Wagner’s music confirms and expands the interpretations elucidated by Eliot’s verse. Brünnhilde’s statement of fire-dominated lust (“Feel how the flames/burn in my breast, effulgent fires/seize hold of my heart”) is set over a brief, four-bar musical passage that relates to the sensuality of her experience. The passage is composed of two phrase segments, with the second segment, echoing the first (see Example 3.1). Though seemingly simple, this phrase references a significant leitmotiv from Das Rheingold: “Love’s Enchantment.” “Love’s Enchantment”—or “Domestic Bliss”—is most directly associated with Fricka’s pleas to Wotan for a domestically-bound

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115 Ibid., 350.

116 St. Augustine, Confessions, 231.
Example 3.1, Excerpt from Brünnhilde’s final soliloquy; *Götterdämmerung*, III, iii

Example 3.2, “Love’s Enchantment” leitmotiv

lifestyle. It first appears, for example, when Fricka contemplates the advantages of building Valhalla, a “glorious dwelling” to help restrain the unscrupulous Wotan. More subtly, however, the theme also emerges when Siegfried discovers the sleeping Brünnhilde and is transformed into the “Resistance” motive, used to accompany Siegfried’s physical altercation with Wotan. In each appearance, “Love’s Enchantment” exceeds beyond an appeal for the pacification of marital strife and functions as a reference to man’s bodily urges—urges for domestic closeness (Fricka), for sexually-charged violence (Wotan), and for satiating inherent desires (Siegfried). The vestiges of this motive reappear in Brünnhilde’s final soliloquy. Before two prominent

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118 Near the end of Siegfried’s quest to find the slumbering maiden Brünnhilde, he is interrogated by Wotan. Wotan addresses Siegfried with intense anger, brandishing his spear—quite possibly a symbol for his manhood. Their encounter, arguably, carries the connotation of two bestial creatures fighting for the love of a female in heat. As James M. McGlathery notes, “It is the anger of the jealous lover in Wotan, provoked by Siegfried’s reference to his aim of awakening and winning the sleeping beauty.” See James M. McGlathery, *Wagner’s Opera and Desire* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 132-135.
textual breaks (one after “auch,” the other after “Feuer”), her passage leaps down a m7 and a P5. These pronounced melodic leaps subtly, but convincingly recall the intervallic content of “Love’s Enchantment”—a passage that similarly highlights the same diatonic intervals (see Example 3.2). This relationship indicates that not only the text, but also the accompanying music of Brünnhilde’s soliloquy is charged with an electric sensuality, expressed through the metaphor of fire and musical allusion.

It is hardly surprising that Eliot (cognizant or not of the music) likely perceived elements of sexual desire in Brünnhilde’s fiery suicide. Fire appears as a symbol for passion and eroticism, not only in the final moments of Götterdämmerung, but throughout Wagner’s teratology. In Das Rheingold, for example, Loge, the god of fire, describes the unmatchable value of Freia, the goddess of love. Loge explains that he has searched “alle Winkel der Welt” and discovered that no breathing, living being would ever forswear man’s desire for woman. Because Loge is the bringer of this message, he himself emerges as a symbol of human lust. Even more definitely, erotic images of fire appear in the scenes spotlighting Brünnhilde’s “bridal fire.” As punishment for her disobedience, Brünnhilde is sentenced to remain asleep inside a circle of fire and await the arrival of a fearless hero. Wotan, however, originally planned to leave Brünnhilde as prey to any passing vagabond. Only after a heartfelt and argumentative dialogue between Wotan and his favorite daughter does the immortal god acquiesce to Brünnhilde’s pleas for protective flames. Her fiery circle, then, is a testimony to Wotan’s somewhat incestuous desire and untamed love for the persuasive Brünnhilde. But, in Act I of

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119 Another reference is needed.

120 See footnote no. 118.
Siegfried, when the valiant hero prepares for his journey, the “bridal fire” is redefined, representing the virginal desires of Siegfried. Here Siegfried is stimulated by Mime’s description of fear and its metaphorical counterpart—fire. Mime illustrates fear as a destructive force, capable of demolishing one’s sanity, just as untamed fire demolishes its surroundings:

> [F]rom afar, a rustling
  humming, roaring sound draws near,
  a furious booming
  crashes closer,
  a whirling flicker
  flits around you
  and, swelling and whirring,
  floats towards you
  have you not felt the terror then
  that, creepingly, seizes hold of your limbs?\textsuperscript{121}

Mime’s depiction of fear as fire ignites Siegfried’s yearning for the physical sensations that accompany mental terror. Siegfried enthusiastically reacts, exclaiming, “searing and trembling/ burning and fainting/ . . . how dearly I long to feel this dread.”\textsuperscript{122} James M. McGlathery identifies this passage as a markedly erotic moment. In his work Wagner’s Opera and Desire, McGlathery considers the relations among fire, fear, and sexual urges presented in Siegfried’s reflection: “The sensation of fear that Siegfried describes could just as well apply to the experience of virginal sexual desire; and youthful desire . . . is what Loge [god of fire] represents.”\textsuperscript{123}

But, as Brünnhilde knows at the end of Götterdämmerung and as “The Fire Sermon” implies, materialism or eroticism cannot sustain a world order or prevent earthly

\textsuperscript{121} Wagner, Siegfried in “Ring of the Nibelung”: A Companion, trans. Stewart Spencer, 218.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 218-219.

\textsuperscript{123} McGlathery, Wagner’s Opera and Desire, 122.
corruption. Rather, empty sensuality and purely erotic love ultimately lead to
destruction—that is, the destruction of man’s spiritual being and his physical
environment. Augustine’s *Confessions* confirms this. Reflecting on his time in Carthage,
he depicts the results of his downfall: “[M]y soul felt sick. It broke out in ulcers and
looked about desperately for material, worldly means of relieving the itch . . . But
material things . . . could not be true objects for my love.”124

This sordidness and this destruction, however, are arguably a requisite prelude to
salvation. Redemption or, more simply, a *call* for redemption is not possible without the
foreplay of sensual “burning.” In short, one must dirty their hands in order to be cleansed.
Consider again the “Song” of the Thames-daughters and the codetta of “The Fire
Sermon.” The Thames-daughters—that is, the Rhinemaidens in disguise—mockingly
depict man’s polluted landscape. They laugh at a realm where sex and love are
incompatible, where women remain emotionally stoic, while men weep, and where there
is no hope for a future beyond “broken fingernails.” This world is essentially Augustine’s
Carthage: a portal opening to sinful sensuality and a “cauldron of unholy loves.”125 If *The
Waste Land* ended in Carthage, then we could assume that misguided sensuality leads to
the inevitable demise of man and his world. This, however, is not the case. Rather,
sensuality precedes salvation. After his sinful venture into Carthage, Augustine pleads to
the Lord for aid and, after the fire of human cupidity, the Buddha’s oration echoes as a
*call* for detachment from tangible reality; in Eliot’s once heated “cauldron,” a desire
“burns” for the Lord’s redeeming tolerance and for the pacification of material urges.
Eliot’s final statement of “burning” indicates that such salvation—a salvation awakened

125 Ibid.
by the flames of the sensual—is possible. The single word “burning” is a reduction of the earlier, more forceful repetition of the scorching statement, “Burning burning burning burning.”\textsuperscript{126} This reduction suggests both a pacification of suffering and a diminishment of sensual cravings. Calvin Bedient acknowledges this alteration: “the single ‘burning’ at the close, reversing the effect of the echoic ‘la la’ at the end of the Thames-daughters’ ‘Song,’ enacts a marked lightening of agony.”\textsuperscript{127} This lightening indicates that Augustine emerges from Carthage, partially redeemed from the flames of purely material desire and glowing with a newfound passion for a profoundly spiritual existence. His material burdens are lessened and he “burns” only to “re-mount from earthly things.”\textsuperscript{128}

Augustine’s renewal rings harmoniously with Brünhilde’s fiery plunge. As discussed, Brünhilde’s statement of fire-governed sensuality alludes to “Love’s Enchantment”—a motive associated with man’s physical cravings and desires. More explicitly, however, Brünhilde’s declaration references the “Redemption through Love” or “Glorification of Brünhilde” motive. This motive first appears in Act III of \textit{Die Walküre}. Here Brünhilde and Sieglinde—the Walsüng mother of Siegfried—frantically flee from the enraged Wotan. As Brünhilde plans an escape, Sieglinde pleads for death; she cannot imagine life without her slain brother and lover Siegmund. Brünhilde reacts to Sieglinde’s suicidal depression with a stirring command, “O woman, live/ for the sake of love!” and an announcement, “Receive his name from me— / may ‘Siegfried’ joy in

\textsuperscript{126} Eliot, \textit{The Waste Land}, 41.

\textsuperscript{127} Bedient, \textit{He Do the Police in Different Voices}, 154.

\textsuperscript{128} St. Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, 40.
victory!" With this information, Sieglinde rediscovers her will to live. She sings the “Redemption through Love” motive and declares: “Most sublime wonder! / Glorious maid! . . . For him [Siegmund] whom we loved / I’ll save what’s most dear.”

Sieglinde’s words are both praiseful and hopeful. She honors Brünnhilde and, more notably, expresses a renewed desire to live for her unborn son— the product of an inherently erotic union. The “Love through Redemption” motive, in this light, signifies renewal in the face of despair and desolation or, rather, purification amidst an earthly waste land.

In Götterdämmerung, when Brünnhilde states her fire-oriented desires, the theme carries the same connotation. In the aftermath of Siegfried’s betrayal and death, Brünnhilde ceases to mourn her unfortunate state and rejoices in her (and the world’s) impending future. She emerges from tragedy, feeling renewed and happily awaiting her imminent metaphysical journey. But unlike Sieglinde’s exclamation of life, Brünnhilde’s reference to the “Redemption through Love” motive articulates a clear association between spiritual purification and fire. Brünnhilde’s text mentions “flames,” “burn[ing],” and “fire.” When considered in a purely literary context, Brünnhilde’s metaphorical statement about fire reveals her erotic hunger and her yearning to reunite with Siegfried. But, when also considering the significance of the “Redemption through Love” motive, the actual conflagration that awaits Brünnhilde appears primarily as a symbol of purification. This is the fire that ultimately frees Brünnhilde from her corporal

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130 Ibid., 178.

131 It should be noted that Brünnhilde needs spiritual and physical renewal, because she sacrifices her strength and a degree of her consciousness for a predominantly sensual existence with Siegfried in Act I of Götterdämmerung. Similar to the happenings of The Waste Land, erotic desire precedes purification.
baggage, lifting her from a Carthage-like existence. Thus, her fire-framed words, the music reveals, relate not only to physical urges, but also to Sieglinde’s and Brünnhilde’s remarkable transformations—transformations similar to Augustine’s spiritual renewal.

Eliot’s presentation of fire, desire, and redemption in “The Fire Sermon”—specifically, his positioning of Augustine’s and Brünnhilde’s physical angst and spiritual renewal before a fiery backdrop—is consistent with his poetic output and his mother’s influence. For example, his unpublished poem “Elegy,” originally intended for publication alongside The Waste Land, depicts a sexually-mislead husband who, in the end, is pursued by God’s wrathful, but cleansing presence. In “Elegy,” Eliot characterizes God as “a rolling ball of fire,” whose biting “flames” overwhelm the speaker with a “consuming heat.” Fire, then, is analogous with a divine force and—similar to the fire of Augustine’s Confessions and Siegfried’s funeral pyre—is linked to salvation from a purely sensual existence. Eliot’s understanding of fire as a medium for purification is also, arguably, linked to his mother’s influence. In a poem concerned with asceticism and spirituality, she writes:

Purge from thy heart all sensual desire
Let low ambitions perish in the fire
Of higher aims. Then, as the transient dies,
The eternal shall unfold before thine eyes.

Her words, like Eliot’s, metaphorically suggest that fire refines and ultimately purges man of empty, physical cravings. This fire “of higher aims,” a fire of religious goodness,

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132 Miller, T.S. Eliot’s Personal Waste Land, 137.


is the same fire that burns at the end of “The Fire Sermon” and, as Eliot’s text implies, is the same fire that consumes Brünnhilde.

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Although Eliot’s single statement of “burning,” the final gasping sigh of “The Fire Sermon,” suggests a release from worldly tensions, it is, ultimately, inconclusive. Penned in lowercase letters, without punctuation, the word “burning” floats on the page like the last winking flicker of a devastating conflagration. We must ask, then, in its last flash of life, what images and meanings does this remaining flame invoke? Does it refer to Buddha’s fire of the senses or to Augustine’s heated love for the Lord? If the former is true, then does Eliot suggest that redemptive cleansing is incomplete or, perhaps, not possible? And, if the latter is true, then do Augustine’s and, more notably, Brünnhilde’s transformations expand beyond individual renewal to the salvation of the entire world? While such questions echo the frustrated cries of exhausted hermeneutic debates about The Waste Land and the Ring cycle, when considered in the same analytic breath, they merit further speculation. Particularly, because Eliot does provide closure to “The Fire Sermon”—and, arguably, closure to his reading of Götterdämmerung—with Part IV of The Waste Land, “Death by Water.”

Unlike the other expository episodes, songs, and fragments of The Waste Land, “Death by Water” is not constructed upon a scaffold of explicit allusions. In constructing his referential framework for “Death by Water,” Eliot is noticeably inconsistent with his bibliographical technique. He does not provide footnotes that link “Death by Water” to other allusive images and, thus, fails to insinuate meaning beyond a seemingly literal narrative. Prompted by this lack of clear external references, Brooker and Bentley
conclude that “‘Death by Water’ forces readers to interpret [the text itself], but fails in the end to permit the reader to grasp any satisfactory meaning.”\textsuperscript{135} Likewise, literary critic Richard Chase criticizes Eliot who “has failed because he does not know what he is trying to bring the myths into focus with . . . there is so little of tangible human experience in this passage, there is so little to justify the myths.”\textsuperscript{136}

This is not to say, however, that “Death by Water” is an incomprehensible, free-standing section, unassociated with other literary or musical works. Most obviously, “Death by Water” is an English translation and revision of the final stanza from Eliot’s early poem “Dans le Restaurant.” At a purely literal level, “Dans le Restaurant” depicts an encounter between a customer—the initially irritated narrator—and his waiter—“Le garçon délabré qui n’a rien à faire.”\textsuperscript{137} The waiter intrusively describes a failed romance from his melodramatic boyhood, while the narrator makes jeering asides: “Bavard, baveux, à la croupe arrondie, / Je te prie, au moins, ne bave pas dans la soupe.”\textsuperscript{138} Their discussion ends with the narrator’s final statements, an indirect comparison of the waiter to Phelbas the Phoenician—the principal character of “Death by Water.”

The waiter from “Dans le Restaurant,” then, provides the most well-defined rendering of Phelbas. Robert L. Schwarz, author of \textit{Broken Images: A Study of The Waste Land}, argues that the waiter is a self-portrait of Eliot. Schwarz concludes that Eliot’s once tall and attractive physique, his affair with Emily hale, and his retreat from New England


\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
parallel the description of Phlebas the waiter: “un bel home, de haute taille” who dreams of past romances and “oubliait les cries des mouettes et la houle de Cornouaille.”

While Schwarz’s interpretation debunks other less convincing readings of Phlebas—as Eliot’s potential homoerotic lover Jean Verdenal or, according to Herbert Knust, as Wagner’s patron King Ludwig—it only illuminates one possible dimension of Phelbas’s complex personae and the ambiguous substance of “Death by Water.” In a footnote for “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot himself identifies Phelbas as a multilayered character, born from the myriad motives and cross-references within The Waste Land.140 “The one-eyed merchant,” Eliot writes, “seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand prince of Naples.”141 Taken as a restoration of the one-eyed merchant, a green-eyed materialist, Phlebas emerges as an antagonist and an individual who clings entirely to worldly goods.142

But, as A. David Moody claims, “Death by Water” is not just a character portrait; it is both a “coda to all the previous associations of water with mortality” and a

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139 Ibid., 32.

140 Although Eliot himself identifies a link between Phlebas and the one-eyed merchant, we should not take his footnotes too seriously. In a 1956 lecture, addressing the literary criticism of The Waste Land, Eliot speaks candidly about the reality of his footnotes. Many of his notes, Eliot claims, were merely created to satiate the aesthetic criteria of his publishers: “when it came to print The Waste Land as a little book . . . it was discovered that the poem was inconveniently short, so I set to work to expand the notes, in order to provide a few more pages of printed matter, with the result that they became the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship . . . . [M]y notes stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources . . . . I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.” Quoted in Lawrence Rainey, Revisiting “The Waste Land” (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 125.


142 In his essay, “What’s the Matter with One-eyed Riley?” Herbert Knust argues that the one-eyed merchant alludes to Wotan from the Ring cycle. If considered from this perspective, the one-eyed merchant does not merely represent a man with a greedy appetite, but also an individual who “carries on his shoulders the curse and the destiny of the world.” This conclusion will seem apt at the close of my discussion, in my examination of redemption in the final moments of Götterdämmerung. See Knust, “What’s the Matter with One-Eyed Riley?” Comparative Literature 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1965): 291.
“transition, preparing the emotions” for Part V of *The Waste Land*. Moody’s observation suggests that “Death by Water” is simultaneously an ending and a beginning, displaying the death and the rebirth of Phlebas. Such an interpretation is compatible with Cleanth Brooks’ analysis:

The drowned Phoenician Sailor recalls the drowned god of the fertility cults. Miss Weston [author of *From Romance to Ritual*, one of Eliot’s most significant resources for *The Waste Land*] tells that each year at Alexandria an effigy of the head of the god was thrown into the water as a symbol of the death of the powers of nature . . . this head was carried by the current to Byblos where it was taken out of the water and exhibited as a symbol of the reborn god.

Specifically, Brooks refers to the second stanza of “Death by Water,” in which the drowned Phoenician seems to travel back in time, from old age to the beginning of life:

. . . As he rose and fell  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.

Here the idea of rebirth, in conjunction with death and earthly struggle (as proposed at the end of “The Fire Sermon”) trickles into the content of “Death by Water.” Eliot’s word placement (“the stages of his age and youth”) indicates that Phlebas moves from his elder to his formative years. This syntactical decision implies that Phlebas, though drowned, only suffers from a temporary death, as he re-enters life via the turning “whirlpool.” This cycle of reincarnation is not, however, limited to Phlebas, to the “délabré” waiter, to Eliot, or to Weston’s fertility gods; it is, rather, a cycle that envelops all living, earthly


creatures. The final stanza of “Death by Water” articulates the universal nature of Phlebas’s eternal rebirth:

Gentile or Jew
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas . . .

Eliot’s command indicates that no one is excluded from the cycle of reincarnation. Regardless of religious creed, all beings turn the “wheel,” lingering above the “whirlpool” that churns beneath the surface of the world’s temporal order.

Most remarkably, this episode of death and birth is directly positioned after two momentous happenings in The Waste Land: (1) the “Song” of the Thames-daughters and (2) an implicit reference to the immolation scene from Götterdämmerung. This sequence of events—from the alluring, water-nymphean songs, to the purifying fire, to death by drowning, and finally, to universal rebirth—parallels the major events in Act III of Götterdämmerung. In Götterdämmerung, like in The Waste Land, the Rhinemaidens belittle Siegfried (or, mankind, in general), a heroic being rejuvenates her spirit before a cleansing fire, and a malevolent persona, Hagen, drowns to death. Because of these curiously close parallels between Eliot’s text and Wagner’s music drama, Phlebas, arguably, can also be understood as the Nibelungen son of Alberich, Hagen.

Hagen is the puppet master of Götterdämmerung. Working to acquire the power of the Ring, he guides the marital actions of the Gibichungs—Gunther and Gutrune—and encourages Brünnhilde’s mission of vengeance against Siegfried. Yet, despite his cunning persistence and scheming devices, he does not attain his goal and dies at the bottom of the Rhine, strangled by the Rhinemaidens, Woglinde and Wellgunde. When considered in conjunction with “Death by Water,” Hagen’s death, like the death of

\[146\] Ibid., 41-42.
Phlebas, marks the end of a life cycle, but not the end of the world. The Rhine flows, Wagner’s water sprites reclaim their gold, and the “wheel” turns. This eternally whirling world, however, is not the god-governed, morally-unconscious realm from Act I of Das Rheingold. It is a world that is refreshed, environmentally and spiritually refurbished, and accompanied by the symbolic “Redemption through Love” motive, the final musical gesture sounded in Wagner’s teratology. True, Eliot’s text suggests that Phlebas—that is, Hagen’s twentieth-century counterpart—will reemerge unwelcome. He will return, however, in a realm cleansed by heroic sacrifice and partially enlightened by an Augustinean consciousness, a realm touched by a purifying fire that extends to the entire world.147

Of course, in order to accept such a conclusion, a brief investigation of Eliot’s philosophical mindset is necessary. While constructing The Waste Land, Eliot was deeply involved in Indic and Buddhist studies and even considered making Buddhism his personal religious mantra.148 According to Buddhist thought, the wheel is a symbol for man’s timeless, cyclical universe. As stated in the Svetasvatara Upanishad, the “universe is a wheel. Upon it are all creatures that are subject to birth, death, and rebirth. Round and round it turns and never stops.”149 The wheel’s continuous motion is not, however, hopeful or life-giving, but, rather, is devastating, grounded in suffering and ignorance. In

147 The idea that the Ring cycle ends optimistically, rather than apocalyptically, is a nearly-trite conclusion reached by generations of scholars. For instance, Simon Williams asserts that “the conclusion of Götterdämmerung does not depict the end of the world and therefore betoken some apocalyptic desire for self destruction in the whole human race.” Similarly, Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht conclude that, despite the end of Valhalla, “the earth remains, still capable of renewal, still charged with this promise.” See Williams, Wagner and the Romantic Hero (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 100; and Kitcher and Schacht, Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner’s Ring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 201.


149 Quoted in P.S. Sri, T.S. Eliot, Vedanta and Buddhism (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 35.
defining samsāra, the Buddha elucidates the grievous nature of the universal wheel:

“Ignorance, desire and attachment form the round of the corruptions . . . And it is through these three that this wheel of Existence is said to have three rounds . . . it is incessant . . . it revolves.”

Death in a state of unchecked material longing, such as the death of Hagen, promises a horrific rebirth upon the wheel of suffering. A death, however, divorced from “ignorance, desire, and attachment” promises release from the agonizing cycle of rebirth.

For the survivors—the Rhinemaidens, Augustine, the “Gentile or Jew”—an awareness of this binding wheel helps to reduce the consequences of rebirth, launching a journey towards metaphysical stillness or nirvana. In “Death by Water,” Eliot creates such a sphere of self-awareness, switching from a narrative third-person point of view to an imperative second-person point of view. This change in perspective suggests that the remaining persons in, outside, and reading The Waste Land are a step closer to enlightenment. They are not Phlebas or Hagen, fated for a miserable rebirth, but are somewhat displaced from the absorbing momentum of the universal whirlpool.

Furthermore, Eliot’s conflation of symbols of refining fire and agonizing, life-giving water implies that Eliot perceived a similar sense of conscious awakening at the end of Götterdämmerung. Thus, while the transfigured Brünnhilde “saw the world end,” the tempestuous Rhinemaidens saw the earth shift towards a position one cycle closer to total enlightenment.

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151 From the “Schopenhauer ending,” composed in May 1856 and later discarded. Wagner’s “Ring of the Nibelung”: A Companion, trans. Stewart Spencer, 363.

152 Taking cues from Leon Stein’s 1950 comment (“[Parsifal] is in truth the fifth opera of the Ring”), non-practicing Buddhist monk Paul Schofield argues that Parsifal depicts the rebirth of Wotan,
By way of conclusion, I return to Brooker and Bentley’s conception of the “hermeneutic loop.” Summarizing the process of interpretation, they suggest that the practice of analysis is itself an experience of death, rebirth, and transfiguration:

The reader has moved outside the poem, found a meaning, considered it, and returned to the poem as such; in a sense, he has returned to the moment before interpretation. But it is a return with a difference, a difference made by the process of trying to interpret . . . . [T]here is a post hermeneutical stage, a stage which is in a sense after meaning.153

My interpretation of Eliot’s implied reading of Götterdämmerung, then, primarily offers a vehicle for discovery, contemplation, and return to the only fixed reality, the art object: Eliot’s The Waste Land and Wagner’s the Ring cycle. This return to fixity and hermeneutic stasis, as Brooker and Bentley might argue, is the purpose of interpretation—that is, the relaxation after the struggle or the final death after drowning. Perhaps, this is what Verdenal later experienced, in February of 1912, after he wrote to Eliot: “I am beginning to get the hang of the Ring. Each time the plot becomes clearer and obscure passages take on meaning . . . . But I am not making much sense, it is all so confused and difficult, and impossible to put into words and necessarily so (otherwise, no one would have felt the need to express it in music).”154

Brünnhilde, Alberich, and Siegfried. Schofield claims that, together, the Ring and Parsifal represent “the portrayal in symbolic form of the entire panorama of existence, from the original Fall to final enlightenment and salvation.” Schofield’s conclusion is compatible with the rendering of Götterdämmerung—as an incomplete, but advancing redemptive process—implied by “Death by Water.” See Schofield, The Redeemer Reborn (New York: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2007), 3.


Conclusion

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

Eliot, “Little Gidding” from *Four Quartets* (1943)

In his 1807 work *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel suggests that history is the grand narrative of the world “Spirit” (*Geist*). For Hegel, reality matures and changes with the passing of time, and thus his theory presents reality on a developmental continuum, driving towards human consciousness and rationality. When Wagner began work on the Ring in 1848, Hegel’s theories were rattling around in the back of Wagner’s head. In his Dresden library, Wagner kept a copy of Hegel’s *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* and familiarized himself with *Phenomenology*.\(^{155}\) Although in 1854 Wagner replaced Hegelian thought with a predominantly Schopenhauerian worldview, we can still identify vestiges of Hegel’s philosophy in the Ring cycle—particularly, Hegel’s conception of self-consciousness.\(^ {156}\) As discussed in my previous chapter, Wagner presents a sense of conscious awakening and spiritual renewal at the end of *Götterdämmerung* during Brünnhilde’s final soliloquy. Here, as Valhalla simmers with the heat of redemptive flames, we encounter self-sacrifice, human compassion, Brünnhilde’s transfiguration, and, finally, the end of one historical phase and the advancement of the Hegelian *Geist*. We, the audience, leave the theater with a sense of refreshment and renewal, prepared for


the next historical period, humming the “Redemption through Love” motive under our breath.

Coincidentally, the end of The Waste Land betokens a similar transformation. The final words of The Waste Land (“Shantih shantih shantih”)—translated by Eliot as the “peace which passeth understanding”—reference the conclusion of the Upanishads. The Upanishads, or Vedanta, are attached to the end of the sacred, poetic texts of the Hindu Veda. They provide a form of intellectual reflection on a mystic doctrine as well as a sense of post-prayer reprieve. In closing The Waste Land with this allusion, Eliot arguably evokes the same peaceful and optimistic silence that lingers in the aftermath of the Ring cycle. Maragaret E. Dana, arguing for a Parsifal-inspired reading of The Waste Land, offers one possible interpretation of these final Sanskrit murmurs. She concludes:

[this quest poem] provides the vision and interpretation, however incomplete, which enable the quester to continue his life search . . . . The conclusion of the poem records [Eliot’s] honest admission that the ritual produced no magical transformation. But what it did produce was something valuable—the ability to go on.

As Dana astutely notes, the end of The Waste Land is infused with subtle tones of optimism. Eliot and Eliot’s audience are given “something valuable”—that is, a tempered sense of hope in a post-Waste Land environment. We can move forward, because we

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157 Eliot’s translation alludes to Philippians 4:7. This translation or, more accurately, this interpretation is yet another detail revealing Eliot’s proclivity to meld Eastern and Western values, beliefs, and rituals. (“And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”)


have the ability to do so. This is, perhaps, the same sensation Eliot felt as he exited the theater after *Götterdämmerung*.

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According to Stravinsky, the congruity between Eliot’s poem and Wagner’s music dramas is far from surprising. In a series of personal musings, recorded by Robert Craft, Stravinsky stated that the goal of the artist is to re-fabricate the substance of tradition:

> Were Eliot and myself merely trying to refit old ships while the other side—Joyce and Schoenberg—sought new forms of travel? . . . . Of course, we seemed, Eliot and myself . . . to have made out of the *disjecta membra*, the quotations from other poets and composers, the references to earlier styles . . . the detritus that betokened a wreck. But we used it, and anything that came to hand, to rebuild, and we did not pretend to have invented new conveyors or new means of travel. But the true business of the artist is to refit old ships. He can say again, in his own way, only what has already been said.¹⁶⁰

Clearly, with *The Waste Land*, Eliot accomplished the “true business of the artist” and presented, in his own words, the message, myth, and experience of Wagnerian traditions and performance.

In providing a scholarly interpretation of art, we are often faced with the same task Eliot, Stravinsky, and other “true” artists seemed to complete—the task of rebuilding, remapping, or simply reinterpreting. As stated in my introduction, it was not my intention to provide a definitive or comprehensive analysis of *Tristan* or *Götterdämmerung*. Both works, in particular the Ring and its finale, cannot be fossilized into a single authoritative interpretation. In using Eliot as my point-man, it is my hope that this exploration has provided fresh analytical perspectives on well-worn topics and has also re-explored Wagnerian terrain, first surveyed by Eliot alone. Of course, further

investigation is still possible. Literary and music scholars are yet to provide satisfactory answers to questions concerning Eliot’s understanding of *Parsifal* and its presence in *The Waste Land*. For example, do Eliot’s quotation of Verlaine’s “Parsifal,” myriad allusions to the Grail legend, and the ill-fated demise of Phlebas the Phoenician carry anti-Semitic connotations and thus further substantiate the limited scholarship about Eliot and anti-Semitism? Additionally, from a purely positivistic standpoint, there is still not a clear biographical timeline for Eliot’s experiences with Wagner. There are no specific records of Eliot’s attendance at *Parsifal*, the Ring, or *Tristan*. In lieu of such information, scholars have safely made the assumption that Eliot “must have” attended performances of Wagner’s music dramas sometime between 1909 and 1922; yet, there is no evidence to support when or where.

Because my study has left many questions unanswered, generated new ones, and revisited old ones, I conclude with a final soft-edged speculation: the eternal survival of Eliot’s and Wagner’s art depends, perhaps, on a lack of analytical objectivity and, paradoxically, an irrational desire to “fill-in-the-gaps” of a bottomless pit. American philosopher Nelson Goodman described this twisted and, yet, beautiful phenomenon: “Art is inexhaustible because no interpretation or collection of interpretations can claim to deliver the last word on a work. There is no last word.”

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162 Reported as occurring in a work by Nelson Goodman.
interpretations and two, art has a communal function. It was Eliot who understood artistic
analysis in terms of Goodman’s later concept, prescribing that “the finest tact can give us
only an interpretation, and every interpretation, along perhaps with some utterly
contradictory interpretation, has to be taken up and reinterpreted by every thinking mind
and by every civilization.” The concluding aims of my thesis can be understood under
these conditions. My word is not, nor hopes to be the “last word,” as I am, much like
Eliot and *The Waste Land*, one more “thinking mind” contributing to an unending
“collection of interpretations.” I am merely refitting old ships and leaving much work for
future craftsmen.

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Appendix A

Quotations from The Waste Land

Below are passages from The Waste Land that contain allusions to Wagner’s music dramas. All citations are from Eliot, “The Waste Land” and Other Poems (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1962), 27-46.\(^\text{164}\)

*from* “The Burial of the Dead”

Frisch weht der Wind  
Der Heimat zu  
Mein Irsch 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.*

*from* “The Fire Sermon”

The river sweats  
Oil and tar  
The barges drift  
With the turning tide  
Red sails  
Wide  
To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.  
The barges wash  
Drifting logs  
Down Greenwich reach  
Past the Isle of Dogs.  
   Weialala leia  
   Wallala leialala

\(^{164}\) The provided passages do not include Eliot’s myriad footnotes and should not be regarded as the only basis for my interpretation of Wagner’s works. Please refer to Eliot’s complete poetic work for explanatory footnotes.
Elizabeth and Leicester
Beating oars
The stern was formed
A gilded shell
Red and gold
The brisk swell
Rippled both shores
Southwest wind
Carried down stream
The peal of bells
White towers
  Weialala leia
  Wallala leialala

‘Trams and dusty trees.
Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.’

‘My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart
Under my feet. After the event
He wept. He promised “a new start”.
I made no comment. What should I resent?’

‘On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.’
  la la

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest

burning

from “Death by Water”

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
And the profit and loss.
A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.
Appendix B

Isolde’s “Liebestod” from Tristan und Isolde

Translated by Lionel Satler and Christopher Anderson

Gently and quietly
how he smiles,
how sweetly
he opens his eyes -
Do you see it friends?
Do you not see?
Ever brighter
how he shines,
surrounded by stars
soaring on high?
Do you not see it?
How his heart proudly swells and,
brave and full, pulses in his breast?
How softly and gently from his lips
sweet breath blows: Friends! See!

Do you not feel and see it?
Do I alone hear this melody which,
so wondrous and tender in its blissful lament,
all-revealing, gently pardoning,
surrounding from him, pierces me through,

rises above, blessedly echoing
and ringing around me?
Resounding more clearly, wafting about me,
are they waves of soft breezes?
Are they billows of blissful fragrance?
As they swell and soar around me,

shall I breathe, shall I listen?
Shall I sip, plunge beneath them?
Expire in sweet perfume?
In the surging swell
in the ringing sound,
in the vast wave
of the world-breath -
to drown,
to sink -
unconscious -  unbewußt -
supreme bliss!  höchste Lust!

(Isolde, as if transfigured, sinks in Brangäne’s arms gently onto Tristan’s body. Deep emotion and sense of exaltation among those present. Marke blesses the bodies.)