



## T. S. ELIOT'S "DISORDERLY ORDER" AND THE ECHOES OF DANTE'S INFERNO

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### **Abstract:**

How right was T. S. Eliot when he claimed to be able to truly venerate "tradition" in a largely disillusioned and traumatized Europe after the Great War? This paper opens the investigation by a comparison and apparent similarities between Harold Bloom's conceptualization of poetic influence and those of T. S. Eliot dispersed among the body of his literary criticism. On one hand, Bloom maintains his idea of poets being out of necessity on the defensive mode when it comes to the influence, whereas T. S. Eliot tried to at the same time "embrace" the chaos of Modernism and his idea of a venerated, abstract and unchangeable "tradition". For T. S. Eliot, the figure of Dante looms large on the European poetic horizon as a link between the present and the past. In order of illustration, the author of the paper emphasizes Eliot's use of epigraphs or direct borrowings from Dante at the beginning of his poems as a means of the insertion of the great poet's imagined "missing" link into the poetry of his day. Thus, Eliot's legacy effortlessly engrafted itself onto that of his beloved poet master, Dante.

**Keywords:** tradition, disorder, Bloom, Dante

### **1. Introduction**

In his notable book, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom developed his highly influential analysis of poetic influence and the "intra-poetic" relationship between poets and the work of earlier writers. Showing a deepening interest in Freud, Bloom presented the history of Western poetry since Renaissance as a competitive Oedipal struggle between poets and their precursors. Bloom argues that all poetry is intertextual and that modern poetry needs to be understood in terms of its relationship to past work. Since Milton's poetry has suffered from anxiety of influence, "*a mode of melancholy*", therefore there is a fear that the writing of poetry is no longer possible. This anxiety is something far more significant than a sense of intellectual awe at the achievement of one's literary predecessors; instead, it is a force that makes poetry happen. Bloom maintains that it is necessary for poets to clear imaginative space if their own work is not to be overwhelmed by earlier poetry, and that "strong" poets arrive at their vocation and original voice by strongly

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misreading the work of their precursors. Bloom later developed this concept of "anxiety of influence" in his seminal book *The Anatomy of Influence* (2006). Here he states that "[A] strong poet seeks not simply to vanquish the rival but to assert the integrity of his or her own writing self." (p. 8). Bloom redefines his previous concept and sees influence as "literary love, tempered by defense". It is love for a particular poet that makes the author undergo a specific influence. The author is inspired by the poet whose poetry he loves, and "inspiration means influence". (*The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 10).

This idea of the anxiety of influence is, to a great extent, based on Eliot's essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*. Speaking of tradition in relation to literary precursors, he states that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the past directs the present". The similarity between Bloom's and Eliot's concepts of tradition is best seen when it comes to the relation between past and present poets. Namely, Bloom's idea of the necessity for poets to clear imaginative space corresponds to Eliot's idea that "feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations," expressed in his theory of impersonality.

When it comes to the relation of Eliot and Dante, it can be seen on two planes: intertextual and Eliot's critical appraisal of Dante. Eliot mentions Dante in many of his essays, but two of them are entirely devoted to him: "Dante," a rather extensive essay, and "What Dante means to me". While writing on him, he tried to explain his own poetic method, as he did in most of his essays.

One of the most significant concepts for Eliot was unity versus disorder. Writing on Dante, he states that "[T]he vital matter is that Dante's poem is a whole; that you must, in the end, come to understand every part in order to understand any part." (*Selected Essays*, p. 258). That "unity" is a shared common knowledge: for example, both Dante and his listeners did not need to individually imagine or think up certain concepts; those had been given by the shared culture. Extratextual references, in the case of a poem like *The Divine Comedy* those would be within the 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian theology, as well as the textual ones, were taken simultaneously. Therefore, the modern reader should make an effort to learn about the context of the poem in order to allow its meaning to fully flower within them: "...you cannot afford to ignore Dante's philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passages which express them most clearly" (*Selected Essays*, p. 257). The intended effort is not directed at the text itself, but at a "state of mind" or times that generated the text.

"Disorder" as perceived by Eliot is mirrored in the modern "fragmentation", that is, the disconnected sense of self and history and one's place in the said history. Eliot praised Dante's "universalism", which meant his European rather than a limited national rootedness, which was based on the universality of Medieval Latin. Thus, Eliot conceived of a possibility of a pre-understanding subconsciously shared: "What we should consider is not so much the meaning of the images, but the reverse process, that which led a man having an idea to express it in images." (*Selected Essays*, p. 242). Common knowledge should predate any effort of an individual expression.

In *The Waste Land* and a number of his essays, T. S. Eliot venerates the idea of disorder, but in due course, tries to make his poem more intelligible and orderly by providing clarifications to his allusions in the extensive endnotes. He is also persistent about fulfilling the fissures of non-being with plentiful references to a meaningful past. *The Waste Land's* ideas of non-being and its sense of emptiness of life leading to the disorder are opposed to the implicit idea of creating an

order. Similarly, in his essays, Eliot lays emphasis on the idea of imposing aesthetic/ideological order with his vision of organic cultural unity. This duality of emptiness of life on the one hand and establishing order and intelligibility on the other is reconciled employing the aesthetic harmony of the opposites.<sup>ii</sup>

The persistence on the aesthetic resolution of the above dichotomies, which Eliot sees as probable only in reference to the past, bears ideological traits common for many Modernist authors. The aesthetic of emptiness and non-existence realized through a contradictory poetic of disorderly order thus leads to that what Terry Eagleton terms like the "*ideology of cultural disintegration*". This paper aims to examine the interrelation of Eliot's theoretical poetics and the poetics employed in *The Waste Land* regarding the ideological aspects of *the aesthetic of disorderly order*.

Even though new and revolutionary regarding poetic forms, Eliot was fairly traditional concerning cultural changes. This reactionary position is seen both in his poetry and his theoretical concepts in his essays and more extended studies, primarily in *The Waste Land* and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. Giving the definition of "culture" in the latter text, he highlights the interdependence of the cultures of the group, the individual, class, and society. He claims that the society's culture is fundamental and goes beyond all the others; he gives further details about the idea claiming that we "*find it in the pattern of the society as a whole*" (*Notes*, p. 23; my emphasis). It is pretty evident from this that Eliot implies the social hierarchy as something set and unchallenged. The idea of hierarchy realized through the integrated culture is even more reinforced when he writes about its breakdown and the prospect of repairing the "malady". The very viewpoint that cultural fragmentation leads to its disintegration and that this process is related to the disintegration of a class or between classes speaks in favor of social harmony and hierarchy. Being a supporter of high culture, Eliot is also an advocate of the high class since he sees it as the chief bearer of cultural progress. The questions about the control of and deliberate influence on culture speak for the ideological position that culture is "*the property of a small section of society*" (*Notes*, p. 33). In addition to this viewpoint, to a certain extent, he also equates spiritual aspects of art and religion and sees religion as something that gives significance to life and protects humanity from despair.

Eliot suggests that the reconciliation of the local and communal should be unconscious. The unity with which Eliot is concerned is by and large necessarily unconscious, and therefore, he suggests, it can be best approached through a consideration of the useful diversities (*Notes*, pp. 51-52). Cultural unity is here based on loyalty which stems from the family and then extends into a local community and finally into a nation. However, such a concept presupposes more or less a firm hierarchy, and thus cultural unity is not unconscious but dictated and imposed. It is ambiguous whether Eliot thinks of unawareness of the conceived concept or whether it stands in for a natural process with the "unconscious". If it is the latter, it is a contradiction in terms, and he suggests its "consideration". The necessity of studying culture also implies that culture is disorderly and that nothingness instead of meaningfulness pervades.

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<sup>ii</sup> See Petar Penda (2011). "Cultural and Textual (Dis)unity: Poetics of Nothingness in *The Waste Land*. In Joe Moffett (ed.). *The Waste Land at 90: A Retrospective*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2011.

Led by his maxim that "*Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different*" (*The Sacred Wood*), Eliot borrowed profusely from Dante and many other predecessors. He explicates this as his intention to make the connection between the past and the present: "*I have borrowed lines from him in the attempt to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader's mind the memory, of some Dantesque scene, and thus establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life.*" This statement, to a great extent, explains his poetics. Paralleling the glorious past with the history of his time, Eliot emphasized the necessity of restoring the past and conquering the contemporary disorder. The dogma of the normative and structured society prevails and is represented as an absolute necessity if the present-day chaos is to be overcome.

In his longer essay *To Criticize the Critic*, Eliot explains why he returned to *The Divine Comedy* over and over again:

*"The Divine Comedy expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity's despair and the beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing. It is, therefore, a constant reminder to the poet of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel because they have no words for them; and at the same time, a reminder that the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizen, if he has all the time a firm grasp upon realities with which they are already acquainted. (To Criticize the Critic, p. 134).*

Frequent allusions to Dante serve to implicate the impossibility of separating the past and the present. In ideological terms, some values are to be preserved regardless of the social changes. It is constancy based on the hierarchy and order that is insisted on. This constancy is asked for in every field of human action: politics, education, art, everyday life, and culture in general. Eliot's allusions, however, contribute to creating a new poetic form, but as far as ideas are concerned, it is as if he replaced Pound's credo "Make It New" with "Make It Difficult" in order to make art and culture inaccessible to ordinary people, to make it elitist.

When it comes to reminiscences, in the form of quotations, allusion or references, they are best exemplified by "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The very epitaph of the poem takes us to Dante's *Inferno*:

*"S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo."*

It translates: "*If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.*" This epigraph locates the modern world of Prufrock by equalizing it with hell and suggesting that the modern world is hell, as a matter of

fact. Likewise, the lines that immediately follow the epigraph, "Let us go then you and I," draw in the reader in hell. In this way, the epigraph is a functional and inseparable part of the poem, and as Locke suggests, Eliot integrated the epigraph so well that "the six verses from the *Comedia* are as much the property of Eliot as they are Dante's."<sup>iii</sup>

The epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* is mixed with the lighter context of Prufrock's love song. Epigraphs are never to be ignored in Eliot, for they convey hints of the significance or even genesis of the poem. Together with the title, this epigraph prepares the reader for the experience of the poem. In this poem we have the love song of a particular character, whose very name suggests qualities he later manifests. Then the epigraph states the situation of another character who was called upon to reveal himself. How is it related to the title? Are the two characters alike or merely in similar situations? In the *Inferno*, the flame of Guido is asked to identify himself, and he replies in the words of the epigraph: "If I thought my answer were to one who ever could return to the world, this flame should shake no more; but since none ever did return alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer thee." As George Williamson<sup>iv</sup> states if this relates to Prufrock, it must be an extended metaphor that will gradually unfold itself. This actually equates to the world of *Inferno* and Prufrock's world, which means that contemporary society is *Inferno*. In this sense, the first line, "Let us go then, you and I," is the invitation to Prufrock's infernal world. In this infernal world made of thousands of indecisions, tea parties, inability to force the moment and ask the overwhelming question, people are alienated, concerned with the trivial, divided, frustrated, and eventually nihilistic – with no hope for the betterment.

In this respect, the parallel with Dante's *Inferno* points out that modern society is infernal itself and cannot be delivered. Eliot's allusions to Dante represent his "attempt to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader's mind the memory of some Dantesque scene, and thus establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life" (Notes, p. 128).

We have started with the similarity in Bloom's and T. S. Eliot's view on the role of poetic predecessors in a world that has greatly lost its sense of tradition, a commonly shared knowledge. For Bloom "the anxiety of influence" paradoxically creates a possibility for a new generation to create its own voice, whereas for Eliot, his idea of "impersonality" enables new and authentic art creations precisely because one's ego is no longer in the way. For both critics, it is a complex process, especially in a world that is primarily chaotic. This sense of chaos or "disorder" as Eliot calls it makes artists look back over the span of ages in order to reaffirm their common human background. Despite Eliot's stoic acceptance of modern chaos, evident in his poetic work, yet he deeply yearns for a sense of completeness and continuity and finds it in his constant references to Dante's work. His use of epigraphs, direct borrowings from Dante, especially his deeply felt and honest reverence for the ancient masters, makes him paradoxically very contemporary and yet timeless. However, his rather reactionary and elitist views regarding social changes and the place and role of culture, were not on a par with the depth and width of his poetic work and literary criticism. Hence, we might conclude that T. S. Eliot will be remembered for his artistic fervor, sharp intellect and exquisite erudition that gave Europe back

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<sup>iii</sup>Frederick W. Locke. "Dante and T. S. Eliot's Prufrock." *MLN* 78, no. 1 (1963): 59.

<sup>iv</sup>George Williamson. *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis*. New York: Syracuse University Press. 1984, 58

its cultural continuity in a world suffering from discontinuation imposed by the violence of history.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

### **About the Author**

Bozica Jovic is Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of East Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina. She earned her doctorate in contemporary Scottish novel from the University of Belgrade. Her research focuses on contemporary Scottish writers (most notably Muriel Spark and Alasdair Gray), English Renaissance poetry, postmodern literary perspectives and the Biblical Studies. She has previously published work on Alasdair Gray's opus, English Renaissance devotional sonnets and Muriel Spark. She is currently working on dichotomies within love poetry in Renaissance England.

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