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Water is generally considered a source of life. It satisfies some primal needs: thirst, cleanliness, and the desire for purity. The human body is composed of an average of 60-65% water; approximately 71% of the Earth's surface is covered by water from the oceans and seas. Talking about "death by water" might seem like an oxymoron, as water is a source of salvation, as taught by the ritual of baptism (which exists in different forms in almost every culture). "Death by water" is actually an oxymoron, as it is a myth of "death that heals", produces salvation. It belongs to an ancient myth of regeneration - the Fisher King - that from its origins became well known thanks to James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, universally considered the first example that shared elements of religious belief and scientific thought, discussing fertility rites, human sacrifice, the dying god, the scapegoat, and many other symbols whose influences extended into 20th-century culture. Frazer's core thesis posits that early human societies practiced the ritual killing of sacred kings or divine representatives who embodied the spirit of vegetation: the sacrifice, often occurring when the king's power waned, was meant to ensure the renewal of crops and life, symbolically enacting a cycle of death and rebirth. The original story of the Fisher King belongs to the Arthurian literary cycle, dating as far back as the 12th century, where he is the character who incarnates the guardian of the Holy Grail¹.

The story tells that the Fisher King was blighted by a wound that would not heal and, because of this injury, the land he ruled wilted into a wasteland. The King spends his time fishing in a river near his

castle of Corbenic. Many knights-errant come to the Fisher King to heal him, but this will be possible only for the chosen one destined to find the Grail. This story has become well known throughout the XIX century because it is the structure on which TS Eliot built a section of his poem *The Waste Land* (1922), a masterpiece of modernist poetry. Eliot composed the poem between December 1921 and January 1922 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he was hospitalized for mental instability. The poet sent the typescript to his friend and compatriot Ezra Pound, who also contributed to the revision of the text, so much so that Eliot dedicated the poem to him, calling Pound himself "Il miglior fabbro" (the best blacksmith), an expression taken from Dante Alighieri, who thus called the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel in Canto XXVI of *Purgatorio*.

The *Waste Land* is divided into five parts: *The Burial of the Dead*, *A Game of Chess*, *The Fire Sermon*, *Death by Water*, and *What the Thunder Said*. It is a polyphonic composition characterized by a multitude of individual voices speaking in many different languages (Latin, Greek, German, French, Sanskrit) as well as numerous literary references (Dante, Shakespeare, Ovid, Homer, Baudelaire, the Bible, St Augustine, Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts, as well as the Wagnerian opera, and Arthurian legend surrounding the Holy Grail), where "death by water" is the main element. *Death by Water* is the shortest section of the poem, describing the aftermath of the drowning of the Phoenician sailor Phlebas: his corpse is still trapped in a whirlpool that serves as a metaphor for the cycle of life and death, and serves as a warning to pursue a meaningful life.

In the poem, Phlebas has been dead for

¹ The Holy Grail is traditionally the Christian relic identified with the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper or the one in which Joseph of Arimathea collected his blood. A central figure in Arthurian legends, it symbolizes a supreme, sacred, and difficult-to-achieve goal.

fifteen days ("a fortnight dead"), having forgotten earthly concerns like gain and loss, and his body is being stripped by the underwater currents. His figure represents "death by water", a ritual death that is not only a physical end, but also purification and regeneration, connecting to fertility myths and the Fisher King. In the *Golden Bough* Frazer provides an extended list of dying-and-reviving fertility gods (such as Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis) and magical rituals provided the scaffolding for the poem's theme of a broken world needing rejuvenation. The central figure of the *Waste Land* - a king rendered impotent who leaves his land sterile - is heavily influenced by the vegetation rites and mythologies discussed by Frazer. There are mythological figures, such as Tiresias, Tristan, and Isolde, and lines from poems, operas, and works of literature that span genres and cultures.

One main reference to western modern tradition for Eliot is that of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* quoted by the poet with the line "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (Act 1, Scene 2): it is a part of a song by the spirit Ariel to Ferdinand. With those words Shakespeare describes an imagined, magical transformation ("sea-change") of a drowned man's body, where his bones turn to coral and eyes to pearls. It is a poetic image of metamorphosis, suggesting that the dead are not just gone but are "transformed into something rich and strange".

"Death by water" can be considered the original myth for one of Bill Viola's most meaningful films: *The Passing* (1991). It is a film devoted to his mother's memory. As the film's title, *The Passing*, demonstrates, the film intends to stage a condition impossible for art, namely the passage: the transition between life and death. The famous phrase "he who is dead and he who sleeps is but an image" is part of Macbeth's soliloquy (Act II, Scene 2) after the assassination of King Duncan. It is an expression that reflects the concept that the dead and the sleepers are defenseless beings, whose condition can be compared to a fiction or an inanimate image. Viola's problem is to verify whether cinema can

produce that transition that painting and sculpture have not been able to stage because they are deprived of a quality that cinema has as its peculiarity: time. In painting, as in theater, one is either alive or dead. The transition, in different ways, either has occurred or it is a fiction. Viola's film is full of conditions of transition. From black to white, from youth to old age, from consciousness to the unconscious. Viola, placed at the center of this personal exploration of altered time and space, represents mortality in such forms as a glistening newborn baby, his deceased mother, and the artist himself, floating, submerged under water. Starkly yet poignantly rendered in black and white, *The Passing* reinforces the notion of a permeable conduit between reality and surreality. An irrepressible soundtrack of Viola's labored breathing in sleep and wakefulness serves to pull the viewer through an otherworldly topography.

The final scene is a bourgeois interior, a private house, which is flooded by a sudden flow of water that destroys the family picture. An unexpected wave of water submerges a domestic picture: It is an image that signals the exact moment of the mother's death. There is no other way for cinema to make this moment visible than through a symbolic image: water, the flow of life, which takes away the serenity of everyday life. The image, however, remains suspended, like the entire film, between dream and consciousness, between private and public history: from childhood to death. Viola uses grainy black and white to create an aesthetic reminiscent of an ultrasound or a night vision, juxtaposing desert landscapes with the fluidity of the water. The water is the final inevitable solution, but it still keeps the pure cleanness and sublime power which belong to the fertile rituals. The film, as is often the case with Viola's films, is also rich in symbolic elements. The recurring image of submersion symbolizes both claustrophobia and the dissolution of the self, a theme rooted in a near-drowning experience the artist had as a child. A haunting soundtrack of Viola's labored breath-

Bill Viola, *The Passing*, Videotape, black and white, mono sound, 54:22 minutes, 1991.







ing and children's laughter accentuates the physical weight of existence and the inexorable passage of time. Another film that had very strong references to water is in *The Reflecting Pool* (1977–1979), a video installation that has become a manifesto of his poetics. The film shows a man diving into a clear pool, but, at the moment of immersion, time stands still. His reflection in the water fragments, creating a series of images that evoke the transience of existence and the search for deeper meaning. *The Reflecting Pool* is not only a work of art, but an experience capable of capturing the essence of the human condition: the transition between states of being, the perception of reality and illusion, the connection between the individual and

the world around them. With *The Passing* Bill Viola moves his meditations on water to his personal biography, but still with a continuous reference to the outer world, the real. In *The Passing* the suspension we perceive is between the real and the dreamlike atmosphere, a condition very close to the conclusion of John Keats's great poem, *Ode to the Nightingale*: "Fled is that music, do I wake or sleep."



Manuscript of *Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes, BnF Français 12577, fol. 18v, 1330. (Perceval arrives at the Grail Castle to be greeted by the Fisher King)