

Aesthetics in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: A Dantean Approach

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Abstract: The present paper studies the influence of Dante on the work of Eliot from the aesthetic point of view, and it is a universal truth that Dante greatly influenced T.S. Eliot's poetry. The great Italian meant more to him than even Shakespeare, whom he thought more varied than Dante, with a greater breadth of humanity, but not so understanding of the heights and depths. He considered Dante's poetry to be "the most persistent and profound influence on my own verse." (*Selected Essays*, p.252). The presence of Dante in Eliot's poems ranges from the quotation used as the epigraph or motto at the head of the first poem, through allusions in *The Waste Land* and inserted English imitations of Dante such as the first line of 'Animula', to the large-scale adaptation of Dantean themes and patterns of imagery in *Ash-Wednesday*. No simple listing of allusions can properly illustrate that sort of 'borrowing', encompassing Dante's Christian beliefs, attempting the simple beauty of his language, extending the range of his symbols, and recreating the whole feel of his verse. Dante's images frequently appear in Eliot's works. Dante and his visions of 'Hell' influenced Eliot's view of the world as a cold and desolate place.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Imagism, Hell, Universal, Symbol, Philosophy.

Introduction

This paper momentarily reflects on the impact of the incomparable Italian writer Dante on the work of Eliot. Eliot is probably the leading name in the 'Modern Movement' that brought about a revolution in English literature from 1910 to 1930. These revolutions occurred at

about the same time in all the arts, as ‘Modernist’ demolished all received definitions of what art is, e.g., the prose writings of James Joyce (1882-1941), the paintings of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), the music of Igor Stranvinsky (1882-1971). Picasso’s experiments in painting dislocated conventional subjects by using geometric shapes to represent the body and putting the eyes on the same side of the nose – a visual parallel of Eliot’s dislocations in words; we can find related developments in paintings which have reflected through Eliot’s ‘collage’ technique.

Dante, Alighieri

Born in Florence, Italy, around 1265, Dante was the son of Alighiero di Bellincione Alighieri and Bella di Abati, and he grew up among the Florentine aristocracy. Italian poet and scholar Dante Alighieri is best known for his masterpiece ‘La Commedia’ (*The Divine Comedy*), which is universally considered one of world literature’s greatest poems. Divided into three sections—‘Inferno’, ‘Purgatorio’, and ‘Paradiso’—*The Divine Comedy* presents an encyclopedic overview of the mores, attitudes, beliefs, philosophies, aspirations, and material aspects of the medieval world. Written between 1292 and 1294 in commemoration of Beatrice’s death, *Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*) reflects Dante’s first effort to depict her as an abstract model of love and beauty. Dante completed *La Commedia*, and other works, including *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Convivio*, and *De Monarchia*, while in exile. His most famous work, *The Divine Comedy*, is as rich in science, astronomy, and philosophy as it is rooted in 14th-century Catholicism and Italian politics. The epic describes Dante’s imagined journey through Hell and Purgatory to Heaven. *Inferno*, the most popular and widely studied section of *The Divine Comedy*, recounts Dante’s travels through the different regions of Hell, led by his mentor and protector, the Roman poet Virgil. *Paradiso* manifests the process of spiritual regeneration and purification required to meet God, who rewards the poet with perfect knowledge (*Poetry Foundation*).

The *Divine Comedy* expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity, despair and the innocent vision that man is capable of experiencing. It is, therefore, a constant reminder to the poet of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel because they have no words for them, and at the same time, a reminder that the explorer, beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness, will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizens if he had all the time a firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted.

Dante has a persistent presence in Eliot's work. The great Italian meant more to him than even Shakespeare, whom he thought more varied than Dante, with a greater breadth of humanity, but not so understanding of the heights and depths, 'deeper degrees of degradation and higher degrees of exaltation' (*Selected Essays* 252). He regarded Dante's poetry as 'the most persistent and deepest influence upon my verse' (*What To Selected Essays* 125) – a comment that can be set against his remark on Laforgue quoted above: Laforgue is an early influence, Dante a lasting one.

Literary Canon: Imagism

The literary movement called 'Imagism' revolved against the Georgian poets' cheap and shallow practice. During the war, there was a strong movement in poetry. It aimed at some drastic changes in poetic theory and practice. Standing as it did for a clear-cut subject, an accurate and economical language, a striking simile or metaphor and a sharply visualised, concrete and sensuous image. Following are the salient features of the Imagist Movement.

(*Some Imagist Poets* 18):

- It uses the language of common speech.
- It produces poetry i.e. hard and clear and does not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It creates new rhythms and copies old rhythms which merely echo old moods.

- The use of ‘verse libre’ made Imagist very popular.
- Free verse, the theory of speech rhythm, was a unique contribution of the Imagist to modern English poetry.
- Imagism opposes the hollow wordiness of contemporary English poetry and introduces a certain amount of hardness and precision which was the crying need of the time.
- Its main objective is to produce brilliant effects and clear expressions which do away with the vagueness and cloying softness of Georgian poetry.
- Discovering the traditional technique is quite inadequate for articulation.
- The Imagist created a precise diction and concentrated on concrete imagery to effectively express a new kind of consciousness.
- Unquestionably, the Imagist movement was inspired by ‘aesthetic considerations’.
- The Imagist sometimes failed to produce genuine poetry because they were quite conscious of being strikingly different and dissimilar from other poets.

Aesthetics

It is concerned with beauty or the appreciation of the beauty, beauty: it cannot be defined, for truly this is left to each person to decide, beauty to me is being able to connect with someone or someone’s work. Aesthetics, in literature, is the inclusion of references to artistic elements or expressions within a textual work. It’s a method used to promote or educate readers about important artistic expression in society.

Literary Approach

The Waste Land is a poem by T. S. Eliot, broadly viewed as one of the main poems of the century. Eliot utilises numerous scholarly and social implications from the western writers

like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as well as Shakespeare, Buddhism, and the Hindu *Upanishads*. The poem shifts between voices of parody and prediction including unexpected and unannounced changes of speaker, area, and time and invoking a tremendous and conflicting scope of societies and writings.

The poem *The Waste Land* is divided into five parts. The first, “*The Burial of the Dead*”, presents the different subjects of preventing expectation and misery. The second, “*A Game of Chess*”, employs alternating narrations, in which vignettes of a few characters address those topics experientially. “*The Fire Sermon*”, the third segment, offers a philosophical reflection comparable to the symbolism of death and perspectives on forbearance in juxtaposition, impacted by Augustine of Hippo and Eastern religions. After a fourth segment, “*Death by Water*”, which incorporates a concise expressive request, the culminating fifth section, “*What the Thunder Said*”, closes with an image of judgement.

Aesthetics and Dantean implications in *The Waste Land*

The journey of both Dante and the narrator in *The Waste Land* undergo a spiritual quest of their own subconscious; they're opened to the realisation of how they live their lives, exposed to the consequences of the choices of others. Despite the dilemma of memory and wish, love has a prominent role in the aesthetics of Eliot and Dante, both in aggravating the artist's will to create through the direction of superabundant erotic desire, and in being the stuff that sustains a fraternity of mentorship among poets living and dead. Eliot has borrowed various lines from Dante, in the attempt to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader's mind and the memory, and thus establish a relationship between the mediaeval inferno and modern life. *The Waste Land* will perhaps remember that the vision of city clerk's trooping over London Bridge from the railway station to their offices evoked the reflection. Eliot intentionally modified a line of Dante by altering it—“sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled.”

There are various allusions of Dante's in the poem such as the opening of the poem about the cruelty of April "mixing Memory and desire" (lines 2-3), for example, recalls the lament of Francesca, caught with her lover Paolo in Hell's whirlwind of lust in *Inferno*, Canto V. The allusion is significant to Eliot's aesthetic in the way that it suggests a relationship between the Hell of desire experienced by Dante's lovers and the poet's Hell of desire, which imprisons creativity. There are different suggestions of Dante. The beginning of the poem about the remorselessness of April "blending Memory and want" (lines 2-3), for instance, reviews the mourn of Francesca, with her darling Paolo in Damnation's hurricane of desire in Hellfire, Canto V. The reference is pertinent to Eliot's taste in the manner that it proposes a connection between the Damnation of want experienced by Dante's darlings and the writer's Damnation of want, which detains imagination.

Similarly, as in *Vita Nuova*, the "final cause" is the craft of poetry and the vocation of the artist. Beyond the hyacinth girl, the artist chooses sublimation and the possibility of a vaster creative engagement when he chooses to overlook romance and look instead "into the heart of light, the silence" (41). Eliot's vision "into the heart of light, the silence" evokes an experience shared by Dante's pilgrim-poet (42), when he walks with the poets of the 'bellas cola' (beautiful school) (*Inf. Canto IV*, 94), a passage in which Dante places himself in kinship with a group of famous poets of antiquity. In the aesthetic paradigms of both Dante and Eliot, an artist's commitment to the vocation of art can mean the entrance into a fraternity of intellects that spans generations, so that love has a prominent role in both poets' notion of the artistic tradition. Along with the other Dantean strains in "*The Burial of the Dead*," Petronius' description becomes a portrait of the aberrant artist, an indication as revolting as the sign written across the gate of Dante's Hell: "Abandon every hope, who enter here" (*Inf. Canto 3.9*). As ominous as the warning Dante places at Hell's gate, the Sibylline reference delivers an imagistic blow.

Eliot's rendering of the adventure narrative as first suggested by the Sibyl at the masthead of *The Waste Land* becomes recognizable again at the end of "*The Burial of the Dead*," the poem's first section, with the protagonist's visit to the psychedelic seer, Madame Sosostris, which is the beginning of a journey which will culminate in his mountain ascent to hear "*What the Thunder Said*." In the passage, the seer narrates a Tarot card reading (Creekmore 98). This reading plays an important part in the narrative of the artist's development. The hanging men featured by both Dante and Eliot represent the importance of accepting vocational difficulty, the death and rebirth of personal will, and the importance of aligning one's creative will with a greater creative will. Eliot depicts the image of an "Unreal City" in the concluding stanza in which a crowd of people - perhaps the same crowd Sosostris witnessed—flows over London Bridge while a "brown fog" hangs like a wintry cloud over the proceedings.

A title such as *Storm over The Waste Land*, for a collection of essays edited by Robert E. Knoll, reminds us that from the first there were extremely hostile critical responses to Eliot, and especially to *The Waste Land*, which is widely seen as not only the most famous and admired but also the most notorious and abused poem of the twentieth century, the most influential but also the most resisted.

Critical Observations

"Eliot's indebtedness to Dante ranges from the quotation and the adaptation of single lines or passages to the deeper influence in concrete presentation and symbolism" (Praz. 361). According to Moynihan and Drew, I shall reiterate that Dante's presence contributes to a positive understanding of Eliot's aesthetics and to the notion that the speaker of *The Waste Land* progresses over the course of the poem. Progress is legible in the speaker's account of his accomplishment and the new, individual poetic voice that emerges. The new voice interprets the translations of Dante that lead the reader through a re-visitation of the artist's

self-sacrifice and self-liberation and testify to the artist's transformed relationship to April's cruel prison of "memory and desire."

Conclusion

In this way, we can find that Dante has a strong presence in not only *The Waste Land*, but in most of the work of Eliot. While critics often consider that *The Waste Land* is a poem without resolution, its Dantean references place the section in a purgatorial context and continue the narrative of the transformation of the poet. The quester's resurrection from "living" to "dying" at the section's start echoes the thunderous rebirth of Statius in Dante's *Purgatorio*. As the thunder speaks, Eliot interweaves the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* parable with a quote from the imprisoned Count Ugolino of Dante's *Inferno*. In both of these cases, Dante's presence highlights aspects of Eliot's aesthetics, pointing in particular to the role of personal will in the development of the artist's relationship to tradition. This poem with the allusions of great world classics has enriched the knowledge and perspectives of the modern readers.

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