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It Falls to Us: Linking *The Waste Land* to Dante's *Divine Comedy*

Katherine Balkema

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I have neither given nor received, nor have I tolerated others' use of unauthorized aid.

Katherine Balkema

Introduction: A New Perspective

There are very few – if any – portions of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* that have not been meticulously scrutinized over the course of several years of study. Scholars from all sorts of walks of life have contributed a wealth of ideas and possible explanations with varying degrees of focus; some have honed their focus on certain passages within the poem or particular, external factors that influenced Eliot's work. Others have taken on the task of providing interpretations for the poem at large, culminating in entire volumes dedicated to their conclusions. Perhaps the most famous of these is Cleo McNelly Kearns, whose study on the Indic influences in Eliot's writing paved the way for many subsequent areas of interest. She addresses a number of Eliot's poems throughout her text, and the Indic allusions in each, which ultimately leads to her mentioning Eliot's fondness of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*.¹

Her observation of Indic texts having as strong of an impact on Eliot's poetry and thought as the *Divine Comedy* did is not carried much further, which is perfectly sensible, given the topic she chose to pursue. However, it seems to me that there is a great deal to be gained from interpreting Eliot's work, specifically the last few stanzas of the final section of *The Waste Land*, if one considers the potential connection between elements of the *Divine Comedy* and the key points of Eliot's conclusion to *The Waste Land*. To wit, I believe that the thunder is in and of itself a mentor that helps facilitate the reader's personal journey to find morality in a damaged reality, rather than as a set of instructions left to the reader by Eliot himself. Much like the pilgrimage illustrated in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *The Waste Land* Eliot describes is a part of the human condition that is meant to be both observed and experienced by the reader; through its

¹ Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: A Study in Poetry and Belief* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 50.

depiction, it attempts to instruct the reader on how best to carry on their own pilgrimage to achieve their ideal selves, be that in the form of resurrection, enlightenment, or however else one would define his or her actualized existence. The thunder, in this instance, serves the same role as Virgil in the *Divine Comedy* – it is a universal guide based in wisdom that can be applied to any and every pilgrim that passes through this Waste Land on the way to the ideal existence.

Establishing Connections: Close Readings of Dante

To begin, I feel it would be best to describe specific aspects of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that may best be translated to one's reading and interpretation of *The Waste Land*. Once a solid argument has been made for each characteristic's inclusion in this analysis, it will be easier to move to a more in-depth comparison between it and *The Waste Land*. In the context of this argument, the first and perhaps most fundamental quality of the *Comedy* that must be considered in relation to *The Waste Land* is the nature of the *Comedy* itself. In a letter written to his host in Florence, Dante explains that his work will be addressing specific concepts and ideas "as to which inquiry must be made at the beginning of every didactic work,"² which ultimately leads to Dante describing that the purpose of "the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness."³ These statements are very brief and are by no means the only parts of Dante's letter worth acknowledging, but they are of particular importance to consider in order for the remainder of this argument to make some semblance of sense. The *Comedy* was intended to be an educational tool for the general public, including those who identified as Christians and those who did not; anyone who wishes to

² Dante Alighieri, "Epistle to Cangrande" from *The Letters of Dante* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1920) 199.

³ *Ibid*, 202.

improve their understanding of the divine existence are meant to be able to form their own conclusions based on what they learn through their indirect experience of the pilgrim's journey.

The most prominent feature of the *Comedy* that lends itself to this instructional capacity is the character of Virgil, as well as the part he plays throughout the pilgrimage. The epic poet serves as the pilgrim's friend and mentor for the first two thirds of the journey depicted in the *Comedy*, and is typically characterized as the personification of human rationality and wisdom in scholarly interpretations. Over the course of the journey, first through hell and then through purgatory, Virgil allows the pilgrim to openly voice his questions regarding the nature of their pilgrimage and the divine existence, while simultaneously acting to alleviate the pilgrim's occasional bits of fear. The former dimension of Virgil's functionality is demonstrated quite well in Canto XI of *Inferno*, wherein the pilgrim and Virgil are forced to pause in order to adjust to the general unpleasantness of the atmosphere. The pilgrim inquires as to whether his guide would be willing to instruct him on the structure of the deeper regions of hell, and Virgil responds by reasoning his way through the sinners' placement in their respective circles and the systematic divisions of the subsequent circles into rings and ditches. The pilgrim, who is having difficulty following the logic of the deeper layers' organization, initiates a follow-up session to Virgil's explanation:

“Master, your lucid words make me aware...
But those in the thick marsh, those who are driven about
by the wind, those in the rainfall and its mess,
and those who crash together and harshly shout,
why does the red-hot city not oppress
those souls with pain, if they have earned God's hate?
If not, why are they set in such distress?”

“Why does your understanding deviate
so far afield?” he said...

“Do you forget the explanation given,
in the pages of your *Ethics*, of the three
dispositions that offend the will of heaven...
How it says there that incontinence will incur
less blame, offending God less grievously?
If you contemplate that saying and you stir
your wits to recollect what you saw
punished above...
you will see why justice has seen fit to draw
a line between them and the evil souls below...”⁴

This exchange continues throughout the rest of the Canto, and similar sessions of question and answer repeat themselves throughout the rest of the trilogy. Here in particular, Virgil is guiding the pilgrim’s thoughts toward a higher level of active rationality, which ultimately encourages the emergence of more concrete thoughts on divine matters that will guide the pilgrim over the course of his journey.

Yet it must be observed that scholars have suggested that the complexity of Virgil’s supporting role is meant to extend to the reader’s own reality. In light of Dante’s assertion that the *Comedy* is meant to be a didactic tool for the general population, it is clear that Virgil is one of the cruxes of that didactic intention, and that the reader is meant to learn from Virgil’s wisdom in the same capacity that the pilgrim is. An essential passage illustrating this point comes later on in *Inferno*, when the pilgrim witnesses an intense disagreement between Sinon and Master Adam. Virgil snaps at the pilgrim to restore his focus, and insists that he “remember that I always will be near / if it ever should befall that fortune brings / such arguments as this one to your ear.”⁵ Charles Singleton argues that this passage proves to be an excellent example of Virgil serving a dual purpose in guiding the pilgrim: “it is here that he [Dante] must make sure, in the

⁴ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.: United States, 2008) 67-89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 145-147.

future, that Virgil be at his side. Thus Virgil... has a dual role as guide, in a journey there and a journey here.”⁶ Virgil is the first of two teachers encountered by the pilgrim as well as the reader, and his capacity to teach is observed first in his mentorship of the pilgrim – the journey “there” – and second in the thoughts and ideas Dante the poet expresses through his character that are meant to extend outward to the reader’s life in reality – the journey “here.” This duality is crucial to Virgil’s effectiveness as a guide, and it will be seen again when we move to discuss the thunder’s address to *The Waste Land*.

However, a guide is not the only concept that is shared between the *Comedy* and *The Waste Land*. The inclusion of a set of morals, or principles, is at least briefly mentioned in subtle, thought-provoking ways in both works. Towards the beginning of the second installation of the *Comedy*, the *Purgatorio*, Dante the pilgrim basks in the hopeful atmosphere of the rediscovered heavens. As he takes in the sights around him, he notices “four stars / unseen by mortals since the first mankind.”⁷ The allusion is discrete enough to not distract the reader from the pilgrim’s joy at seeing stars again, but the editor notes that these four stars observed at the base of Mt. Purgatory are symbols of the four cardinal virtues of classic thought: prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. It is with these virtues in mind – as well as the continued guidance of Virgil – that the pilgrim continues on his journey of comprehension and self-actualization. Eventually, as the pilgrim moves closer to the top of the mountain – and, therefore, closer to God – the four stars are replaced by three stars, each signifying the three great Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. The pilgrim himself transitions from relying solely on reason to overcome his struggles towards depending more and more on divine grace and love; yet this transformation

⁶ Charles Singleton, “Allegory” in *Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Harvard University Press: United States, 1954) 1-17.

⁷Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio* (Signet Classics: United States, 2009) 23-24.

is not reflected in *The Waste Land*. We will see later that the thunder does define a set of principles to guide the reader as he or she moves forward, but the transformation that those virtues are likely to inspire is not entirely clear, nor is it necessarily strictly religious in nature. But it is worth mentioning that each pilgrimage outlines a set of qualities for the pilgrim to aspire to, and that the environments in which they are presented – despite the gradual improvement of the one – are both strikingly depicted as full of despair and confusion.

The Comparison: Environmental Atmosphere & Emergence of a Guide

In the beginning of *Inferno*, the pilgrim loses his way in a dark, tangled wood before being set upon by three beasts, prompting the appearance of Virgil; in “What the Thunder Said,” the narrator is travelling through a desolate landscape, though it is unclear as to where he is going or why he has decided to go. There are two specific passages that depict his apparently aimless quest. The first describes a “road winding above among the mountains / Which are mountains of rock without water / If there were water we should stop and drink...”⁸ It is difficult for a Christian not to think of one of many biblical cases of wandering in a desert, be that in the image of the children of Israel fleeing the persecution of Egypt or in the ongoing temptation of Christ in the New Testament. This line of thought is reinforced by the second passage, which depicts at least two travelers on their way to some unknown destination:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
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

⁸ T.S. Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2006), 333-335.

–But who is that on the other side of you?⁹

Many scholars have concluded that this stanza is an allusion to the biblical story of Emmaus, wherein two disciples of Jesus – after discovering that Christ’s body is no longer in the grave – encounter a hooded traveler along the road. Only after they have arrived at Emmaus do the disciples realize that their mystery companion is none other than Christ himself. Here then, Eliot seems to have brought these images together to define one long, winding journey. This excursion through the Waste Land seems to imply the promise of finding liberation or truth at its end based on the stories these examples allude to, yet the specific goal of this wandering is not entirely clear. The search for water is key, however, and the setting of the thunder’s first appearance is crucial in identifying this voyage as a pilgrimage towards self-actualization.

This sojourn through the desert ultimately gives way to an equally desolate depiction of the Ganges River. Passing by an old church that has fallen into disrepair, the narrator comes to a lifeless, silent jungle where “the limp leaves / Waited for rain, while the black clouds / Gathered far distant, over Himavant.”¹⁰ This return to the water imagery laced throughout the poem is an important thematic device, but the darkness, confusion, and prevailing sense of despair is somewhat reminiscent of the dark wood that Dante the pilgrim found himself lost in at the beginning of his journey. Moreover, the fact that this particular patch of the Waste Land is the first to hear the thunder’s words is an important one in establishing the thunder as a guide to wayward pilgrims. The Ganges is the most sacred of the rivers in India, and Hindus personify it as the Goddess Ganga. She is the highest embodiment of purity and new life, and all sects of Hinduism believe that her waters facilitate the remission of sin as well as the breaking of the

⁹ Ibid, 359-365.

¹⁰ Ibid, 395-397.

reincarnation cycle.¹¹ Just as the city of Jerusalem attracts Christian, Muslim, and Jewish pilgrims, Ganga draws Hindu pilgrims from all over the world. There is little doubt that the cleansing of sin associated with Ganga is of particular importance in establishing the implications of this scene, but because the thunder first addresses a site for pilgrims, it may also be said that this is meant to be a sort of refuge for pilgrims to attempt to regroup and adjust to their new, distressing circumstances. The ongoing reflection of destruction and familiarity with death throughout *The Waste Land* has likely given rise to shock and disorientation; many readers would likely attest to not knowing what to think after reading *The Waste Land* for the first time. Those feelings, too, can be related back to the *Comedy*; the pilgrim's confusion and fear of his environment immediately precedes his first encounter with Virgil. Therefore, this setting is preparing those pilgrims who have stumbled their way here in confusion to receive the first instructions from their own guide regarding how best to proceed.

The Thunder as Wisdom vs. Religious Connotations of Pilgrimage

This interpretation, however, raises a question regarding the thunder's nature. If the scene over which the thunder is presiding is a religious one, it may seem strange to think that the thunder is channeling intellect as it speaks rather than divine judgment. However, continuing in our endeavor to compare the narrator's trek through the Waste Land with the pilgrim's journey in the *Comedy*, the thunder speaking with the voice of reason would be the best way for its message to reach a variety of readers. Recall that Dante himself stated that the *Divine Comedy* was didactic in nature. There is no question that his *Comedy* is set in an explicitly Christian context, but Dante intended for the pilgrim's journey to serve as a means to instruct those who

¹¹ Indira Peterson, *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), 3274.

would read the *Comedy* on questions of ethics and divinity, both on a journey there and a journey here. Anyone who silently followed the pilgrim on his journey was meant to be able to learn from Virgil right alongside him. Knowing this, personifying reason and having it guide the majority of the voyage seems to be the best choice in terms of a plot device. Reason is not exclusive to one particular faith; rather, it is a defining characteristic of humanity as a whole. The same can be said here: despite the thunder's presence in a sacred site that is singular to the Hindu faith, its words are understood by each reader. It first speaks in single Sanskrit syllables, but Eliot provides translations and interpretations for each of them. What the thunder says is meant to be read and pondered by all who interact with it.

Context: The Hindu Fable of Thunder

This brings us to the thunder's message proper, but before examining it in greater detail, I feel it is important to establish the connection between the Sanskrit texts that Eliot implements in the last few stanzas of the poem and their original context. In the Hindu Fable of Thunder, the Lord of Creatures dictates three principles to each of his three offspring: gods, men, and demons. In doing so, he instructs them on their particular weaknesses, and recites specific instructions on how each of them may rectify their faults. For the gods, his advice is to practice self-control; for men, he explains the importance of generosity; and to the demons, he states the necessity for compassion and sympathy. According to the end of the Fable, these three qualities are repeated to this day in the voice of heaven itself, so that each person may constantly practice the disciplines of control, giving, and kindness. Lawrence Rainey, who provided a number of annotations to his edition of *The Waste Land*, observes that there are two main comments regarding the interpretation of these instructions. On one hand, it may be believed that each of the types of offspring were given instructions that would address their natural weakness; for

example, gods were naturally unruly, therefore they were explicitly told to control themselves better. On the other hand, it has also been suggested that the gods and demons did not exist outside of mankind; men who were especially greedy were called men, those who were lacking in self-control were gods, and those who were decidedly cruel were known as demons.¹² Which interpretation is correct is entirely subjective, but it seems that in the context of Eliot's poem, the latter interpretation is the more sensible one. Humanity is the primary focus throughout his work, and the subsequent lines referencing the three disciplines become even more interesting if this particular reading of the Fable of Thunder is used as a lens to inform them. For that purpose, the rest of the analysis will be based around the idea that in the original tale, humans were the only active species in the Creator's teachings.

What the Thunder Says: Close Readings of Eliot, Relation to Dante, & Self-Actualization

Moving to the thunder's words, then, we see that the disciplines laid out in the fable are incorporated into the poem in a much more ambiguous manner. Eliot chooses to address the quality of generosity first, originally intended for men lacking the desire to give. The thunder begins by addressing the holy site beneath it:

what have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries.¹³

¹² Lawrence Rainey, in *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose* (United States of America: Yale University Press, 2006), 120.

¹³Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 401-406

In essence, Eliot is asserting that mankind has given nothing of particular importance. Perhaps due to greed, the only gift a person is capable of giving to others and to the world are reckless, ill-advised actions that will not be remembered once his or her life has ended. However, the language used in these lines sound less condemning and more remorseful, as if the voice of heaven is lamenting the state of the earth. “The awful daring of a moment’s surrender” gives the impression that the trivial nature of humanity’s generosity is regrettably coerced or forced from human beings, rather than intentionally distributed out of spite. It is a different manner of instruction than Virgil’s Socratic mentorship, but the principle is the same. The thunder is teaching the pilgrim in each reader through identifying the lack of virtue, and then by expanding on the rationality of the consequences that come with that lack of virtue. In spite of prudential thought and their own better judgment, humans spend ridiculous amounts of their time frantically working to acquire titles or reach milestones in the hopes of assuring the significance of their own existences; but in their desperation to find meaning, they are trapped in a self-centered spiral and fail to acknowledge the struggles of others around them. This lack of good judgment is detrimental to others aside from the individual; the human tendency to hone in on one’s own concerns not only propagates a certain brand of self-centeredness, but the subsequent neglect of other people in and around that individual’s life compounds the damage inflicted by their vanity. There is a social aspect to this kind of greed, and the thunder’s instruction warns the pilgrim to recognize how he or she may be hurting the self as well as their peers.

This entrapment may also be seen in the quality of compassion, originally directed towards demons lacking sympathy. The remorseful tone carries over from the previous stanza, and a distinct feeling of helplessness permeates through the words following the second iteration of thunder:

I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.¹⁴

As the passage is dedicated to a lack of compassion, it is clear that the prisoner is locked away from experiencing genuine sympathy for others. Beyond that, however, the thunder's guidance is the most ambiguous it will be, and at first glance, its comparison to Virgil in this instance appears far-fetched, at best. However, if we consider the topic of social isolation, discussed at length in a previous section of *The Waste Land* as well as in a number of Eliot's earlier poems, a new line of thought emerges. The imagery of an industrialized "human engine" is seen a number of times, and it is always depicted as a solitary unit focused solely on completing its work and returning to its home when the clock announces the end of the day, almost completely oblivious to the potential of relationships with other people. This is isolation, propagated by the occupational tasks of the modern world, may indeed be the prison that Eliot is referring to. This may be better explained in relation to the illustrious key; namely, a genuine interest and desire to interact with others. In order for sympathy to exist, it must be possible for humans to interact with one another. Without the potential for personal interest and relationships, compassion for others would be little more than a myth, and expanding one's limited area of interest to include other people will inevitably give way to feeling sympathy. Humans are locked in their cells of isolation due first to the way their world is built, and second because of how they have been taught to operate in that world. The thunder is building on its first point in the previous stanza, and logically concludes that the self-interested tendency that was first seen in its discussion of generosity has now manifested itself as a fundamental inability to connect with others in a

¹⁴Ibid, 411-414

meaningful way. Already lacking the prudence to look beyond themselves and their desires, the thunder next recognizes that humans are lacking in empathy, or perhaps even the bravery to break out of their unfeeling cells and engage with others. But humans cannot or will not do that, whether out of fear of social rejection or simply because they cannot escape their own minds.

The harsh criticism continues in the final stanza that references the Fable of Thunder, which corresponds to gods lacking self-control. After determining that humans are profoundly flawed and more or less paralyzed by their own apathy, the thunder concludes its instructions with a very rational solution: identifying humanity's potential to improve. It speaks of a serene alternate reality, saying "The sea was calm, your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited, beating obedient / to controlling hands."¹⁵ The virtue of temperance would give humans an excellent start on their way to redeeming themselves; even the nastiest of habits can be corrected if only they would have the will to practice discipline. Just as with Dante the pilgrim, the logical implementation of each of the principles discussed previously would have been of massive importance at the outbreak of World War I and the subsequent creation of this Waste Land. This final rumination of the thunder connects each of the principles and assorts them into one cumulative plea for change. That plea takes on even more meaning, far beyond the parameters of the war itself, if it is related back to the original story. In the Hindu fable, only one subgroup was missing one respective virtue; here, it seems that the heavens have decided that the whole of humanity is lacking in all three virtues. Understandably, this would lead one to think that the nature of humanity as we know it is almost certainly unredeemable – as it is missing all three disciplines – compared to gods or demons, who were only ever missing one. On all counts, it seems that humanity is hopeless. Yet it remains that the thunder presents itself to a site where

¹⁵ Ibid, 420-422.

fatigued, frightened pilgrims are likely to gather in search of guidance and a means with which to improve their lives. Dante the pilgrim's journey began with him stumbling through a dark wood, cornered by beasts, before his guide appeared to show him the way to liberation from his shortcomings. The thunder is serving the same purpose; the depiction of the world's distress and the irrevocable damage done to the human condition necessitates the thunder's guidance. In order to reach the greatest number of pilgrims possible, the guide takes on the form of the highest ability of human functioning; intellect, and the capacity to reason one's way through the suffering of this world. Just as Dante illustrated the guidance of Virgil in his *Comedy*, Eliot is directing the thunder to instruct the pilgrims of this world through wisdom on their journey through this Waste Land and to the ideal forms of themselves.

The idea of self-actualization, with or without religious connotation, being the destination of the journey is further illustrated in the conclusion of *The Waste Land*. In spite of the decay and desolation, regardless of the brokenness of the human condition and the lack of virtue, the end of the poem ultimately implies the presence of peace, for better or worse. The last word is repeated three times over as a means to conclude the journey: "Shantih shantih shantih,"¹⁶ which, according to Eliot himself, can most closely be translated to mean "a peace which passes all understanding." Be it through pleasant or painful circumstances, the eventual result of trekking through the Waste Land is to find some form of peace. One interpretation is that the sensation of being removed from the Waste Land is what brings the individual peace, be that in the form of dying or in some sort of spiritual awakening resulting in the restoration of virtues. My interpretation is, admittedly, a simple one: it is impossible to find peace without first travelling through a tangible or metaphorical Waste Land. In Christianity, Christ was forced to

¹⁶ Ibid, 433.

die and pass through hell before he could be resurrected and pave the way to eternal life for Christians. Many people do not know who they are or what they are capable of until they have been forced to overcome change, whether they be exciting or excruciating processes. Dante the pilgrim ultimately finds his way to divine love, which encompasses a feeling of genuine peace and security in God's grace, at the end of his excursion through the afterlife. And though it is in a much more ominous, ambiguous way, the narrator comes to find peace at the end of his travels through *The Waste Land*. The two journeys mirror one another in subtle ways, but the end goal of each of them is essentially the same. Regardless of the nature of one's journey, it is uncontested that finding peace in one's self is an end worth striving for, and the fact that the thunder's advice to the reader on his or her journey through this Waste Land precedes the promise of peace is difficult to ignore. The words of the thunder direct the reader first to recognize his or her potential to improve under the guidance of reason, whether it be a pleasant or painful experience, and second to the inevitable presence of peace in one's self.

Conclusion: It Falls to Us

At this point, the discussion of the potential for *The Waste Land* to be interpreted as a journey to pursue self-actualization has been initiated, at the very least. The imagery of a lost soul wandering aimlessly in the desert, without the promise of arriving at his or her destination or even knowing what exactly his or her goal should be is all too reminiscent of a lost soul trapped in a dark wood without any clue as to how he came to be there or how he may find his way out. The intervention of a voice sent to guide the wanderer, and that voice utilizing wisdom to effectively guide him or her towards the promise of improvement, does nothing to assuage the lingering suspicions that this final section of *The Waste Land* may be more than divine morality condemning humanity to death for its grievous indulgence in unadulterated vice. There is a path

marked here, with an objective looming over the bleak horizon, and the thunder's guidance can provide only a few answers to the many questions there are. It is difficult, it is confusing, and what the goal is ultimately falls to the reader to decide; perhaps the journey there ends in death, or in enlightenment, or even in waking from a terrible nightmare. Likewise, the journey here can only be influenced by the rationale posed by the thunder. Wisdom is a teacher, yes, but in the end, all it can truly do is offer recommendations to shape our actions: we alone are the ones who can act. It falls to us to decide which actions will help us find where we wish to go and who we wish to be as we navigate our own Waste Lands. We first consult the wisdom we have gleaned from previous experiences, decide what we wish to do, and finally, we act accordingly. And the consequences of those actions are ours alone.

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