THE WASTE LAND – The Burial of the Dead

We’re going to analyse an extract taken from a poem, which is a series of dramatic monologues, and as a result we will see here different voices. The title of the poem is THE WASTE LAND (1922), the term pushes us to think to a sterile and arid land, I would like to know which is this land and why it is sterile.

The Waste Land is dedicated to Ezra Pound, who is defined “il miglior fabbro”, a quotation from the Dante’s Divina Commedia. Furthermore the poet starts with quotation from Latin and Greek: the epigraph is taken from Satyricon (I century AD). “Del resto la Sibilla a Cuma l’ho vista anche io con i miei occhi penzolare dentro un’ampolla e quando i fanciulli le chiedevano: Sibilla, cosa vuoi? Lei disse: voglio morire”. Right from the start the intelligent reader understands that the **desire to die** is one of the central themes of the poem, as suggested title, the quotation and the name of the first section of the poem.

April is usually the month which brings spring, it’s strange to define it “cruel”, because such a word refers to somebody who makes you suffer. Eliot is turning traditional vision of that month upside down: the line is taken from Chaucer, whose Canterbury Tales opens with the words “*April is the sweetest month*”. Therefore Eliot is going back to Chaucer, “the poet’s poet”, the first one to use English as literary language because he wants to make reference to the origins of the English poetry and he wants to make an implicit comparison to the style of the Middle Age which is more positive than his time. What makes April cruel? April brings the promise of a rebirth that modern age can’t keep: the western world and in particular Europe is living a crisis from different point of views. In particular he’s worried about the spiritual slought of 20th century, indeed people had lost all their points of references: Darwin says men come from a progressive evolution, so there is no God people can rely to and Nietzsche even said God is dead. Eliot exploits the natural image Lilacs in order to convey such a message, indeed Lilacs are flowers used by bishops during funerals. So again there is the idea of death, but now it is linked to religion because the greatest fear of the modern man is to be alone in the world, without a God and a meaning for his life. Moreover April is cruel because it mixes memory and desire, indeed it pushes people to hope in the future because of their past, therefore Elliot expresses a new concept of time: Bergson says past and future is contained in the present, indeed the concept of time is simultaneous in this poem because April is the present but it implies the hope for future and the regret of past, furthermore seasons follow an unusual chronology. The roots of this spring land are dull, so they don’t help for rebirth, Eliot is using a convention of poetry, which is speaking about nature and spring referring to deep thoughts, but here the references to nature are made according to a modernist point of view, without religion and hope in the future and traditions (root). During spring we expect the rain help the rebirth but here land is sterile. Instead winter kept people warm, because they can stay together in front of the fire, moreover it covers earth with snow defined forgetful (personification): the snow protects earth in order to be warm and it leave outside negative memories. Eliot underlines the words “little life” with an alliteration: winter is feeding life, despite it is little. Human beings suffer spiritually because they have lost all their points of reference, so they can’t find a sense to life and rely on tradition anymore. The **waste land is an extended metaphor for existence** unless every single human being finds his personal sense after a request, but if the man continue to live in a “waste land” he will be a **dead in life** because he won’t know what to do with his life. One of the most important techniques exploited by Eliot is OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE: there is a relation between objects (dead land, dry tubers…) with something else, for instance the idea of sterility, indeed the first part of the poem works on the opposition between sterility and fertility.

Then suddenly come summer: it “surprised us”. The poet is using the first plural person because it is an **inclusive subject** which includes the dramatis personae and the reader, so he thinks also the reader feels the same he feels. Moreover Summer surprise because everything around men is changed and so he isn’t able to recognize the signs of the warm season anymore. However that “us” also refers to two people whose actions are described by the poet, they firstly are in the landscape of a lake near Munich. Here the mad king Ludwich the second, who was a friend of Wagner, died because of a shipwreck (classical topos of literature). This is the first reference which gives the name to a section of the waste land (dead by water). Then repair from rain under a colonnade, drink a coffee and play with a sled (Ethan Frome: they try to commit suicide with a sled) Here the poem becomes narrative through a **juxtaposition of scenes** (more extreme than the beginning) without logic linked and only by atmosphere and by myth, in particular **vegetable myths**.

The final part of the poem begins with a question: *“what are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / out of this stony rubbish?”*, however there isn’t a certain answer, because there isn’t an absolute truth. Human beings know that they have only “broken images” of reality, so they found repair in their own soul. Turning again upside down tradition the sun represents here the negative, because it implies sterility, dry lands and dead, instead the shadow, despite it is little is the only secure place. However Eliot pushes to go over the shadow and see the world, which is “a fear in a handful of dust”: the reference to dust comes from Bible (You were dust, dust you’ll be) and is a metaphor of death. The choice to exploit a religious image brings the reader again to the vision according to which the loss of religion is the most frightful fear of man. However Eliot is looking for the possibility to an individual regeneration, so his idea isn’t completely pessimistic because only when man will realize reality will be able to determine his own life and values.