

## Rivista di poesia comparata

Direttore responsabile: Francesco Stella

## Iniziative

**8 dicembre 2019**  
Semicerchio a "Più libri più liberi"

**6 dicembre 2019**  
Laura Pugno alla Scuola di Semicerchio

**5 dicembre 2019**  
Convegno Compalit a Siena

**4 dicembre 2019**  
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**29 novembre 2019**  
Maurizio Maggiani alla Scuola di Semicerchio

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Semicerchio a "Più Libri Più Liberi" Roma

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Semicerchio issue on MIGRATION AND IDENTITY. Call for papers

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"Folla delle vene" di Iacuzzi a Semicerchio

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Semicerchio XXXIX (2008/02) Waste Lands. Eliot &amp; Dante. pp. 17-27

by C. Bradshaw Woelfel

Source-hunting scholarship can be a fruitful approach to the work of T. S. Eliot but, by turns, a rather facile one. Its usefulness was best summed up by the poet himself, decades after the publication of the (in)famous notes to *The Waste Land* that have sent generations of critics back to the library: it is «a waste of time, unless [...] secondary to 'understanding'» (Gordon 485). With that caveat firmly in mind, I wish to offer a closer examination of the connection between Part V of *The Waste Land* and what is already a known source, Dante's *Purgatorio*. To admit straightaway – my goal in part is to argue that a particular passage of Dante's *Purgatorio*, a series of visions encountered by Dante-pilgrim in *Purgatorio* XV, is a source for a particular section of Part V of *The Waste Land*, that which begins with the reference to the journey to Emmaus and ends with the list of «Unreal» cities (lines 359-376). Whether one subscribes to *Purgatorio* XV as a direct source or not, it serves as a useful piece of a more general discussion of Purgatorial parallels building throughout Part V – most notably the appearance of Statius and the repeated expression of thirst or desire for water – that solidify the impression that the closing section of *The Waste Land* consciously mimics (or perhaps, mimes) Dante's ascent through Purgatory. In light of what Eliot says about Dante in his critical prose, the textual echoes as a whole suggest a kind of recurring pattern in Part V that can serve as an interpretive key for understanding the poem and its self-conscious representation of Eliot's poetics.

The endpoint of this discussion is a re-examination of Eliot's direct quotation from the Dante/Arnaut Daniel exchange of *Purgatorio* XXVI in the closing montage of fragmented references that finishes *The Waste Land*. The reference to Daniel's disappearance back into the refining fire has previously somewhat speciously been interpreted as a condemnation of the modern decay of love into lust. A closer look at the Dantean source suggests it ought to be understood much differently. In the section of *Purgatorio* XXVI from which the line is excerpted, Dante is indeed interacting with two lustful penitents. Those two penitents, though, do not only coincidentally happen to be the poets Guido Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel – the encounter is substantially concerned not with lust, but with capping long discussion of poetics that makes up one of the dominant threads of the entire canticle. If we understand the larger poetic context of Daniel and Dante's interaction, we can more clearly understand how Eliot uses the quotation to serve as an end-comment for what *The Waste Land* says about the relationship between revelation and poetics in modernity. As he does throughout Part V, Eliot invokes Dante in an almost masochistic fashion, using the expectation of Dante's successful poetic and spiritual progress as an idealized backdrop against which his preoccupations with the modern problem of subjectivity and its troubling consequences are unmistakably illuminated: the practical inefficacy of revelatory experience, the absence of compassion or sympathy, the subjective privacy of the act of interpretation, and, most importantly for Eliot, the radical inability of the poet to construct a redemptive vision of society.

\*

In her critical biography of Eliot, Lyndall Gordon relates a well-known and rather charming anecdote that, from his early twenties, Eliot would carry a pocket Italian edition of Dante with him everywhere (a *Dantito*), memorizing long passages as he lay in bed or rode on trains (85). The influence of Dante on Eliot's formative years marks the early hints of a shadow that would not fully emerge until the mid 1920's: Eliot came to understand the task of the poet in relationship to the model that he found in Dante, and he tracked the breakdown of modern society according to its dis-integration from a unity that he projected into the 13th century. The most important source for understanding Eliot's view of Dante and Dante's poetics is not the 1920 or 1929 eponymous essays, but the series of lectures on metaphysical poetry collected in the volume *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*.<sup>1</sup> In these essays Eliot traces what he calls the «dissociation of sensibility» or, elsewhere, the «disintegration of the intellect», a gradual breakdown of the possibility of a totalizing schema for human experience as it is evidenced in three moments of poetry, the 13th, 17th, and 19th centuries (227).<sup>2</sup> The breakdown implies a conception of poetry and the task of the poet that can be closely allied with that laid

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out in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*: «The task of the poet is to create art that serves as a source of shared meaning for their contemporaneous society, the greatest art being most comprehensive» (*Sacred Wood* 54-5).<sup>3</sup> Dante is the perfection of the model; he takes the greatest possible range of human experience and integrates it into a coherent schema that gives meaning and value to the greatest possible range of human thought and emotion (for his particular historical moment) (*Varieties...* 55-6, 222-4).

In *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* Eliot explains how Dante's «perfection» is the result of a consensus of meaning unique to the 13th century intellectual community, and the product of a pre-Cartesian conception of revelation. The real success of the *Commedia* is that it presents, synthesized and ordered, such a tremendous range of potentially dissonant (even contradictory) thought and emotion in a unified system. This is possible because both thought and emotion had been synthesized by long-developing traditions of philosophy and poetry (respectively), traditions that at Dante's moment were in harmony (220-3). This synthetic whole was the product of a pre-Cartesian belief in the efficacy of revelation: the assumption that human consciousness was capable of perceiving objective reality and, subsequently, capable of interpreting thought and emotion according to a unifying, objective system of meaning. As is reflected everywhere in the *Commedia*, this appeal to a single and unifying interpretation of human experience depends on an appeal to revelation that is its foundation. Revelation for Dante is access to an objective truth that reveals the essential oneness of what is perceived and experienced as multiple; free of Cartesian doubt, Dante holds that it is directly accessible by, and verifiable within, the human consciousness – it serves as a kind of base interpretive compulsion that guides all human emotion and reason. It is this appeal that allows the construction of a coherent and universal system of meaning for all thought and emotion within Dante's poem, one that the reader is intended to assent to despite (or, perhaps, because of) their lived experience as subjective individuals, their subjective interpretations of his poem, and the innately imperfect relationship between signs (especially language) and meaning (207-28).<sup>4</sup>

For Eliot, the modern crisis of meaning exists because people (over a long course of time) became increasingly aware of the fact that their thoughts, emotions, and interpretations of experience cannot be verified beyond their particular subjective selves. Once subjectivity imposes a filter between human consciousness and the perception of any objective reality, it becomes fundamentally impossible for the claim to «revelation» to serve as the basis for a unifying system of meaning. Any attempt to transcend subjectivity and perceive a potentially unifying objective reality can only be made by a feat of circular logic, a leap to the outside that is ultimately unverifiable (Habib 109-113). This means that even if transcendent religious experience is still possible, it is impossible to be conscious of it, to apply the experience to human thought or emotion (individual or collective), in any way that does not fundamentally undermine its claim to transcendence. Eliot calls this realization «a true Copernican revolution» in thought, one that leads to the modern crisis of meaning<sup>5</sup>: «Individuals become increasingly aware that there is no way to verify the validity of their own interpretations of experiences, thoughts, or emotions through an objective source» (*Varieties...*80, 222).<sup>6</sup> Over time, they push against the formerly accepted consensus of meaning until it falls apart, leaving the impression of a former sense of shared meaning that has been irrevocably shattered (*Varieties...*207-28). In this context, shared experience itself becomes seen as nightmarish – against the appearance that one single experience has been shared in time and space by a pair or group of individuals comes an awareness that the meaning of that experience and its attendant feelings can only be individual, subjective, and multiple.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there is not even any way to verify that the experience has happened at all, or that the people who shared it are real. Unable to expand to any transcendent level of significance, human action becomes seen as wasteful.

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As in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the earlier sections of *The Waste Land* reference the hellish world of *Inferno*, symbolic of the problem of the modern isolated and subjective experience of life, and its consequences for human interrelations.<sup>8</sup> However, as we approach the potential moment of revelation in «What the Thunder Said», Eliot's referential world begins to shift from *Inferno* to the *Purgatorio*. This appropriately mirrors Dante's own shift in the *Commedia*, as *Purgatorio* is the canticle that is most self-consciously concerned with the task of representing objective truth in poetry or art.<sup>9</sup> However, as the referential world shifts, Eliot's usage of Dante becomes increasingly problematic and ironic. In Part V of *The Waste Land* key moments of progress, revelation, and transcendence in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are invoked in order to serve as models or contrasts against which the progress of *The Waste Land* is more noticeably unfulfilled, incomplete, and unsatisfactory.

The presence of a purgatorial backdrop for Part V of *The Waste Land* is, I wish to argue, developed in part through Eliot's evocation of a series of visions encountered by Dante-pilgrim on the mountain as the poem builds toward its climax. The relevant passage from «What the Thunder Said» reads as follows:

But here there is no water.

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Who is the third who walks always beside you? 360  
 But when I look ahead up the white road  
 There is always another one walking beside you  
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
 I do not know whether a man or a woman  
 – But who is that on the other side of you? 365

What is that sound high in the air  
 Murmur of maternal lamentation  
 Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
 Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
 Ringed by the flat horizon only 370  
 What is the city over the mountains  
 Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
 Falling towers  
 JerusalemAthens Alexandria  
 Vienna London 375  
 Unreal

Eliot's notes attribute the section to three sources: Luke Chapter 24's journey to Emmaus, the story of Shackleton's Antarctic expedition, and Herman Hesse's *Blick in Chaos (The Waste Land: A Facsimile... 73, 85)*.<sup>10</sup> These sources, no doubt, are relevant. But, the section taken as a cohesive whole suggests a potentially more illuminating source, a series of visions encountered by Dante-pilgrim in the middle of *Purgatorio* XV. This series of visions resonates with the specific images and themes Eliot uses to present the crises of modern life throughout *The Waste Land*, as well as the potential solutions presented in words of the thunder god. A close analysis of *Purgatorio* reveals the centrality to Dante's poetics of compassion, a confirmation of the transcendence of the individual. Eliot will deliberately invoke Dante's conception of compassion in «What the Thunder Said» as a contrast to the modern moment, when such experience is depicted as impossible. The action of *Purgatorio* XV centers on the ascent from the second to the third terrace of the mountain of Purgatory, from that of Envy to that of Wrath. The first thing that Dante-pilgrim experiences on the third terrace is a vision, which includes three exemplars of meekness, the counter to Wrath<sup>11</sup>:

There it seemed to me I was caught up 85  
 In an ecstatic, sudden vision  
 In which I saw a temple full of people

And, at the door, about to enter, a woman,  
 With the sweet demeanor of a mother, who said:  
 «My son, why have you dealt with us like this? 90

Behold, your father and I have searched  
 For you in sorrow». Just as she now was silent,  
 So did that which brought her leave my sight.

Then there appeared to me another woman,  
 Tears of grief still running down her cheeks 95  
 From anger at the one whom she disdained.

She said: «If you are indeed the lord of this city,  
 Whose naming caused such strife among the gods  
 And from which so much knowledge lights the world,

Avenge yourself on those bold arms 100  
 That dared embrace our daughter, Pisistratus». And it seemed to me that the lord gave gracious answer,

Offered gently and with tranquil look:  
 «What shall we do to one who seeks our harm  
 If we condemn the one who loves us?» 105

Then I saw people, aflame with burning wrath,  
 Stoning a youth to death,  
 And each one screaming to himself, «Kill, Kill».

And I saw him sinking to the ground –  
 For death was heavy on him now – 110  
 But keeping his eyes open to Heaven,

As from his deepest agony he begged  
 The Lord on high to pardon his tormentors  
 With a look that must unlock compassion.

When my soul made its way back 115  
 To the things that are real outside it,  
 I come to know my errors were not false.

Dante's first vision is taken from Luke Chapter 2, and is a fascinating counterpart to the journey to Emmaus story in Luke 24 that Eliot cites in his notes: Mary and Joseph travel to Jerusalem with the 12-year-old Jesus for Passover. They leave Jerusalem, «supposing [Jesus] to be in their company», but later discover that although they thought Jesus walked with them, he is gone. They return to

Jerusalem and, three days later, find him in a temple lecturing to rabbis. Dante's quotation is Mary's sorrowful words to Jesus. Jesus' reply is to tell her that they should have known that he «must be in his father's house», and the Biblical passage concludes by saying that «[Mary and Joseph] did not understand the saying which he spoke to them» (2:44-50).

It may seem a strange fit with the lines cited by Eliot, but Mary and Joseph's journey out of Jerusalem in Luke 2 is an inversion of the journey to Emmaus in chapter 24. Jerusalem as a site of divine teaching is the focus of both passages, and both turn on the issue of an absent divinity (in the Luke 2 story Jesus is absent for three days, as between crucifixion and resurrection). The critical difference is that while in the journey to Emmaus Jesus is possibly absent but revealed to be present, in the other story Jesus is presumed to be present but revealed to be absent. In a rare biblical moment, Mary is confused by the words of Jesus even when she does find him, and thus the dominant tone of the passage is negative – abandonment by God, confusion of his message. This is precisely the feeling evoked by Eliot's reference to the journey to Emmaus, which mimics Mary's abandonment and confusion by excising the expected (or wished-for) moment of revelation. Eliot gives us the context of the revelatory moment, even a symbol that *could* be the miraculous and transcending figure of Christ, but *not* the 'reveal' (if you will), the actual verifiable moment of revelation. Some kind of figure is present to the two travelers, but its actual significance is covered, «wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded», such that they cannot even make out its sex. An identifiable Jesus is absent, and the figures in the poem, like we the reader, are left confusedly noticing the lack because we expect it to be there. This idea – the presence of a potentially transcendent signifier without the possibility of verifying its meaning or objective reality – will be the dominant recurring theme of Part V.

Eliot replaces the absent Christ with a «murmur of maternal lamentation». This line links the reaction of Mary in Luke 2 to the «tears of grief» running down the cheeks of the central figure in the second vision in Dante's series, the weeping wife of Pisistratus. Pisistratus was a tyrant who ruled Athens in the 6th century BCE, whose story Dante took from Valerius Maximus: Pisistratus's daughter is raped. His wife (the girl's mother) comes to ask him to seek vengeance on the guilty parties, but Pisistratus spares them in a profound and uncharacteristic moment of compassion (Hollander 337-8). Pisistratus's compassion counters the potentially destructive and dis-integrative nature of his wife's wrath, transforming a rape (an event with obvious ties to «A Game of Chess») into an opportunity for transcendence. This compassion is rooted in the Dantean idea of revelation; it is an experience of the fundamental oneness of the self with other individuals, and therefore also a verification of feeling beyond the limit of individual subjectivity. The causal link between revelation and compassion suggested in the story of Pisistratus is expanded through the final image of the series in *Purgatorio* XV, the martyrdom of St. Stephen: stoned to death by a public crowd, Stephen's meekness is rewarded with ecstatic vision. The revelation of a divine vision elicits what Dante calls a look that should «unlock compassion» in the witnesses. The look of Stephen «from his deepest agony» seeks to transform his terrible experience of violence into compassion not just between himself and the people destroying him, but between God and the crowd as well (Dante, *Purgatorio*, XV, 111-14). Stephen's face is an interpretable sign that should open up a revelatory experience of compassion to a wider audience, but his gaze is tellingly fixed «on Heaven», and its success is contingent not upon his face itself, but only on the experience of the divine that it attempts to translate.

Beyond Stephen's death, the failure of the crowd to feel compassion without the aid of the divine has serious poetic implications that Dante makes explicit. Stephen's call for an experience of compassion is linked, through the careful framing of the visions, to Dante's own poetry. In the passages just preceding and just following the three exemplars Dante-poet intentionally frames them as a revelatory vision that Dante-pilgrim is experiencing on the mountain (Dante, *Purgatorio* XV, 85-6, 115-7). Dante-pilgrim's revealed vision puts him in the place of St. Stephen, and transforms the representation of the vision in the poem into a potential source of «unlocked compassion» linking Dante-poet (who is actually re-presenting the vision in the form of the poem), God, and the reader. Dante-poet calls the visions «errors [...] not false» (*non falsi errori*), «errors» because they are not actually objects on the mountain, «not false» because they reveal an objective truth hidden to normal sense experience. The representation of the visions in the poem are like the look on Stephen's face – they *should* be the occasion for an experience of transcendent compassion, but their success is contingent upon a transcendent basis beyond their sense experience, just as Stephen's call for compassion is contingent on much more than the interpretable sign of the look on his face.

A slight digression is necessary to fully explain how these visions can be said to emphasize, in myriad ways, the absolute necessity of a space *outside* of individual subjectivity in order to experience compassion. In the second vision Dante-poet yokes the story of Pisistratus's compassion to the story of the naming of Athens, which he took from Augustine, by first referring to the tyrant as the ruler of «the city / whose naming caused such strife amongst the gods». In the myth referred to, Athena and Poseidon both wish to name the city, so each offers a gift – Athena an olive tree, Poseidon a spring. Athena's gift is deemed more useful, so she gets the honors (Hollander 338). The spring of water that Athens denies is linked to revelation through a broad referential system in the *Commedia* (see below on rain).<sup>12</sup> The

spring of Poseidon and the olive tree of Athena are symbols that mark two fundamentally different systems of thought, one rooted in the belief that human reason and sense are sufficient to perceive and understand objective truth (Pagan Ancient Greece), the other rooted in the Christian notion that revelation is fundamentally necessary to overcome faulty human reason and sense, which on their own are incapable of perceiving or understanding objective truth. Pisistratus's compassion is a sign of his turn away from the system represented by Athens to that represented by the spring.

The inability of mankind on its own to overcome subjective limitation without an appeal to an act of faith – here to feel compassion, in the vision of St. Stephen to effectively represent transcendent meaning – is one of the central poetic statements of *Purgatorio*. Its special significance for the issue of poetry in Dante is revealed through the figure of Virgil, the symbolic acme of classical reason, virtue, and poetry. The poem progressively reveals that Virgil's lack of faith makes it impossible for him to understand or perceive the coherent structure of the universe and, accordingly, to correctly interpret experience. This is present in *Purgatorio* XV, where Virgil's reaction to Dante's visionary experience reveals that the Pagan poet is excluded from the compassionate bond it is meant to «unlock». After the completion of the vision, Virgil mistakenly thinks that Dante-pilgrim has been hallucinating as someone who is drunk or asleep, signifying that he has not himself seen the revelatory visions. This reaction is based entirely on his misinterpretation of Dante-pilgrim's face, a visible sign that echoes his inability to interpret the visions themselves (XV, 115-38).<sup>13</sup> Virgil is a more benign version of the crowd that stones Stephen to death in the third vision; unable to interpret the look on Dante's face, he is prevented from the experience of compassion, just as he is excluded from any broader understanding of transcendent meaning.

Virgil's limited understanding in *Purgatorio* XV sets up his contrast with the most important figure in *Purgatorio*, Statius. In what cannot be a coincidence, Statius's identity is introduced to Dante and Virgil in *Purgatorio* by allusion to the same story used by Eliot in Part V of *The Waste Land*, the journey to Emmaus. Indeed, when seen in comparison, Eliot's passage seems an obvious intentional reference (XXI, 1-13).<sup>14</sup> In *Purgatorio*, Statius plays the role that Eliot omits from his version, the revealed Christ, and he appears in order to interpret for Dante and Virgil the climactic event of *Purgatorio*, an earthquake that shakes the entire mountain (Canto XX, especially XX, 124-51). It turns out, Statius explains, that this earthquake signifies the completion of a soul's purgation, and the subsequent ascent to Paradise (in this case, that of Statius himself). This begs an incredible question, though – how was Statius, a supposedly Pagan poet, saved? The answer is incredible, and is the entire purpose of Statius's presence in the *Commedia*. As was previously unknown to the world, Statius discovered and accepted Christ before his own death by reading *Virgil*, a Pagan poet (Canto XXI). Through a fortunate *misreading* of Virgil's poetry Statius interpreted an allusion to Christ in a passage of Virgil's poem that Virgil did not intend (Virgil, of course, is not amongst the saved). The surreal interaction between the poets highlights two points central to Dante's poetics: first, language is a set of signs created by man and thus flawed, subject to change and at the mercy of interpretation. No amount of poetic mastery could make it possible for Virgil to have all readers understand the meaning that he himself intended.<sup>15</sup> Second, without access to a source outside the human mind, signs cannot be interpreted according to their potentially transcendent meaning – Virgil could neither see nor understand the potentially transcendent interpretation latent in his *own* thought and represented in his own poem.

In Dante's poetics, the act of correctly interpreting a transcendent, compassion-inducing meaning out of human experience – whether it be the crowd interpreting Stephen's face, Virgil interpreting Dante's face, or Statius's act of reading poetry – is not determined by the signifier itself, or by sense experience. Rather, it is determined by a consciousness experiencing a miraculous transcendence, one that then interprets all signs according to a revealed truth that is always already accepted. This kind of transcendent consciousness, though, is precisely what Eliot felt was impossible to accept once Cartesian doubt is posited. Both the modern poet and the modern audience are at best a kind of Virgil, whose ignorance can be usefully aligned with the questioning speaker(s) of Eliot's half-version of the journey to Emmaus – the signs may be present all the time, but when seen, heard, or felt, they cannot be consciously recognized in a transcendent manner, nor understood in anything but a private, subjective manner.

To return more directly to *The Waste Land*, perhaps the most striking means that Eliot uses to contrast his conception of modernity with the pre-Cartesian conception present in Dante is through the symbol of water or rain, central to both «What the Thunder Said» and *Purgatorio*. The image of the «fountain» which Athens denied in favor of the gifts of Athena is linked to Purgatory's insistent repetition of an unquenchable thirst experienced by the purgatorial souls and by Dante himself. Purgatory, like the desert of *The Waste Land*, is dry and calling for water. For Dante the water needed is ultimately linked to revelation. In *Paradiso* Dante calls faith a «rain» that overcomes all individual thought and provides understanding that precedes (and directs) thought and feeling (XXIV, 91-96).<sup>16</sup> In Part V of *The Waste Land*, the repeated reference to the miracle of water from the rock at Meribah in lines 331-5 signals that water is potentially related to revelation, as it is also linked to the potential reunification or regeneration of society through the Weston grail legends. But, just like with the potential Christ figure of Eliot's journey to Emmaus reference, Eliot uses the expected or hoped for revelatory significance of water in

Dante to expose the way that, in modernity, it can no longer serve that function. In the water-song section that immediately precedes the journey to Emmaus reference, water is signified through onomatopoeia (lines 346-58). This onomatopoeia mimics the experience of sound without or before the interpretation of its meaning. It is potentially unifying (everyone hears the same sound), but necessarily calls attention to the need for a subjective interpretive act – the sound has no meaning until the reader supplies one. This kind of experience, similar to the use of literary reference in the poem or its depiction of human relationships, is both shared or non-exclusive to a particular subject and, paradoxically, irredeemably private and personal in terms of its significance.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout Part V, Eliot repeatedly uses onomatopoeia to create situations where an expected revelation of transcendent meaning is replaced by a sound without meaning. The shared experience of the sound points to the absence of the real function of revelation, which is to facilitate shared feeling and shared meaning. Onomatopoeia occurs again in the *co co rico* of the rooster, a sound traditionally meant to signal the coming of dawn, and therefore another evocation of Christ and revelation (391-2). The cock-crow does mark the coming of rain, but after the long buildup to the expected moment the thunder itself speaks only in meaningless pure sound, the triple «Da» (400, 410, 417).<sup>18</sup> Once again, onomatopoeia allows the simultaneous experience of a sign, now one which is explicitly supposed to serve the role of revelation, without an explanation of its meaning. The meaning-giving move of transforming the sound into three different words, *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, and *Damyata*, enacts a reversal of the supposed purpose of revelation by separating a single sound into multiple signifiers that are unrecognizable to Eliot's contemporary audience, alien by the 'otherness' of their language and the religious tradition from which they come. The reader is left in the role of Eliot's figures on the road to Emmaus, made acutely aware of the necessity for subjective interpretation of meaning where they expect a representation of transcendent revelation.

Tellingly, Part V of *The Waste Land* contains two other Dantean references that, coming from *Inferno*, reinforce the insoluble nature of the problem of subjectivity by denying the possibility of compassion. The first is the reference to the famous adulterers Paolo and Francesca from *Inferno V* echoed in «[t]he awful daring of a moment's surrender / [w]hich an age of prudence can never retract» (402-3). On one level this is a simple condemnation of failed human relationships, evocative of «A Game of Chess». However, in the *Commedia*, the story is also about language and interpretation. Paolo and Francesca give in to their adulterous desires because they are overcome with lust while reading a story about Lancelot. The line that marks their fall is evoked later in the *Paradiso*, to serve as a contrast to Dante-pilgrim's moment of conversion while in contemplation of «the point which had overcome him». The point is part of a vision through which Dante understands God's unifying presence in all multiple created things, and the line itself references Augustine's conversion in the *Confessions*. Dante-poet introduces the line by saying that Beatrice, not Dante-pilgrim, is «looking fixedly at the point which had overcome [Dante]», and the scene is thus an instance of perfect compassion between Dante and Beatrice, founded directly in experience of the divine through the signifying image of the point. Immediately afterward Beatrice reads Dante's mind, confirming their perfect sharing of consciousness (XXIX, 12).<sup>19</sup> This transcendent intersubjectivity is the goal of the «awful daring of a moment's surrender», but Eliot evokes only Francesca's failure, not Dante's success. This impossibility of intersubjectivity is reinforced in the second *Inferno* reference, that to «the key» that locks «each in his prison». As Eliot explains in his notes through the reference to F. H. Bradley, the image of the isolated prisoner is symbolic of human subjectivity, the privacy of experience that cannot be transcended and, thus, makes actual compassion impossible (411-4).<sup>20</sup>

Rather than presenting an interpretive key for human thought and emotion, the moments of revelation in *The Waste Land* offer no possibility for an experience of compassion that might repair the modern sense of isolation and the consequence of wasted human action. Eliot signals this by contrasting Dante's ascent to redemption in the journey up Mount Purgatory with the lack of perceivable progress in «What the Thunder Said». The moment of revelation is preceded with the hellish images of «hooded hordes swarming / [o]ver endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth / [r]inged by the flat horizon only». This hellish desert plain culminates in the list of decayed and Unreal cities distant from the idealized «city over the mountains». After the moment of revelation, we find that the mountain, like the rain, cannot be redemptive – we can never leave the world of the «Unreal» city or, more appropriately, find that when we arrive at what we thought was our goal, it is just another ruined tower, like that of *Le Prince d'Aquitaine*.

What is remarkable about Dante's series of visions, themselves evocations of a broad series of literary and historical reference, is the way that their meaning is connected through a single source of meaning that builds throughout the entire poem. There is a single poetic voice rendering a single coherent picture of all of existence, as we follow a single protagonist. It cannot be understated that for Eliot (and for Dante), this is the direct result of Dante's notion of revelation, seeing the essential oneness of what we would otherwise experience as multiplicity. Eliot gives us, on the other hand, a series of images and references without the unifying, systematizing base. The images themselves are fragmented and disjointed, the voice deliberately jumps from speaker to speaker with no discernable connecting

voice, and the poem maintains no obvious protagonist whose coherent view of society we are meant to share. The fisher-king that finally appears at the end is a symbol of the modern poet himself, hoping to redeem society but only able to construct a vision of society whose potentially transcendent meaning is excluded or obscured, like the play of «mad» Hieronymo.

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The presence of *Purgatorio* XV as a direct source is debatable, but my goal has been to suggest the way that Dante's deliberate engagement of issues of language, representation, and revelation can serve as an important interpretive lens through which to see Eliot's own treatment of those issues in Part V of *The Waste Land*, where the influence of Dante is undeniably present. Without this more elaborate contextualization of *Purgatorio* as a source it is near impossible to understand how they are brought to a climax in the one direct reference of «What the Thunder Said» to *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVI's exchange between Arnaut Daniel and Dante (line 427).<sup>21</sup> The reference has generally been taken in its most literal sense, the necessity for purgation by fire, and specifically for purgation of the predisposition to lust.<sup>22</sup> This sense, most certainly, is correct. It echoes the poem's general disgust with human sexuality and with female sexuality in particular, perhaps most obvious in «A Game of Chess», but also present through Part V's allusion to Francesca's adultery. I. A. Richards summed up the view of most critics nicely when he said that Eliot's fascination with *Purgatorio* XXVI illustrates «his persistent concern with sex, the problem of [his] generation...» (Manganiello 71). For Eliot the 'problem of sex', though, is merely a symptom of the larger problem of subjectivity (as in *Prufrock*). In *The Waste Land*'s closing slew of references, I would like to suggest that his engagement with that issue is primarily operating at the level of poetics.

The case is the same for the exchange with Arnaut in the Dantean source. Arnaut is the last soul that Dante encounters before passing through the ring of fire and entering the earthly paradise (Eden) on top of Mount Purgatory. He occasions the summary of a long discussion of poetics and Italian poetry that has run throughout the canticle, dealing primarily with a definition of the scope and purpose of Dante's own poem and its exhibition of Dante's *dolce stil nuovo*. This summarizing begins before Arnaut Daniel, in Dante-pilgrim's encounter with the soul of the poet Guido Guinizelli. As an anonymous soul in the circle of fire Guido explains the nature of lust's corruption of love (the central lesson of the terrace of the lustful) to Dante-pilgrim. Then, in one of the most emotional scenes of *Purgatorio*, Guido names himself to reveal his identity:

«About myself, indeed, I'll satisfy your wish. 91  
I am Guido Guinzizzelli, come so far in my purgation  
because I felt true sorrow well before the end».

[. . .]

when he gave me his name and I knew he had been 97  
father to me and others, my betters,  
who always used love's sweet and graceful rhymes.

[. . .]

Once my eyes were satisfied,  
I owned myself ready to do him service  
with such assurance as compels belief. 105

He answered: «All that I hear you tell  
leaves so deep and clear a trace in me  
that Lethe cannot wash it out or make it dim,

but if your words just now have sworn the truth,  
tell me what has caused you to disclose 110  
by speech and look that you still hold me dear».

And I to him: «Your sweet verses,  
which as long as modern custom lasts,  
will make their very ink seem precious».

«O brother», he said, «that one whom I point out» – 115  
and he pointed to a spirit just ahead –  
«was a better craftsman of the mother tongue.  
in verses of love and tales of romance  
he surpassed them all, [. . .]»

Dante-poet alludes to an immediate feeling of brotherhood with Guido, and summarizes his connection by saying that he «knew [Guido] had been / father to [him] and to others, [his] betters, / who always used love's sweet and graceful rhymes». What Dante is alluding to is the fact that Guido is the father of Italian love poetry, the basis of Dante's early poetic education. The mention of «love's sweet and graceful rhymes» is there to name sweet style that Dante opposes to his own «sweet new style» (*dolce stil nuovo*). Dante has explained this distinction just one canto earlier: what separates Dante's *new* style from the sweet verse of the other Italian love poets in his tradition is that he was the first to expand love unto a theological dimension. The difference is the basis in revelation, accessed





of shared meaning. «Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe» might usefully be seen as an ironic comment on the call for revelation – spoken as much to the poet-figure shoring fragments against his ruins (and symbolized by *le Prince* who lords over a broken tower) as to the broader society for whom that poet is meant to recover meaning – I'll give you the poem you ask for, including the signs of revelation, but it will not mean the same for each of us. The result is that the entire effort amounts to waste. All speech in fact is waste when, as Arnaut Daniel reminds us, it is disengaged from the possibility of transcendence.

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Because it revolves so closely around the issue of transcendence and the necessity for revelation, a discussion of Eliot's use of Dante in *The Waste Land* runs the risk of seeming overdetermined by his conversion in 1927. I would like to close by suggesting, on the contrary, the way that the conception of revelation as effectively impossible present in the 1922 poem might be used to illuminate how problematic for Eliot the issue of conversion was, and would remain throughout his life. In the opening to the last of the Clark Lectures Eliot says:

For several generations, we have been told by philosophers and half-philosophers, that if you cease to believe in Good and Evil, they do not exist. [. . .] We have not been so often told, what is equally true, that if we do believe in Good and Evil then they do exist. One generation doubted, one disbelieved, and the present generation has forgotten, that Good and Evil can be real... (*The Varieties...* 207)

The influence of Dante assured that Eliot could not forget, but he saw no way that it could be real for the modern subject in the way that it was for Dante. The very conception of reality had been irrevocably altered. The problem, as Eliot understood it, was not seeing the importance or value of belief, but seeing how you could ever think or feel that you believe without subjective doubt – in other words, how you could have any kind of belief of value. In *The Waste Land* Eliot is not calling for a religious conversion of society. Rather, the poem suggests that there may be no way that even genuine religious experience could be realized within the subjective consciousness, even less chance that it might again form the basis of a new kind of poetry or the construction of values for society. The great irony, as the publication of *The Waste Land* would prove, was that Eliot's poetry of doubt and despair struck both an intellectual and emotional chord that resonated throughout the society he felt irrevocably isolated from.

#### NOTE

1. These were the Clark Lectures at Cambridge in 1926 and, later, the revised Turnbull Lectures at Johns Hopkins in 1933.

2 Eliot says that the «disintegration» he tracks in poetry is «probably only one aspect of a general deterioration, the other aspects of which should interest workers in other fields». In the Turnbull

revisions of the lectures, post-conversion, he will also say that this theory is closely linked to the «History of Belief».

3 This is best explained in the often misread analogy of the platinum catalyst, which includes the idea of the impersonal poet as a necessary mechanism because of the problem of subjectivity. The essay continues:

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings [...]. The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.

The platinum catalyst functions as a sort of magnet, which draws in both the absorbed tradition and the emotions and feelings of the contemporary moment (the «historical sense» in both of its features, not simply the «tradition» as it is normally understood but also the values of the poet's modern society) until the «numberless feelings, phrases, [and] images» present can «unite to form a new compound». The measure of success of the poet is the extent to which they serve as the completely passive mouthpiece of the broadest range of their society's experience possible. «[I]t is not the 'greatness', the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place». Following the chemical analogy, the pressure in the chamber in which the fusion occurs would be dependent entirely upon the amount of «numberless feelings, phrases, [and] images» present – the more comprehensive the better, since it would in turn represent in a single work of art the greatest possible range of society.

The objection might be raised that Eliot, by naming only «emotions and feelings» as the stuff of poetry, is making poetry not of a kind with Dante's 'metaphysical poetry', which deals explicitly with thoughts and emotions. Indeed, the move away from thought is an explicit attempt on Eliot's part to get around the problem of subjectivity as it might relate to the poetic project. However, as the necessity of the myth of the impersonal poet makes clear, as do the slippages of «phrases and images» into the metaphor, feelings and emotions have the same relationship to the problem of subjectivity as thoughts – they are likewise realizable to the poet (or individual) only after a process of subjective filtration in the mind. This is well illustrated in *The Waste Land's* engagement of the issue of compassion, central to Dante's poetics, which is discussed later in this essay. In the Clark Lectures, Eliot will return thought to the task of the poet by name, see *The Varieties...*, 223-4.

4 Also see Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, translated and with a commentary by Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press), especially Cantos XXIII and XXIV. Dante makes it clear in the exam on Faith administered to Dante-pilgrim by St. Paul that Faith is a self-evident basis («both substance and evidence») through which all right reason and interpretation is subsequently

derived. Faith thus precipitates a radically different kind of human consciousness, one that unifies the apparent multiplicity of all experience, and is the basis for the synthesization of thought and emotion.

5 According to Eliot, after Descartes «assumptions as to the ultimate reality of [anything] can only be legitimized in the degree to which they extend coherently through social experience, and not by any abstract conception». For the discussion in the direct context of poetry, see Eliot, *The Varieties...*, 262.

6 Eliot's discussion of the impact strictly in the realm of philosophy can be found in the discussion of his Harvard philosophy papers in Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy*, especially chapter 4. See also Dominic Manganiello, *T. S. Eliot and Dante* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 50. Writing before the publication of the Clark and Turnbull lectures in Schuchard's book, Manganiello has clearly caught the scent of the significance of Descartes for Eliot's conception of Dante.

7 See Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 259. Eliot wrote in an essay on F. H. Bradley in 1914 that «the attitude of science involves the constitution of a larger and larger limbo of appearance [...] the thing is known through appearances, but as soon as the distinction is made appearance and things fall apart, and appearance replaces the thing as a point of attention [...]. Whenever we desire to explain we will think of a reality which causes the appearances, but as soon as we have clearly formulated it, it turns out to be appearance itself». The quotation is useful for understanding Eliot's reference to Bradley in the notes to Part V (see below).

8 The epigraph is the most obvious example – a doubly ironic reference. In the *Commedia* Dante's revelatory journey is meant to prove Guido's claim about the incommunicability of truth to be false, in modernity, Guido's claim is the truth, signaling the falsity (or impossibility, in terms of efficacy) of Dante's journey to a transcendent poetics. The Lazarus reference more pathetically renders the same sentiment.

9 Dante's increasing focus on poetics and issues of representation in *Purgatorio* can be found throughout the poem itself, but for an interesting and useful discussion of the difference between *Purgatorio's* focus on semiotics and the function of the sign in relating potentially objective reality (in contrast to *Inferno* and *Paradiso*), see Francis X. Newman, *St. Augustine's Three Visions and the Structure of the Commedia*, in *MLN*, Volume: 82 Number: 1 Jan, 1967, 56-78.

10 If you look at the handwritten manuscript facsimile for the drafts of the section, it appears that Eliot wrote the section almost exactly as it appears in the final version, and that Pound cut little. The two chief changes are that the stanza break between lines 365 and 366 was omitted (enhancing the impression that the Emmaus reference is closely related to the «sounds high in the air» section), and that the city Athens originally appeared first in the list of cities in line 374.

11 The section in question fits into a broad contextual pattern that gradually highlights the centrality of poetics and interpretation. In *Inferno*, as Dante descends he meets on each level punished souls meant to characterize a particular kind of sin. After (usually) an interview, the souls' appropriate positions in the broader schema of hierarchized sins are established either through their own explanations or in conjunction with the aid of Dante-pilgrim's guide, Virgil. In

*Purgatorio* the structure is similar, but much more formulaic: as he ascends to each level of purgatory Dante-pilgrim still encounters purging souls who symbolize the disposition to vice that marks that particular level of the mountain, but he also encounters 3 exemplars of the virtue which is meant to counter the particular vice of that level, drawn from stories in Scripture or Classical literature (the first is always a story about Mary). These exemplars cannot actually be souls on the mountain (many will be encountered later in the *Paradiso*); rather, they are presented through some kind of abstract representation – works of art carved onto the mountain by the divine hand, visions sent to Dante-pilgrim, floating voices, etc.

12 See note 4 above on revelation and faith in *Paradiso* XXIII and XXIV.

13 This inability is set up against Virgil's role as guide throughout *Inferno* and into *Purgatorio*, where he will eventually be replaced by Statius and then Beatrice. See also Eliot's note to *The Waste Land* line 366 and an expanded version of the cited passage that can be found in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Waste Land*, ed. by Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 60-62. Virgil's misinterpretation of Dante as drunk or sleepwalking while receiving the visions that he cannot share aligns it with the passage from Hesse's novel that Eliot cites in his notes (it may, even, partially explain Eliot's immediate and strong affinity for it). In that passage Hesse describes Dostoevsky (and his Karamazoff) as a poet/prophet who, inflicted as with a sickness, receives visions about mankind. In the closing lines of the passage cited by Eliot in his notes, Hesse says

that Dostoevsky functions as a sort of «barometer» for the sickness of «already half Europe», which is «in a state of drunken illusion [...] [singing] a hymn such as Dmitri Karamazoff sang». He elsewhere aligns this sickness with changing meanings. What is absent from the Hesse, though, is the specifically Dantean nature of the images in Eliot's lines – fragmentary flashes juxtaposed against one another, described as «sounds high in the air». On subsequent terraces in *Purgatorio* the exempla that Dante experiences will come explicitly as voices from unknown sources, often sounding in the air, a technique that suggests the line «What is that sound high in the air».

14 See above for a discussion of Eliot's absent Christ in *The Waste Land* Part V. The section from *Purgatorio* in which Statius appears makes for a remarkable contrast with Eliot's Journey to Emmaus reference. Compare lines 1-13 here with Eliot's, see page 19 above.

The natural thirst that never can be quenched  
except with that water the woman of Samaria  
begged to be given as a special grace  
tormented me. And in haste I followed my leader  
[. . .]  
And lo, as Luke sets down for us that Christ,  
just risen from the cave that was His sepulcher,  
revealed himself to two He walked with on the road,  
there appeared a shade, coming up behind us  
while we, intent upon the crowd prone at our feet,  
were not aware of him until he spoke  
and said: «O my brothers, may God grant you peace».

Note also the presence of water/thirst immediately surrounding both references to the Emmaus story, discussed in the context of revelation below.

15 See also Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXVI, 109-138. In *Paradiso* this sophisticated understanding will be confirmed by Adam in the 8th heaven, when Adam tells Dante that language is created by man, and was already changed by its own nature before the time of Tower of Babel.

16 Dante, *Paradiso*, XXIV, 91-96. In Cantos XXIII and XXIV this «rain» is explicitly linked with the water of the baptismal fountain, and satisfies Dante's thirst. Also see note 4 above.

17 For a useful discussion of Eliot's dissociation of meaning from language with special regard to literary reference, see Maud Ellmann, *A Sphinx without a Secret*, in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Waste Land*, pp. 258-275. The selection is excerpted from her book *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 91-109.

18 For a useful discussion of the poem's possible construction of an internal system through which to interpret meaning see Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley, *Reading 'The Waste Land': Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), pp. 172-207. This internal system, of course, would be the creation of the poet, and still subject to the problem of subjectivity in terms of its possible translation to an audience.

19 This extremely insightful connection to Augustine and the Paolo and Francesca episode of the line in Canto XXIX, 12 was suggested to me by a lecture given by Christian Moevs on *Paradiso* XXIX, given on the 26th of April 2007, at Notre Dame University.

20 Brooker and Bentley point out in *Reading the Waste Land...*, p. 193, that Eliot's Ugolino reference and the passage he cites from Bradley «are not parallels but contrasts». This is true, a result of Eliot's belief that Bradley's (or any other philosopher's, for that matter) attempt to circumvent subjectivity was only possible through an unverifiable leap of circular logic – see notes 9 and 10 above.

21 The importance of this passage to Eliot cannot be underestimated, as is evidenced by its re-occurrence throughout his work – notably, it appears again in *Ash Wednesday*, was the source of the «il miglior fabbro» dedication to Pound, and was the source of the title of Eliot's 1920 book of poems, *Ara Vos Prec*.

22 The explanatory note to the line in *Lawrence Rainey's Modernism: An Anthology* (United Kingdom: Blackwell, 2005), p. 139, or the note of Michael North in the Norton Critical Edition, p. 19, are two typical examples. Although North's book gives us three pages of music for «Shakespearian Rag» amongst 35 other pages of reproduced source material, there is no treatment of Dante, nor a larger reproduction of the Arnaut Daniel section of *Purgatorio*.

23 For Daniel's reputation, see the commentary by Robert Hollander, p. 593. For Eliot's identification with Arnaut, it seems to be a name that Eliot and Pound were fond of giving to each other. The Dantean context gives Eliot's heartfelt dedication to Pound, which names him Arnaut by implication, a kind of mellow sadness. For Pound naming Eliot, see Canto XXIX in *The Cantos*. The reference indicates Pound's understanding of the exchange was at least as deep as Eliot's.

24 Hollander notes that in fact, it is a pastiche of Provençal lyric love poetry in general, not just Arnaut Daniel's work. Alighieri, *Dante, Paradiso*, Trans. and comm. Charles S. Singleton, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

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