

Dante's influence on contemporary American and British writers:

"The Waste Land" in T.S. Eliot's poetry and The Divine Comedy

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On 15th October 1922 The New York Times Book Review listed Eliot's poem among the "Recommended books on Fall Lists", recognizing his great work.

In March 1922, Eliot had offered *The Waste Land* for publication to the Hogarth Press, the British publishing house founded in 1917 by Leonard and Virginia Woolf. They recorded: "*He has written a poem of 40 pages, which is to be printed in the autumn. This is his best work, he says. He is pleased with it*".

For the presentation of the poem, the Woolf catalogue announced:

"T.S. Eliot is a name which has acquired a leading significance during this period, he is among the few unique talents of our time. The qualities of Mr. Eliot's verse are enduring. They represent in many ways the keenest inquiry into our lives which American poetry can boast. Mr. Eliot's mind is subtle, ironic, highly individualistic, he runs to caricature the genuine realities. The Waste Land is the longest poem T.S. Eliot has ever written and this volume represents a new phase in his development, being the fruit of his experimentation in all of his previous work."

His volume *Poems*, containing *The Waste Land*, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and the *Portrait of a Lady*, was marked by "*an intense cerebral quality*" as defined by the The New York Times Book Review and as "*a compact music that has practically established a movement among the younger men*".

Eliot was also awarded the “Dial’s 1922 Award” for his publication, obtaining a prize of two thousand dollars, a prize given annually to young American writers “in recognition of their service to letters” and the motivation was:

“The Waste Land is the finest poem of this generation. It gives voices to the universal despair or resignation arising from the spiritual and economic consequences of the war, the cross purposes of modern civilization, the cul-de-sac into which both science and philosophy seem to have got themselves and the break-down of all great directive purposes which give zest and joy to the business of living. Mr. Eliot is an erudite despair, he quotes lines from The Satyricon of Petronius, from Tristan and Isolde, from Dante, Baudelaire, Verlaine, from The Old Testament and modern jazz songs. In him, reverential and blasphemous ideas are juxtaposed in amazing antitheses. He is a poet who has read voraciously and who possesses an insatiable curiosity about life. His poems are characterized by great lyrical beauty”.

In 1945 Eliot wrote: “A poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him”. Correlatively, the duty of the poet, as Eliot emphasized in a 1943 lecture, “is to preserve and to improve the language and poetry cannot report the event, it must be the event, creating its own life against its own questioning”.

Eliot’s poetry is a process of “living by thought” said the Indian poet Balachandra Rajan, who died in 2009, “at the edge of nothingness, driven by a sensibility aware of the disorder, the futility, the meaningless, the mystery of life and suffering”.

Modernism was also mainly represented by orientation towards fragmentation, free verse, contradictory allusions and multiple points of view, so different from the Victorian and Romantic writing. These modern features appear greatly in the work of T.S. Eliot. Modernist writers were interested in showing characters having multiple personalities and modernist texts are full of allusions to other texts in a cross cultural learning reference to Dante, Homer, Shakespeare and the Holy Bible.

In *The Waste Land* Eliot shows his discomfort with modern life, the modern life lacking in spiritual matters. Life is presented as trivial, suffering from the First World War, both at physical and inner psychological level.

T.S. Eliot has produced such great effect upon his generation because he described men and women who get out of bed or into it from mere habit.

Eliot operates, according to the other modernist poets, a sort of reverse of the myth, a lowering, a mortifying and humiliating reading and interpretation of the myth (as we can see from the quote from Petronius in *The Waste Land*), like James Joyce's Ulysses in his single day journey, published in Paris in 1922 by Sylvia Beach at The Shakespeare & Company, with his private thoughts, the external events, the conversations, the physical surroundings of Dublin and its relations to its epic precursor Homer's Odyssey.

The Waste Land

Eliot wrote: *"My indebtedness to Pound is for having improved The Waste Land. I owe too much to Ezra to be a critic and I thank him because he has reduced a mess of some eight hundred lines to about half its size, il miglior fabbro"*.

Valerie Eliot, interviewed by the editor Timothy Wilson in 1972 for the journal The Observer declared:

"The years of writing The Waste Land were a nightmare for my husband. I really want people to know how much I want to extent my debt and gratitude to Ezra Pound for having made the necessary cuts and improvement of the poem. During his second visit to New York, in 1970, Pound went with me into a library to see if the publications of my husband would help his memory, he was so sad that he just sat for a long time in front of it, with tears in his eyes".

Ezra Pound died in Venice in 1972. His final tribute to Eliot and his final appreciations appeared in the Preface to *The Waste Land* for the Gallop's booklet Letters published in 1970, where he wrote: *"The more we know Eliot, the better. Valerie Eliot, his devoted wife, has done a great job in promoting his work"*. He defined the poem as a sort of *"polyphonic epic poetry of conscience"*.

The Waste Land is a cryptic, difficult poem filled with any number of references to external works and imagery as complex as the framework. At the end of the poem Eliot provides several notes on some of the lines which often only added to the confusion of some of the images.

The title comes from the work of Jessie L. Weston *"From Ritual to Romance"* written in 1920, on the Grail romances, based on Thomas Malory's *Le Morte*

d'Arthur (1405-1471), the first romance in the Arthurian legend's *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, a work that Eliot loved so much.

Miss Jessie L. Weston (1850-1928), scholar and translator of Arthurian texts wrote: "*The forces of the ruler being weakened, the land becomes Waste*" and it comes from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*: "*I sank away from thee and I wonder, O my God, too much astray from thee my stay, in these days of my youth, and I became to myself a barren, infertile, desert land.*"

The Italian essayist Mario Praz (1896-1982) reported that Giorgio Caproni (1912-1990) and Renato Poggioli (1907-1963), suggested for the Italian translation a possible reminiscence of *Inferno XIV* verse 94, "*In mezzo mar siede un paese guasto*", "*A devastated land lies in midsea, a land that is called Crete*".

Here the Greek island Crete is called "*un paese guasto*", "*a waste land, a waste country*" ("*la gaste lande, la terre gaste*" in Old French), in order to describe a damned land which has become more than an austere and infertile desert, almost a *sick*, an *ill and corrupted* land, where human beings seem to have scratched out for three hundred years and then given up in despair and darkness, waiting for a sort of proud knight, a modern knight, who would have been able to free them from a sort of gloomy malediction.

In the city Eliot, like Baudelaire, finds new imagery, a completely new language for poetry, to find poetry in the every-day world, in depicting cityscapes and urban scenes, in the modern world. Civilization has been reduced to a waste land and the land has lost its fertility and ability to give life:

"April is the cruelest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain", from *The Waste Land*

Eliot and Dante

Dante was for T.S. Eliot the most universal of poets in modern languages. He considered him a great master. For Eliot the Florentine poet had been able to put into his long poem *The Divine Comedy* his contemporaries, friends, enemies, historical personages, legendary and Biblical figures.

He had put in Hell men that he knew and hated but also ancient figures, like Ulysses. Those figures are all representative of types of sin, suffering, fault and merit, and all come together in the same contemporary reality.

Eliot wrote that Dante reminds us that Hell is not a place but a state which can only be thought of and perhaps only experienced. The experience of a poem, as for *The Divine Comedy*, is the experience both of a moment and of a lifetime, the experience as human beings, of human passions.

Eliot wrote that Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them and there is no third: Shakespeare gives the greatest width of human passion while Dante gives the greatest altitude and the greatest depth. They complement each other.

For Eliot Dante has been able to transmute his personal and private agonies into something universal and impersonal.

The quotation

Eliot had thought to use a quotation from Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899, because he was very impressed by this novel, but he changed his mind and replaced it by one from the *Satyricon* of Petronius, the Roman work that contains a mixture of prose and verse, serious and comic elements, erotic and decadent passages.

The *Satyricon* enjoyed celebrity and notoriety in the Georgian and Edwardian eras (1714-1830 and 1901-1910). It is considered important for the reconstruction of the lower classes during the early Roman Empire. Eliot certainly read Petronius when he was a student at Harvard, he had a solid culture and he was familiar with many languages, such as French, Italian, Latin, Greek, German and Portuguese.

Eliot quotes the words of Trimalchio, one of the protagonists: *"I saw with my own eyes the Sybil at Cumae hanging in a cage and when the boys asked her - Sybil, what do you want? - She answered - I want to die"*.

The Cumaean Sybil was a prophetess presiding over the Greek colony of Cumae in the bay of Naples, in Italy. It is said that Apollo was in love with her and that, in order to make her aware of his passion, he promised to give her whatever she should ask. The Sybil demanded to live as many years as she had grains of sand in her hand, but unfortunately she forgot to ask for the continuing enjoyment of health, vigor and bloom, of which she was then in possession.

In Virgil, the Sybil prophesies the destruction of Rome: *"bella, horrida bella", "wars, grim wars I see and Tiber foaming with streams of blood"*, from Aeneid, book VI, lines 86-87.

Eliot operates a reverse with satire, with a lowering and mortifying interpretation of the myth, taking the quotation from Petronius because of his colloquial style, his parody of tragic style, his popular speech and irreverence.

The dedication *"For Ezra Pound Il miglior fabbro"*: the Italian line is pulled from Purgatory Canto XXVI, lines 115-119, when Dante referring to the Troubadour poet Arnaud Daniel as the *"greater craftsman of the mother tongue"* wrote: *"O frate, questi ch'io ti scerno col dito fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno"*, *"Oh brother, this one whom I distinguish to thee with my finger was a better craftsman of the mother tongue"*... *"In verses of love, and prose tales of romance all he surpassed and let fools talk"*, *"... "superò tutti e lascia dir gli stolti..."*.

Arnaud Daniel was a distinguished Provençal poet who flourished about 1180-1200. He was a master among the Medieval French poets and Dante admired him. Eliot named Ezra Pound as *"a better craftsman"*, owing much to his friend to whom he dedicated the poem, he praised Pound to be *"il miglior fabbro"* because he reduced *The Waste Land*, and otherwise the poem would have been too long.

1. The Burial of the Dead

"April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land..."

April is the month of rebirth after the supreme sacrificial death Jesus suffered in March or at the very beginning of April (the date of the Crucifixion is disputed).

The traditional date of the descent of Jesus into the tomb is March 25 (which is also the date marking the beginning of Dante's journey into Hell, chosen as the International Dante Day). The inference appears to be inevitable that the date of passion of Christ must have been arbitrarily chosen in order to be harmonized with an older medieval festival of the spring equinox. Modern writers generally adopt either 3 or 7 April related to the partial lunar eclipse where there was "*darkness over the whole land from the sixth to the ninth hour*", the hours when Jesus was crucified, according to gospels of Mark and Luke.

There is also a reference from the French Romantic poet Théophile Gautier (1811-1872): "*Avril qui mêle le souvenir sous l'herbe, si cruel, si mortel...*" and also in James Joyce: "*A barren land, a bare, waste land, dead sea, sunk deep in earth, cities of dead names...a dead sea in a dead land...desolation*", from Ulysses episode IV Calypso.

Lines 28-30 – Your shadow at morning striding behind you/Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

"**rising to meet you**", "*Ed ei surgendo*". The shade of Statius rises after Virgil, guiding him through the second realm. The quote is from Dante's *Purgatory*, XXI Canto, lines 133-136: "*Now you can understand the force of love that warms me toward you, so that I forget our vanity and treat the shadows like the solid substance*". Here Dante refers to Statius, the Roman poet who lived in the 1st Century. Statius is Dante's guide in Purgatory because Statius, like Dante, is repenting from his past sins and like Dante he is involved in a process of religious conversion going from Hell, to Purgatory (Purgatory, to purge), to Heaven.

"**handful of dust**", from the Bible, Genesis 3, 19: "*dust you are, and into dust shall you return*", and also from the English Romantic poet Alfred Tennyson: "*Dead...and my heart is a handful of dust...*"

Lines 39 – 40 – I was neither, Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, looking into the heart of light, the silence.

Inferno XXXIV 25: "*Io non morii, e non rimasi vivo*" "*I did not die, and did not remain alive*". Eliot wrote: "*I was always dead and still alive, and always something other*", Eliot always felt himself between death and life, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, "*To be or not to be*", his doubts, *to live or to die*, like in Eliot's "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Prufrock's" constant state of self-doubt and anti-heroic figure and over analyzation which constitutes a form of

hell for himself. Prufrock can never truly escape his mind: he spends so much time participating in reality, he metaphorically dies at the end of the poem, corresponding to the idea of not returning alive from the *Inferno*.

"From the earth among the new lights moved a voice..." in *Paradiso XII*, line 28 *"del cor de l'una delle luci nuove, si mosse voce"*, *"into the hearth of light, the silence"*, here the reference is also to Conrad's *"Heart of Darkness"*, 1899.

Lines 60-64 – "Unreal City, Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, A crowd flowed over London bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many".

In *Inferno XV*, lines 16-19: *"we met a troop of spirits, who were coming alongside the bank; and each looked at us, as in the evening men are wont to look at one another under a new moon"*.

Shadows of humanity, they are not visible descending into the darkness, as in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, episode VI (Hades), the modern novelization of Homer's epic: *"so many here once walked around Dublin, most people are only very little alive, against the living death of modern material civilization he spoke again and again, and even if these dead could speak, what he said is unanswerable"*.

Inferno IV, lines 10-12: *"Oscura, profonda era, e nebulosa, tanto che, per ficcar lo viso al fondo, io non vi discerneva alcuna cosa"*, *"It was so dark and deep, profound and cloudy, that, with fixing my look upon the bottom, I there discerned nothing"*.

Also in Oscar Wilde: *"Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows?"* and in Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*: *"Un brouillard sale et jaune"*.

Lines 63-68 – "I had not thought death had undone so many. Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled...down King William Street...final stroke of nine".

The quote is from **Inferno IV**, lines 25-27: *"Quivi, secondo che per ascoltare, non avea pianto, ma' che di sospiri, che l'aura eterna facevan tremare"*, *"Here there was no plaint, that could be heard, except of sighs, which caused the eternal air to tremble"*.

"Those who lived without praise or blame, without hope of death, were wretched people who were never alive. The crowd is the morning crowd of commuters"

coming into the city from the suburbs on the south side of the Thames, business men, clerks, typists..."

Prufrock, in Eliot's *The Love Song*, is in search of himself after a psychological and cultural crisis that came with the loss of moral identity, like Dante.

Prufrock's hesitating attitude, like Hamlet's lack of action, his lack of ability to take actions against the murder of his father: "*Do I dare? and 'Do I dare?'*" is also present in Dante, because those who never acted are defined by the Florentine poet as "*the wretched, the coward men who never lived*", those, like Prufrock that in life never acted for fear, living and passing their time - for living it could not be called - in a state of apathy and indifference both to good and evil, in Hell are condemned by Dante to "*go on in nakedness, and sorely stung, by wasps and hornets, which bedewed their cheeks with blood, that mixed with tears dropped to their feet, and by disgusting worms were gathered there*", *Inferno*, 3rd Canto lines 60-64.

Eliot worked for a time in the City for a bank. Often he reported scenes from morning rush (*crush*)-hours in the London tube comparing them to the "modern *Inferno* of the every-day life". London seems for Eliot full of not living souls and the "dead" people who are on their way spending their life are full of hopeless damnation.

The sights of the modern world that is without hope and without choice is the same for Dante and Eliot who passes judgment on his world drawing the connection with the Florentine poet of the XIV Century.

The living world for Eliot is full of the damned souls of Dante.

Line 76 of "The Burial of the Dead"

"You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!"

This is an excerpt from Charles Baudelaire's poem "*To the Reader*" which translates to "*Hypocrite reader, my double, and my brother!*"

While this means very little on its own, it is important to note this line in the context of "*To the reader*" as well as in the context of the first part of the poem "*The Burial of the Dead*", which is Baudelaire's preface to *The Flowers of Evil*: "*hypocrite reader as guilty of lies and sins as I am*", says Eliot. Baudelaire and

Eliot communicates the same ideas: people are corrupted, the world is corrupted and it is getting worse and worse, and everyone is just as guilty as everyone else.

According to Eliot and Baudelaire, civilization has been reduced to a waste land and the land has lost its fertility and ability to give life. Men must regain spiritual and psychological wellbeing and make peace with their demons.

Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* was considered scandalous upon its publication due to the content pertaining to sex, death and lesbianism but it also contained poems on melancholy, corruption of the city, and the oppression of living, the difficulty of the routine daily life, all of which are themes present in Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*.

According to Baudelaire, and to Eliot and Dante, our sins are not really caused by Evil but rather they are the result of boredom and lack of action, which we are all guilty of. Dante and Baudelaire explain how errors and sins deteriorate our spirit: we confess and ask for forgiveness but we always repeat the same mistakes.

In his preface to *The Flowers of Evil*, "To the Reader", Baudelaire states: "*Each day one step forward towards hell...*" which is clearly parallel to the idea that Eliot is trying to convey in *The Waste Land*, which is a commentary on the state of the world after World War I. *The Waste Land* is the modern city and all that exists are ghosts of the past and they offer no answers says Eliot.

2. A Game of Chess

Here we have a reference to Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess*, first staged in London in 1624 at the Globe Theatre, a comic satirical play and political allegory notable for its political content, dramatizing the conflict between Spain and England.

Line 91 – prolonged candle-flames: from Dante's Purgatory XVIII, lines 28-30: "*come il foco movesi in altura, per la sua forma, ch'è nata a salire, là dove più in sua materia dura*", "even as fire moves upward by reason of its form, whose nature is to ascend, there where it endures longest in its material".

Dante discourses further concerning the nature of love. Love is like a flame, both are constantly looking for their natural element, so while the flame of a candle goes always upward assuming a prolonged and lengthened appearance, love is constantly looking for the beloved person, in a mutual exchange.

Line 110 – Glowed into words: from *Inferno XXVI*, lines 85-90: *“fiamma antica cominciò a crollarsi mormorando, pur come quella cui vento affatica. Indi la cima qua e là menando, come fosse la lingua che parlasse, gittò voce di fuori”, “the ancient flame began to shake itself, murmuring, just like a flame that struggles with the wind. Then carrying to and fro the top, as if it were the tongue that spake, threw forth a voice”*.

And again on the flames, *Inferno XXVII*, lines 58-66, immediately preceding the lines that form the epigraph to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*:

“Poscia che il foco alquanto ebbe rugghiato al modo suo, l’aguta punta mosse di qua, di là, e poi diè cotal fiato: “S’io credessi che mia risposta fosse a persona che mai tornasse al mondo, questa fiamma staria senza più scosse. Ma per ciò che giammai di questo fondo non tornò vivo alcun, s’i’ odo il vero, senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo”.

“After the flame had roared awhile as usual, it moved the sharp point to and fro, and then gave forth this breath:

“If I thought that my reply were given to anyone who might return to the world, this flame would stand forever still; but since never from this deep place has anyone returned alive, if what I hear is true, without fear of infamy I answer thee”.

In this passage Dante confirms that nobody ever came back from the Kingdom of Death, from the *“Abyss of the Hell, that furnace of fire who gathers all the evil of the universe”* and he is not afraid to tell this to a man condemned to the death-in-life, which is to someone destined to purge his sin, or like for Prufrock in *The Love Song* destined to live a non-life in a lack of action.

In their misery, the female protagonists of *A Game of Chess* remember their moments of happiness: here we have an allusion to Paolo and Francesca of Rimini, who are in the second circle of Hell, ***Inferno V* lines 73-75**, which contains the souls of the lustful and the punishment of carnal sinners, they are in the dark, tormented by the most furious winds: *“Volontieri parlerei a que’duo, che insieme vanno e paion s’al vento esser leggieri”*, *“Willingly would I speak with those two that go together, and seem so light upon the wind”*.

Francesca recounting her sad story to Dante says: *“Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice nella miseria”*, *“There is no greater pain than to recall a happy time in wretchedness”*, Inferno V, lines 121-123.

“We sound the depths of Hell very often in this life” wrote T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, *“Midway through the journey of our life we found ourselves within a dark wood, for the right way our society had been lost”*.

“I think we need no other Hell than what we have just come out of”, said T.S. Eliot referring to the barbarity caused by the First World War and he reported the words of Lord Alfred Tennyson, the British Victorian poet he admired so much: *“The deep moans round with many voices. Come, my friend, it is not too late to seek for a new world...”*

And I like to recall the words of the American novelist John Steinbeck, Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962, contemporary to Eliot: *“We have only one story”* he wrote, *“All novels, all poetry, are built on the neverending contest in ourselves of good and evil. And it occurs to me that evil must constantly respawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal”* from *“East of Eden”*, 1952.

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