A Broken Coriolanus: Self and the Renaissance in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

Rupsa Roy Chowdhury

Abstract

From the celebration of human understanding in the Enlightenment towards the birth of a liberal capitalist world view, Post-Renaissance Western Europe has always fostered ideologies predicated upon Renaissance individualism: the liberty, sanctity and the reality of the individual self. The disillusionment of the modern time nonetheless had an obvious perverting impact on the Self who, by now divested of all glorious visions of future to strive at, stood imprisoned in the centrality of its own alienated existence.

T.S. Eliot attempts to find this schizoid self and the memories of its origin in the mires of "The Waste Land". The article argues that Eliot's constant allusions to that past is not simply a jeremiad lamenting the present but also an agonizing reminder of the impossibility of returning to the Renaissance Individualism of unbridled ambition and optimism, attesting the failure of its legacy in the modern age of alienated individualism.

Keywords: Renaissance, "The Waste Land", Eliot, Individualism, Intertextuality.

On the Finisterre mountain range of north-east Papua New Guinea live the Yupno people for whom time flows uphill. The Yupno's ancestors arrived by the sea and following the local river, climbed upward the two thousand five hundred metres high mountain valley to build their community (Ananthaswamy). Thus, for them, the downhill signifies the past and time moves upward through the river into the mountain range. Rejecting the forward momentum of temporal continuation that is pervasively present in Western civilisation and its colonised global reality, the Yupno notion of time in particular is a perfect metaphor to explore T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" – a critique of the rhetoric of progression from within the Western culture. For Eliot, History is characterized not by a continuous progression but by ruptures and retrogressions (Cooper 35) where the future is not saturated with the past but is divested of it. Like the Yupno's river, he views the past as always wide and plentiful while with every beating oar, the present is turbulent and narrow until there is "no water but only rock" (WL 331).

The purpose of this article will be to utilize this rupture in Eliot's poem between the temporal and the cultural movement to connect the industrialised twentieth century modernity with the European Renaissance. Despite the growing scholarship in the last forty odd years that has sought to challenge its pivotal position in the European civilisation[1], the Renaissance still persists as an image of abundance – a glorious past that initiated the West in intellectual engagement, anticipating the advancement of Science as well as the arts and giving birth to the ideas of modernity, if not developing them. Among these ideas, the most important in retrospect is perhaps that of the Self. In his seminal work *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, Swiss Cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt marked Renaissance Italy as the birthplace of this Selfhood. Burckhardt writes:

> In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness–that which was turned within and that which was turned without–lay as though dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation–only through some general category. It is in Italy that this veil dissolved first; there arose an objective treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world, and at the same time the subjective side asserted itself with corresponding emphasis. Man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such. (88)

For Burckhardt, Renaissance Individualism reflected a movement away from social authority and collective consciousness towards self-assertion and private existence as well as a full and harmonious development of the personality that represents humanity and journeys towards its highest cultural development (Lukes 58). The most singular character of this Renaissance Individualism was its vitality. Under an agreeable political climate, the sense of hope that the Renaissance brought to Europe was not merely one of achieving cultural edification but political supremacy, economic expansion and breakthroughs in the domains of knowledge that inaugurated the Age of Enlightenment. The Individual self stood at the helm of this era as well, being developed through the doctrines of liberalism as Europe steadily progressed towards the Industrial Revolution and a capitalist worldview. Yet, by the time of Eliot in the twentieth century, "Self" had begun to acquire a far bleaker connotation with the reality of the individual shifting its bearings from the potential of unparalleled genius to the alienation of absurd existence. Burckhardt attests that Man had discovered himself as a "spiritual individual" (88) in the Renaissance but the individual in the twentieth century West was surely bereft of any spirituality. While the trauma of the First World War devalued the sanctity of existence in European thought, the increased mechanisation of everyday lives imbued in it a profound sense of loss and pessimism. For

Eliot, this loss translates itself in “The Waste Land” as the inability to take shelter in the past as well as to create anything new. But while the impotence of the self is ubiquitous in the critical discourse surrounding the poem, this article hopes to reveal how this sterile self acts as the failed legacy of the glorious Renaissance Individual through frequent references of the era in the fragmented narrative of the poem.

In his early drafts of “The Waste Land”, Eliot had begun the third section of the poem in imitation of Alexander Pope with a description of a Lady Fresca, a decadent society woman whose literary pretension he ascribes to the “soapy sea/Of Symonds – Walter Pater – Vernon Lee” (TS). The three nineteenth century critics whom Edith Wharton recalled in 1933 to have influenced a whole generation (qtd. in Leighton 100) helped shape the Renaissance for the Anglophone world as more a spirit than a historical period. Despite being introduced to the early modern writers through Pater, their languid aestheticisation of the era, typical of the literary salon culture, was rejected by Eliot for whom the Renaissance was a time of vigour and vitality. In “The Waste Land”, this treatment becomes most prominent through the pastiche of Cleopatra in the opening passage of “A Game of Chess”–

> The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
>
> Glowed on the marble, where the glass
>
> Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
>
> From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
>
> (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
>
> Doubled the flames of seven branched candelabra
>
> Reflecting light upon the table as
>
> The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
>
> From satin cases poured in rich profusion;
>
> In vials of ivory and coloured glass
>
> Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
>
> Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused
>
> And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air
>
> That freshened from the window, these ascended
>
> In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,
>
> Flung their smoke into the laquearia,
>
> Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.

Huge sea-wood fed with copper

Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone,

In which sad light a carvèd dolphin swam. (WL 77-96)

This interior scene of garish, claustrophobic atmosphere is in sharp contrast with its source in Shakespeare's tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* where the character of Enobarbus depicts the Queen Cleopatra for his friends Mecaenas and Agrippa as she was journeying on her ship down the Cydnus river:

The barge she sat in, like a burnisht throne

Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;

Purple the sails, and so perfumed that

The winds were love-sick with them; the oars

were silver,

Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made

The water which they beat to follow faster,

As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,

It beggared all description, she did lie

In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold, of tissue,

O'er-picturing that Venus where we see

The fancy outwork nature: on each side her

Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,

With divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem

To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,

And what they undid did. (II.II. 191-205)

It is this Shakespearean character, not her historical original that Eliot borrows in "The Waste Land" along with a careful perversion of all grandeur and the reduction of all majesty. But it is not merely the "golden Cupidon" or the "synthetic perfumes" or the "carvèd dolphin" in a "sad light" that entraps the Cleopatra-like figure of Eliot in being presented as a poor reflection; the Shakespearean Queen stood, for its contemporary audience, as emblematic of the will and passion of the Renaissance Individual, asserting her identity against the powers that be and determining her destiny of a heroic death for love. The female figure in Eliot, on the other hand, persists in her isolation in this scene "of diffuse and

frustrated sensuality” (Bloom 37) as her seemingly insane ramblings to her absent (?) supposed lover are answered by the poet-narrator outside the conversation (See WL 111-138).

The theme of the isolated self, pervasive throughout “The Waste Land”, is again taken up in relation to the Renaissance in the opening lines of the next section of the poem. Eliot’s notes refer us to the beginning of the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser’s “Prothalamion”, a nuptial song, celebrating the twin weddings of the two daughters of the Earl of Worcester:

Calm was the day, and through the trembling air
Sweet breathing Zephyrus did softly play,
A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay
Hot Titan's beams, which then did glister fair;
When I whose sullen care,
Through discontent of my long fruitless stay
In prince's court, and expectation vain
Of idle hopes, which still do fly away
Like empty shadows, did afflict my brain,
Walked forth to ease my pain
Along the shore of silver streaming Thames,
Whose rutty bank, the which his river hems,
Was painted all with variable flowers,
And all the meads adorned with dainty gems,
Fit to deck maidens' bowers,
And crown their paramours,
Against the bridal day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

There, in a meadow, by the river's side,
A flock of nymphs I chanced to espy,
All lovely daughters of the flood thereby,

With goodly greenish locks, all loose untied,

As each had been a bride;

And each one had a little wicker basket,

Made of fine twigs, entrailed curiously,

In which they gathered flowers to fill their flasket,

And with fine fingers cropt full featously

The tender stalks on high.

Of every sort, which in that meadow grew,

They gathered some; the violet pallid blue,

The little daisy, that at evening closes,

The virgin lily, and the primrose true,

With store of vermeil roses,

To deck their bridegrooms' posies

Against the bridal day, which was not long:

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. (Spenser)

From this Thames of pastoral beauty that evokes union, we are led by Eliot to "The Waste Land" where:

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf

Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;

Departed, have left no addresses.

By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,

Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long. (WL 173-184)

In his article "Shakespeare and *tragedy* in *The Waste Land*", Tim Gooderham posits that the propose of quotations in "The Waste Land" is not merely to act as a structuring device and providing the work with most of its relatively scarce points of reference but also to deepen the "events" of the poem by linking them with literary equivalents – a process by which the quotations are themselves changed by being put into an unfamiliar and unsettling context (179). The use of Spenser's refrain exemplifies this function through the shifting of focus in Eliot from the word "softly" to the word "end". With a serene beauty that haunts the reader, the refrain gives voice to a loveless world of alienated existence – a poetic subject at the opposite pole of the Elizabethan poet's paean to love and union.

In the interest of this article, the song to the Thames goes beyond Spenser to merge with other sources, two of which are relevant at this point. First is the most noticeable echo of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" where the seventeenth century poet coaxes his hesitant beloved to consummate their relationship with justifications like –

But at my back I always hear

Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;

And yonder all before us lie

Deserts of vast eternity. (Marvell)

The argument of Marvell is rather famously persuasive of the philosophy of *Carpe Diem* where life is represented as a brief moment of respite, worthy only of epicurean abandon, before the chariot of time leaves us in the eternal desert of death. But with Eliot, we are already in the hinterland of no rejuvenation. Furthermore, the *Memento mori* does not lead the poet-narrator to proclaim a renewed interest in life which shall be judged by its greatness than by its length, rather it seems to paralyse him and interrupt the song with another narrative (See WL 187-195) which is also interrupted by Marvell's refrain and is substituted by one alluding to the myth of Actaeon and Artemis:

The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring

Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter (WL 197-199)

While critical attention have been spent enough on the issues of chastity, violation and moral depravity in Eliot's work, this article would like the reader to take note of the source for this myth which Eliot refers not to Ovid despite referring him as a source in more than one occasion but to "The Parliament of Bees", a series of eclogues by the Elizabethan dramatist John Day. From that work, the voice that Eliot borrows for his poem is that of Thraso or

Polypragmus, the Plush Bee who stands as a mockery of the Renaissance Individual with the striving overreacherself portrayed as a vainglorious reveller who, perturbed that the Sun tries to outshine them, proposes to build a hive like "Pompeys Theatre" with its own artificial sun and silver moon under which:

A roof of woods, and Forrests Ile have spread.

Tree's growing down-wards, full of Fallow-deare,

When of the sudaine (listning) you shall heare

A noise of Hornes, and hunting, which shall bring

Acteon to Diana in the spring,

Where all shall see her naked skin: and there

Acteons hounds shall their owne Master teare,

As Embleme of his follie that will keepe

Hounds to devoure and eat him up asleepe.

All this Ile doe, that men with praise may crowne

My fame for turning the world upside-downe. (Day)

So just as Actaeon and Diana are reduced to Sweeney and Mrs. Porter, so the voice of an ambitious, extravagant, if vainglorious self contrasts with the self in "The Waste Land" who, by now, as Tiresias, the ancient blind prophet, can neither act nor imagine but is fated to fore suffer every action and witnesses without any order how the river that "sweats/Oil and tar" (WL 266-67) is also crossed by "Elizabeth and Leicester" (WL 279) – two celebrated figures of English Renaissance history whose very presence in the poem furthers the distance from the rich past to the desolate present.

Opposed to these spectacular, fleeting appearances, some Renaissance figures have a more subtle but sustained presence in the narrative. Among the extensive referential texts that "The Waste Land" gathers around itself, the works of Dante arrest sufficient attention. Eliot's notes for "The Waste Land "refer to *The Inferno* and *Purgatario* a total of five times, among which the description of Office-goers in London most perfectly captures the craft of Eliot's intertextual approach:

Unreal City,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,

To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours

With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (WL 60-68)

If Eliot steals the city from Baudelaire, for its people he scours *The Inferno* where at the entrance of hell one hears "Sighs, loud wailing, lamentation" (III. 22), "words of suffering, cries of rage, voices/loud and faint" (III. 26-27) as the poet-narrator is unnerved in realizing that "death had undone so many" (III. 57). But Eliot's preoccupation with the self is more ambiguous in this allusion as the souls whose sighs he borrows for the people of his city are banded together with "angels, not rebellious and not faithful/ to God, who held themselves apart" (III. 38-39).

In speaking at the Italian Institute of London in 1950, Eliot had said of Dante, "I still, after forty years, regard his poetry as the most persistent and deepest influence upon my own verse" (qtd. in Bacigalupo 180). And indeed, the sustained reference to the work where Dante stands as the poet-narrator does bring up a sense of comparison between the poetic self of "The Waste Land" and the first Renaissance man. But while *The Divine Comedy*, as both an influence and a fruit of the Renaissance, is a constant upward journey, striving higher and higher to the beatific vision, "The Waste Land" is a journey without direction, not towards anything but only away from itself. The poetic self of the poem then is most assuredly not Dante but rather the twelfth century Provençal poet and troubadour Arnaut Daniel whom Eliot had already quoted in the title of his second poetry collection *Ara Vos Prec* and would return to in "Ash-Wednesday" and later in "Four Quatrets". At the end of "The Waste Land", we find echoes of Daniel's voice in *Purgatorio* "*Poi s'ascosenelfocochegliaffina*" (WL 428) which translates in English as "(t)hen he vanished in the fire that refines them" (Dante, *Purgatorio* XXVI 148).Daniel had asked Dante to remember his suffering and the poetic self of "The Waste Land" seems to forge a similar relationship. So by remembering Dante, he wants to be remembered as a lost soul that the Italian poet had left behind in his journey, both inside and outside the text, towards the spiritual rebirth and the historical Renaissance. The viability of this reading becomes more persuasive if we take note of the fundamental essence of "The Waste Land" as a failed journey where the land is not restored to fertility and the purified self returns from the fire with a desire to sing, to create, finding escape through madness only:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe. (WL 431-432)

A madness, however, without method, one which does not lead to any significant action but obsessive repetitions of commands from Nature, unobserved, if at all understood.

If the sustained references to the works of Dante hail him up as a point of contrast than comparison against the poetic self of "The Waste Land", Eliot takes a similar approach in appropriating the voice of Ferdinand from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the second scene of the first act of the play, Ferdinand, the shipwrecked Prince of Naples, searching for his father, is haunted by the spirit Ariel who, invisible, sings in his presence –

> Full fathom five thy father lies,
>
> Of his bones are coral made;
>
> Those are pearls that were his eyes,
>
> Nothing of him that doth fade
>
> But doth suffer a sea-change
>
> Into something rich and strange. (I.II. 397-402)

In "The Burial of the Dead", Madam Sosostris echoes Ariel in repeating the line "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (WL 48) to describe the narrator's card the drowned Phoenician Sailor. The line is repeated by the narrator in "A Game of Chess" while "The Fire Sermon" goes back to allude twice to Ferdinand's lament of his father. Yet as it would be apparent for any reader of Shakespeare, the evocative source here is an odd choice, for *The Tempest* is not a tragedy and Ariel is in fact misguiding Ferdinand through the song. Not only is his father alive and well, Ferdinand, like any Renaissance hero, will go on to discover a new place, fall in love and be a part of a great adventure. No such extraordinary fate is granted to the poet-narrator in "The Waste Land" who is left isolated, sterile and incoherent by the end, discovering the truth of Madam Sosostris' words in "Death by Water":

> Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
>
> Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
>
> And the profit and loss.
>
> A current under sea
>
> Picked his bones in whispers. (WL 312-316)

Thus, in its preoccupations with the self, "The Waste Land" repeatedly emerges to us as an inverted image of Renaissance Individualism that mourns its loss of vitality and its capacity for transcendence in the existentialist sense of the word. To end the article, I would ask the readers to return once again to the end of the poem where appropriating a passage from Dante's *The Inferno* about a starving imprisoned father who was compelled to eat the

corpse of his children, Eliot conjures up for us the essence of the alienated sterile individual self at the beginning of twentieth century modernity –

> We think of the key, each in his prison
>
> Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
>
> Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
>
> Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus. (WL 414-417)

Coriolanus, one of the later tragedies of Shakespeare, stand along with *Antony and Cleopatra* as an expression of the unbending will and singular strength of individual personalities against conspiring, organised forces. The titular protagonist is the legendary Roman leader Caius Marcius Coriolanus who, offended by the ungratefulness of the Roman people for his victory over the Volscian forces, joins the latter to defeat Rome before being persuaded by his family to conclude a peace treaty which, seen as betrayal, brings about his downfall. Imagining such singular forces against the powers of empires demand more than a sense of centrality in the conception of the self and the world. In Eliot's mind, it is a vision of vitality lost to the diseased West where the revival of the Self can only be "broken" and fleeting.

Note

[1.] I allude to the late 1970s' shift of focus from elite to popular culture by social historians, the feminist reassessment of historical periodisations through scholars like Joan Kelly and, of course, the postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives among western intelligentsia.

Works Cited:

Ananthaswamy, Anil. "Time flows uphill for remote Papua New Guinea tribe." *Newscientist.com*. New Scientist Ltd, 30 May 2012. Web. 7 Dec. 2017.

Bacigalupo, Massimo. "Dante." *T. S. Eliot in Context*. Ed. Jason Harding. New York: Cambridge UP, 2011. 180-189. Print.

Bloom, Harold ed. *Bloom's Guides: T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"*. New York: Bloom's Lit. Criticism-Infobase, 2007. Print.

Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*. Trans. S.G.C. Middlemore. Ed. Irene Gordon. New York: New American Library, 1961. Print.

Cooper, John Xiros. *The Cambridge Introduction to T. S. Eliot*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.

Dante Alighieri. *The Inferno*. Trans. Robert & Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor-Random House, 2002. Print.

---. *Purgatorio*. Trans. Robert & Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor-Random House, 2004. Print.

Day, John. *The Parliament of Bees*. *University of Michigan Lib*. Michigan U, 2007-2010. Web. 9 Dec. 2017.

Eliot, T. S. "The Waste Land." *The Waste Land, Prufrock and Other Poems.* Mineola: Dover, 1998. 31-47. Print. Cited as WL.

---. *The Waste Land*. N.d. TS. Berg Collection, New York P Lib. *British Lib*. Web. 8 Dec. 2017. Cited as TS.

Gooderham, Tim. "Shakespeare and *tragedy* in *The Waste Land*." *Critical Survey*, 3.2 (1991): 178-185. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Dec. 2017.

Leighton, Angela. *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

Lukes, Steven. "The Meanings of *Individualism*." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32.1 (1971): 45-66. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 Dec. 2012.

Marvell, Andrew. "To His Coy Mistress." *Poetryfoundation.org*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 5 Dec. 2017.

Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*. Ed. John Dover Wilson. 2009 ed. New York: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.

---. *The Tempest*. Eds. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. London: Arden, 2001. Print.

Spenser, Edmund. "Prothalamion."*Poetryfoundation.org*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 4 Dec. 2017.