T. S. Eliot's THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK and Dante's DIVINE COMEDY

Discussions of the epigraph of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" have, as Robert Canary states, centered around "whether Prufrock is to be identified with Guido de Montafeltro, the doomed spirit who speaks in the Dante passage, and, if so, which elements of Guido's situation are relevant."[1] Critics have thus either attempted to explain the significance of the epigraph apart from its context or, by pointing out correspondences between Guido and Prufrock only seen when viewing the entire Guido passage, attempted to justify a broader comparison. Though such correspondences do encourage the poem's comparison with the Guido passage in toto—and perhaps, as Mr. Stuckey suggests,[2] the whole structure of the *Divine Comedy*—critics who have chosen such a course[3] have failed to go beyond questions of how elements are similar or different to questions of what thematic significance those similarities and differences have for the poem—i.e., questions of Eliot's intentions in evoking the Guido passage. It is only when we free ourselves from the labor of pointing out direct correspondences and, stepping back, look at the respective situations of Guido and Prufrock that Eliot's thematic relationship to Dante becomes clear.

Both Guido and Prufrock are faced with "overwhelming" questions: both the questions themselves and their responses to them demonstrate the difference not only between Guido and Prufrock but also between the worlds they inhabit—the Christian world of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the barren modern world of Eliot's "Prufrock." In the *Inferno*, Guido explains that, on earth, he was approached by Pope Boniface VIII who requested "false counsel"[4] of him (Boniface needed Guido's knowledge of "all wiles and covert ways" to overthrow Palestrina and thereby advance his own power and possession). Knowing that to give such counsel would be a mortal sin, Guido hesitates ("I was silent, for his words seemed drunken") but is finally seduced by Boniface's sophistic

assurances that "I have power to lock and to unlock Heaven" and thereby can "absolve thee henceforth." Thus Guido, brought "to the point where silence seemed to me the worse offence," commits what he knows to be a sin.

The relevance of this situation in relation to Prufrock is that Guido, in deciding whether to answer Boniface, must (and can) choose between sin and salvation. There is a right and wrong beyond his own intellect and its flaws, a right and wrong derived from an absolute—God. The consequence of his sin—his eternal damnation—is inevitable in the Christian universe which he inhabits; and neither Boniface's intellectual quibbling nor Guido's unfortunate naiveté is of any relevance.

While Boniface's request presents Guido with a clear choice—between sin and virtue, and hence damnation and salvation—the question confronting Prufrock is never spelled out, and its source never clearly identified:

> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an overwhelming question . . . .[5]

Unlike Guido, whose decision led ineluctably to his damnation, Prufrock's decision to confront, or not confront, the "overwhelming question" is detached from any issue of right or wrong. The poem, rather, focuses on Prufrock's inability, in the absence of any absolute, any right or wrong, to confront "the question": he is unable to decide whether to face the question ("Do I dare / Disturb the universe?") and how to face it ("And how should I begin"); he questions the value of even trying ("And would it have been worth it, after all"); his inability to communicate paralyzes him ("It is impossible to say just what I mean"); and, as a result, he wishes only to escape as a non-thinking "pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."

Against the Dantean backdrop, all of these details become mere symptoms of a "waste land" without transcendent ideals and values, a world which revolves around superficial talk of "Michelangelo" and "the taking of a toast and tea" instead of Divine precepts—a world in which any attempt at something more will be misconstrued and discounted:

> 'That is not it at all,
> That is not what I meant, at all.'

That such a comparison between the two works is warranted Eliot himself confirms:

> 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. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.[6]

The epigraph—in the *Inferno*, the beginning of *Guido's* story—should thus recall to the reader the entire Guido passage and make him read "Prufrock" as part of the tradition that includes the *Inferno*. Only when seen against the entire Guido passage, and only when one understands the significance of Guido's decision in

Dante's universe, does "Prufrock" become more a product of his spiritually empty world than a case study in neuroticism.

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NOTES

1. Robert H. Canary, *T. S. Eliot: The Poet and his Critics*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1982), p. 89.
2. William J. Stuckey, "Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Explicator*, XX, No. 1 (September, 1961), item 10.
3. See Robert White, "Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Epigraph," *The Explicator*, XX, No. 3 (November, 1961), item 19.
4. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 1: Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981–2), p. 339. All subsequent quotations from this text, pp. 337–41.
5. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1935* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), p. 11. All subsequent quotations from this text, pp. 1–17.
6. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Modern Poetics*, ed. James Scully (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 63.