T.S. Eliot's Misreading of Some Literary Sources in *The Waste Land*

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> *In other words, if it ruled out or refused all misreading whatsoever, a text would not be literary. A text is literary to the degree that it permits and encourages misreading.*
> *Vincent B. Leitch, Deconstructive Criticism*

Abstract: A poet cannot be a poet at all if he is not connected with all the poetic tradition before him. This is T.S. Eliot's dictum which he stated in Tradition and the Individual Talent and which he practiced in his work The Waste Land. T.S. Eliot showed his relationship with the past through all the quotations and allusions to mythical, literary, and religious works. His reading of those sources according to Paul de Man cannot avoid misreading or misinterpretation. Harold Bloom has tried to build up a theory of misreading, which he prefers to call misprision, especially applied to and done by poets in The Anxiety of Influence. Throughout this article I shall show how T.S. Eliot has applied some of the ways Bloom describes in reading some of the literary sources, and by so doing Eliot has given new meaning to them.

Key words: misreading, misinterpretation, misprision, creativity, revisionary ratio.

The Waste Land first appeared in October 1922 in *The Criterion*, a journal which Eliot edited, and later in November 1922 in the American journal *The Dial*. Since its publication, *The Waste Land* has evoked various responses. Conrad Aiken, Gilbert Seldes, and Edmund Wilson were among those who received it with enthusiasm, and Ezra Pound, who can be considered the 'midwife' of *The Waste Land,* as he reduced the

poem to half of its original length, praised it as "... a masterpiece; one of the most important 19 pages in English." Amy Lowell, however, declared: "I think it is a piece of tripe," and Louis Untermeyer judged *The Waste Land* to be "a pompous parade of erudition" since the poem is interspersed with quotations taken from different sources (as cited in Martin, 1968, p. 4).

Whether those quotations are only pompous erudition as Untermeyer suggested, or whether they have specific purposes, the question of unity has been the concern of many critics. Untermeyer's evaluation of *The Waste Land* is not without basis because the poem indeed consists of fragments from religious, mythological, literary, historical, and philosophical works. It has seemed to such critics that it is Eliot's intellectuality and his vast reading that causes his poem to be fractured and without unified meaning, and this is the characteristic of the high modernist period. In this article, however, I will not focus on the issue of unity or disunity in the modernist writing. Instead, I would like to show how Eliot's use of quotations and allusions from diverse sources involves his own interpretation of his reading of them.

Reading literary texts according to Paul de Man, however, is not only to find the meaning that is already *there in* the texts as the structuralists assume. De Man says that all interpretation involves misreading (Leitch, 1983). Leitch has condensed de Man's complicated theory of misreading and concludes as follows: "In other words, if it ruled out or refused all misreading whatsoever, a text would not be literary. A text is literary to the degree that it permits and encourages misreading" (p. 185)[1]. This concept of misreading was also the concern of Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* with a specific focus on the misreading that is done by poets in order to create a tradition that will make them poets. I shall use Harold Bloom's concept because it is more closely related to poets and the reading of poems than is de Man's.

HAROLD BLOOM'S CONCEPT OF MISREADING

[1] For detailed explication of de Man's theory of misreading read *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979).

In *Tradition and the Individual Talent* Eliot attempted to show the relationship between an individual poet and the whole tradition of poetry. Eliot says: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (Eliot, 1976, p. 15). The influence of the dead poets along with their whole tradition is what Harold Bloom calls ‘Poetic Influence.’ Influence in the Bloomian sense does not mean a blind imitation without a process of converting. Ben Jonson understood the word ‘imitation’ to be a form of creativity. He wrote of imitation as being able to “*convert* the substance or riches of another poet *to his own use*” (as cited in Bloom, 1973, p. 27). In Bloom’s own description:

> Poetic Influence--when it involves two strong, authentic poets, --always proceeds by a *misreading* of the prior poet, an act of *creative correction* that is actually and necessarily a *misinterpretation*. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a *history of anxiety* and self-saving caricature, of *distortion*, of *perverse, willful revision* without which modern poetry as such could not exit [emphasis added] (p. 30).

Poetic influence, or as Bloom prefers to call it ‘poetic misprision,’ is inevitable, because poetic history is inseparable from poetic misprision. From his observation he finds that “strong poets make that history by *misreading* one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” [emphasis added] (p. 5).

There are six ways in which the poet struggles with his precursor; Bloom calls these ‘revisionary ratios.’ First, a poet may misread his precursor by “swerving away from his precursor,” that is he executes a *clinamen* in the Lucretian sense. By this word Lucretius means “a swerve of the atoms so as to make change possible in universe” (p. 14). In other words, a poet makes “a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.”

Secondly, a poet may complete his precursor and become his antithesis. He does so “by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its

terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough." The technical term Bloom uses for this misreading is *tessera*, which is taken from "the ancient mystery cults." Thirdly, a poet may move "towards discontinuity with the precursor." The technical term Bloom uses is *kenosis* which is taken from St. Paul. It means "the humbling or emptying-out of Jesus by himself, when he accepts reduction from divine to human status." This means, Bloom argues, "a breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions." Fourth, a poet may move "towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in a reaction to the precursor's Sublime." The technical term is *daemonization* in the Neo-Platonic sense, that is a situation "where an intermediary being, neither divine nor human, enters into the adept to aid him" (p. 15). The poet sets a place for "the power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond the precursor." Fifth, a poet may make "a movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude." The term Bloom employs is *askesis* in the sense of "the practice of pre-Socratic shamans like Empedocles." Different from *kenosis*, which involves "revisionary movement of emptying", by doing *askesis* a poet "yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor." Lastly, a poet may "hold his own poem so open again to the precursor's work." The technical term is *apophrades* or return of the dead. This term is taken from "Athenian dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead returned to reinhabit the houses in which they had lived." The effect of this ratio which Bloom deems "uncanny" is that "the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work" (p. 16). From all those ratios Bloom explicates, only the first two seem to be applicable to T.S. Eliot.

THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD: APRIL THE CRUELLEST MONTH SCENE

There are many literary references in Part I of *The Waste Land*, but I shall choose some that bear the dominant motif of death. The opening lines of the poem go:

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain (ll. 1-4).

These lines allude to the opening lines of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with a shifted meaning:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote
The droughte of Marche hat perced on the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendered is the flour;
Whan Zepirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holdt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours y-ronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye,
That slepen al the night with open yë (as cited in Hands, 1993, p. 69).

Chaucer's lines show the sweetness of spring that is celebrated by all creatures: plants, animals, and human beings (the tender crops, the young son, and small fowls making melody). After the freezing cold of winter, spring brings new hope and renewal. The end of Chaucer's lines of spring show that for the pilgrims there was Canterbury to go for a spiritual renewal:

Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
The holy blissful martir for to seke,
That hem hat holpen, whan that they were seke.

In Eliot's lines, the speaker "has no shrine and no place to go for spiritual renewal" (Brooker, 1988, p. 105).

The impersonal voice of the speaker in Eliot's lines, who is only later revealed as Marie, considers April as the cruellest month. This is the antithesis of Chaucer's notion of spring. April becomes the cruellest month according to the speaker in Eliot's poem because it breeds lilacs out of the dead land. In Brooker and Bentley's interpretation, it means that April breeds "life from death" (1990, p. 62). In this scene, Eliot brings out the paradox of death-in-life and life-from-death. Eliot

highlights the vitality of life in vegetation hidden underground and covered by snow fighting against death. Ordinary eyes will see only the superficial blossoming of lilacs in spring, but the poet's eyes see that "a little life" of lilacs must struggle through the dark winter death.

Thus, Eliot shifts the meaning of spring from Chaucer's lines. For Chaucer's speaker spring is beautiful, sweet, joyful, and hopeful. For Eliot's speaker spring is the cruellest month. In this example, Eliot misreads Chaucer and becomes his antithesis by giving the new opposite meaning to spring. In this case, Eliot uses the second revisionary ratio, *tessera,* in Bloom's category.

THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD: UNREAL CITY SCENE

A further example of Eliot's misreading of his sources can be found in the "Unreal City" episode. Eliot takes many sources in this stanza. The first is taken from Charles Baudelaire's *The Seven Old Men*. Baudelaire's lines originally run: "Swarming city, city full of dreams, / Where the specter in broad daylight accosts the passerby" (as cited in Abrams and Greenblatt, 2000, p. 2372). In this scene, Eliot makes radical what Baudelaire had only suggested. The 'specter' in Baudelaire's line implies the unreality of life in big cities like Baudelaire's Paris and Eliot's modern London:

> 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 (ll.60-65).

Big cities offer hope to people. In Baudelaire's words, the people 'swarming' cities were full of dreams. For Eliot, not only the city, but also the people themselves are unreal. They flowed over London Bridge, but they walked with downcast heads fixing their eyes before their feet. They walked like ghosts.

The reference to the dead is taken from Dante's *Inferno* as Eliot says in his note. Dante's lines which Eliot quotes run: "So long a train of people/that I should never have believed/That death had undone so

many." The next line of Eliot's poem shows what 'death had *undone* so many' suggests: "Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled." This line is also an allusion to Dante's *Inferno* which describes Limbo, the first circle of hell: "Here, so far as I could tell by listening, / there was no lamentation except sighs, / which caused the eternal air to tremble" (as cited in Abrams and Greenblatt, 2000, p. 2372). In Dante, Limbo is the place that is believed to exist for the dead on the border of hell. The dead people's souls were 'hung' in-between. Although they lived virtuously on earth, they died before the coming of Christ. These people's souls and the souls of the unbaptised infants were barred from entering heaven. In this place Dante could only listen to their sighs. Eliot who witnessed the First World War also used "the image of a London peopled by the dead of the Great War" as D.H. Lawrence did, who put it in his poem *Erinnyes*: "There are so many dead, / Many have died unconsenting, / Their ghosts are angry, unappeased " (as cited in Hands, 1993, p. 81). Both the dead Dante saw in Limbo and the ghosts in Lawrence's poem return to live in the modern London in Eliot's lines. Thus, the people are the living dead, a theme Eliot developed in the next parts of *The Waste Land* and in his other poem "The Hollow Men."

In this example, Eliot uses Bloom's first and second revisionary ratio at the same time. *Clinamen* is used as Eliot follows Baudelaire in describing the city, but he swerves away from him: the swarming city, full of dreams, is changed into 'unreal city.' *Tessera* is used where Eliot retains Dante's line: "That death had undone so many", but he gives new meaning to it: the dead in *Limbo* is changed into the living dead in *London*. This second ratio is also used as Eliot completes Lawrence and becomes his antithesis because the ghosts in Lawrence's poem are changed into the same living dead in London who are not angry but who can only sigh. In this example, Eliot creatively fuses Dante's specter with Lawrence's ghosts to create the living dead. In the 'Unreal City' scene, Eliot uses another source and shifts its meaning as well:

'The corpse you planted last year in your garden,
'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
'Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
'Or with his nail he'll dig it up again! (ll. 71-75)

In these lines, Eliot distorts the ritual death of the fertility god. In the fertility rites, the dying god was resurrected again to give fertility to the land. This is related to the cycle of the seasons, where "vegetation dying in winter to be resurrected again in the spring" (Abrams and Greenblatt, 2000, p. 2369). The tone of the question is clearly ironic. The corpse, instead of a symbolic ritual, was now planted in the garden. According to Brooker and Bentley, this passage involves "a grotesque process of literalisation" where "the dying gods and heroes in *The Golden Bough,* …, are transferred from mythic to modern consciousness" (Brooker and Bentley, 1990, p. 36).

The next two lines are the other example of Eliot's misreading of his literary sources. In *The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth* Cleanth Brooks has informed the readers that these lines are taken from John Webster's *The White Devil*:

> But keep the wolf far thence, that's foe to men,
> For with his nails he'll dig them up again (Brooks, 1968, p. 66).

The change of these lines in Eliot's poem is clear. Webster's 'wolf' is changed into 'dog' and 'foe' into 'friend'. In *Reading The Waste Land: Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation*, Brooker and Bentley give a very interesting explanation for the changes:

> In Webster's day, it was the wolf who dug up corpses. But in our day it is a friendly dog. *Dog* is *god* [sic!] spelled backward, a coincidence picked up not only by Eliot but by several modern writers. The dog "that's friend to men" suggests a modern god substitute which seemed to be a friend but which has become in numerous senses a destroyer. Eliot is here concerned with a rampantly reductive scientism (including that practiced by Frazer) that demythologises myth by digging up the buried god or hero and revealing its nature. A myth, one might say, can function only when it is approached with reverence (Brooker and Bentley, 1990, p. 36).

Grover Smith in his study, entitled *The Waste Land*, had already questioned the interpretation of the reversible spelling of 'dog' and 'god': "Is it for Eliot 'God' spelt backward, as some readers have urged – thinking of the Black Mass in Joyce's *Ulysses* ('Circe')?" To his own question, Smith does not give an answer. Instead, his answer emphasises

the substance of this passage: namely the dog's digging up the corpse brings "overtones of a perversion of life-symbolising ritual, of an interference with natural processes" (Brooks, 1983, p. 97).

Thus, in the Unreal City scene, Eliot emphasises the hopeless condition of people in big cities in modern life. The shift of meaning from Baudelaire's "Swarming city, city full of dreams" that offers hope into a life without the hope of renewal shows Eliot's ingenuity in revising the sources he took from his precursors in order to depict accurately the reality of his modern context. The tone of the passage is quite ironic as the people who should have lived a promising life in London have become hopeless and lived like what Eliot in his latter work called 'the hollow men.' In the 'corpse and dog' passage, Eliot uses the first revisionary ratio, *clinamen*, as he goes along with Webster's line and swerves away from it.

THE FIRE SERMON: THE SWEET THAMES SCENE

In Part III of the poem, Eliot also uses many literary allusions. One of the most outstanding references is in the Sweet Thames scene. In this scene, the speaker came to the river Thames. He was musing on the past condition. The line "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song" is taken from Spenser's "Prothalamion". This poem was written for the celebration of the Earl of Worcester's two daughters' marriage in 1596 (Hands, 1993), and the line that Eliot quotes is the refrain of the wedding song.

A more elaborate quotation from the song will give the context of Spenser's poem and explain to what extent Eliot shifts its meaning:

> Calme was the day, and through the trembling ayre
> Swete-breathing Zephyrus did softly play
> A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay
> Hot Titans beames, which then did glister fayre.
> …
> Along the shoare of silver streaming Themmes;
> Whose rutty Bancke, the which his River hemmes,
> Was paynted all with variable flowers,
> And all the meads adorned with dainties gemmes
> Fit to decke maydens bowres,
> And crowne their Paramours

Againts the Byrdale day, which is not long;
Sweet Themmes! Runne softly, till I end my Song
(as cited in Hands, 1993, pp. 93-94)

This stanza clearly depicts how glorious, beautiful, and exciting the wedding day was. The next stanza that refers to the nymphs of the river will complete the description Eliot adapts from Spenser:

There, in a Meadow, by the Rivers side
A Flocke of Nymphs I chaunced to espy,
All lovely Daughters of the Flood thereby,
With goody greenish locks, all loose untyde,
As each had been a Bryde;
And each one had a little wicker basket,
Made of the twigs, entryaled curiously,
In which they gathered flowers to fill their flasket,
And with fine Fingers crept full feateously
The tender stalkes on hye.
Of every sort, which in that Meadow grew,
They gathered some; the Violet, pallied blew,
The little Dazie, that at evening closes,
The virgin Lillie, and the Primrose trew,
With store of Vermeil Roses,
To decke their Bridegromes posies
Againts the Byrdale day, which was not long;
Swete Themmes! Runne softly, till I end my Song
(as cited in Hands, 1993, p. 94)

The mention of the nymphs in this poem evokes the fairy-like sense that creates miraculous things and hope in the wedding couples and the wedding guests. The beautiful elements of nature are used to celebrate the wedding day: violets, daisies, lilies, primroses, and roses. A wedding day is an important event for it promises a regeneration, a renewal of life. The shift of the tenses in Spenser's poem from the present in the line "Againts the Brydale day, which is not long" into the past "Againts the Brydale day, which was not long" marks the prolonged happiness in the speaker because he still remembered the event after it all passed a long time ago.

The moment of joy is brief, but is stays long after it passed. The lines then clearly show that the song is a happy one.

In Eliot's lines, the joy, beauty, and hope of marriage for the renewal of life do not exist. In Eliot's poem, the Sweet Thames has changed. The beauties that decorated the river on the wedding day have gone, and as their replacement the litter is everywhere. The nymphs were all gone together and "left no addresses." The fairy-like element that provides the possibility of miraculous things and hope is gone in modern life. They have left and their traces are impossible to be found in the barren modern life because they "left no addresses":

…. 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 . . . (ll.175-182).

The song of the speaker in Eliot's poem then is not a happy one, but it is a song of lamentation as the reference to Psalms in which "the exiled Hebrews mourned for their homeland" in the line "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept …" shows (Abrams and Greenblatt, 2000, p. 2375).

The shift from joy and happiness to sadness and lamentation, from hope to hopelessness is worsened by the next allusion to Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" at the end of this stanza: "But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near." Eliot shifts the meaning of Marvell's lines to its opposite: "But at my back in a cold blast I hear / The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (ll. 185-186). Marvell's speaker reminds his lover of the shortage of time which is depicted as a 'winged chariot hurrying near.' This figure has its parallel with the common modern expression "time flies." The lovers must make the best use of time while "youth and beauty" are still at their heights for tomorrow they "shall no more be found." Thus, the philosophy behind Marvell's poem is *carpe diem*. More specifically, Brooker and Bentley say that although Marvell also used the images of

death, the purpose of using the threat of death is to convince the woman "to make love" (1990, p. 133).

Eliot's use of the images of death in this passage and in many others has the opposite effect from that used by Marvell. The rattle of the bones, the allusion to the death of the speaker's father in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the allusion to Actaeon's murder by his own hounds have the effect of reminding the speaker himself (and also the readers) of *memento mori*. From the examples, Eliot uses and combines Bloom's first and second revisionary ratios at once. He executes *clinamen* by following Marvell's lines to a certain extent and then swerves away from it, but at the same time Eliot becomes the antithesis of Marvell in regard to the effect of the death images, thus executing *tessera*. In the allusion to Spenser, Eliot again executes *tessera* by retaining Spenser's line: "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my Song" but giving it a new meaning.

THE FIRE SERMON: THE CLERK AND THE TYPIST SCENE: THE AFTERMATH

The last example I use to show Eliot's misreading of his literary sources is taken from the passage of the clerk and the typist scene. This scene depicts the motif of lust. In the aftermath of this scene, I shall show the result of lust that unifies this section on the theme of death. In this passage, the typist was alone after the clerk went away. Her consciousness was half-numbed as she was "hardly aware of her departed lover." Her brain hardly functioned well because it allowed only "one half-formed thought to pass." What came up to her mind was: "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." She did not like or enjoy or find meaning in the sexual intercourse she had just had with the clerk.

The image of death is supported in the following four last lines that are taken from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*:

> When lovely woman stoops to folly,
> And finds too late that men betray,
> What charm can soothe her melancholy,
> What art can wash her tears away?
> The only art her guilt to cover,
> To hide her shame from every eye,

To give repentance to her lover,
And wring his bosom, is – to die.
(as cited in Hands, 1993, p. 101)

In Goldsmith's lines, death is used as a means of revenge as to "give repentance to her lover, and wring his bosom." Death is not meaningless and useless. On the contrary, it has a purpose. Eliot misreads creatively Goldsmith's lines by twisting its meaning. Although death is not the literal and direct result of lust in Eliot's lines, its meaning is worsened:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone
She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone (ll. 253-256).

In Eliot's lines, the woman is not ashamed or sad. She has become an automaton or 'gratifier machine' for her lover's lust. The sexual relation became mechanic, and she acted like an automaton. This mechanism evokes the image of death because the life force or the *élan vital,* which is a central element in animate beings, has gone altogether and been replaced by inanimateness characteristic of a machine. She is not dead, but she cannot find meaning in her relation to her lover, and without meaning life means death or nothingness. Once again, the motif of 'the hollow man' or the living dead is evoked. In the example, Eliot executes what Bloom describes as *clinamen* as Eliot first follows Goldsmith, to a certain degree, and swerves away from him.

As a conclusion, Eliot creates the dominant theme of death by twisting the meaning of his literary sources. He relates to his *past* by using the quotations and allusions to his precursor poets, but he connects the past with his *present* by shifting the meaning of the literary sources and giving them new meanings. They are based on Eliot's observation of modern European civilization which 'was falling down' as the Great War demonstrated. In reading his literary sources, Eliot has executed two of Bloom's revisionary ratios, namely, *clinamen* and *tessera*, and he builds up the dominant motif of death. Death of course is not the only motif in *The Waste Land*, but from the discussion on Eliot's misreading of his literary sources, it proves to be the dominant one.

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