

Constructing Truth in *The Waste Land*
Word Count: 1077

The conflict between Nietzsche's and Eliot's religious inclinations, the former being an atheist and the latter a Christian, suggests a conflict of ideology on the surface. However, literary critics have found biographical evidence that establishes that Eliot had definitely read Nietzsche, and was even influenced by him to a certain extent. Besides his review of A. Wolf's work on Nietzsche, Eliot has also been cited as remarking to his mother on how he was reading some of Nietzsche's work that he hadn't read before (Bakhtarynia 114). According to Bakhtarynia, a closer analysis of Wolf's review reveals that instead of dismissing Nietzsche as critics had earlier presumed, Eliot critiqued Wolf's treatment of Nietzsche's work. He asserts that Eliot admired Nietzsche for his hybridization between philosophy and literature, something that Eliot himself also worked towards his entire life. These shared interests ironically enough, find a fertile ground to bloom in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Many aspects of Eliot's *The Waste Land* can be read as being derived from a popular Nietzschean philosophy about constructed truths. In his work *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche talks about how the categories of truth and lie themselves are manmade, and thus subjective. Over the centuries, humans created concepts and intellect to exaggerate the importance of their own fleeting lifespan, and to mitigate the frailty of their bodies. We have trained our brains to recognize and sort stimuli into specific categories, and then construct these stimuli as concepts that actually represent dissimilar objects by prioritizing certain characteristics over others. No matter how prevalent, this process is illogical and leads one to question the validity of these 'true concepts'. Eliot's dissertation at Harvard, "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley," also evidences a consciousness of this topic as Bradley too wrote about subjectivity of knowledge and the conflict regarding absolute truth.

Eliot replicates the form of his poem based on Nietzsche's description of the creator by exhaustively using visual metaphors in the first part of his poem, and then proceeding to auditory metaphors in the second part. Nietzsche explains that

this creator only designates the relations of things to men, and for expressing these relations he lays hold of the boldest metaphors. To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one. (Nietzsche 116)

Likening himself to this deceptive creator, Eliot litters the first section of his poem *The Burial of the Dead* with metaphors about seeing. "Broken images," "I will show you," and references to "eyes" abound in the section (2615, 2616). Besides this the "clairvoyante," Madame Sosostris, literally someone who can see clearly, draws even more attention to the image metaphors with the repetition of deictic markers like "here," and her attempts to "see" (Eliot 2617). Unlike the first section, the second section *A Game of Chess* focusses on auditory metaphors and emphasizes the graduation from image metaphors to sound metaphors that Nietzsche talks about, and Eliot as a creator follows. This section displays rich onomatopoeia with its cacophony of "nightingale" (s), "inviolable voice" (s), "cries," "noise," (s) and "dirty ears" (2618, 2619). This parallel between the poet and the deceptive creator affords Eliot more optimistic power to undo the wrongs of lying he talks about in the poem.

Eliot employs the use of Nietzschean ideas not only in the form of his poem, but the content as well. His preoccupation with "unreal"-ity pays testimony to this fact. Nietzsche states that "The liar is a person who uses the valid designations, the words in order to make something that is unreal appear to be real" (115). In his first reference to "unreal city", Eliot describes the

very much real city of London as unreal (2617). While a surface interpretation of this idea would reinforce the lying-creator metaphor, which in this case inverts Nietzsche's real-unreal binary, a deeper analysis leads to a different result. Eliot's "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many," (2717) echoes Dante's description of the entrance into hell in *The Inferno*, giving it a more sinister connotation. It would seem like Eliot warns his reader against the dangers of perceiving subjective truths as absolute ones by likening the unreal city, and by extension attachment to unreality, as hell itself.

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of this deceitful entrapment by constructed categories appears in the prison-key metaphor in *V. What the Thunder Said*. Nietzsche says about man that "Does nature not conceal most things from him- even concerning his own body-in order to confine and lock him within a proud, deceptive consciousness...She threw away that key" (Nietzsche 115). Eliot's lines echo Nietzsche's language of confinement, locking, pride and key:

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn only once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
(Eliot 2627)

These lines describe how man is responsible for his own entrapment. By categorizing stimuli, we think of the key, and by doing this, we bind ourselves within categories of truth and lies that do not really exist, thus confirming our prison. The sentiment is reiterated by his reference to both *Dayadhvam* and Coriolanus. In the Indian Fable, God Prajapati utters only the syllable "DA" to three groups, but the groups based on their own shortcomings interpret this syllable to mean different things. One of these groups - demons, who are naturally cruel,

interpret it as an order to be compassionate. This unclarified interpretation exposes the fallacy of lying to ourselves and making a thing something that it really is not. Through the next example, he cements this meaning. Coriolanus symbolizes a man locked in a prison of his own making because of his pride.

To conclude, I would like to say that Eliot is attempting to warn his readers against self-imposed entrapment by constructing truths. Without reading Nietzsche however, coming to this understanding would be difficult and that only serves to highlight the elite erudition that Eliot expected of his reader. The poem itself complex and fragmented as it is, yields meaning more clearly when observed under the lens of a fitting philosophy like Nietzsche's.

WORKS CITED

- Bakhtiarynia, Ben. "Thinking the Nothing: Nihilism in The Waste Land." Edited by Joe Moffett, *The Waste Land at 90: a Retrospective*, Rodopi, 2011.
- Eliot, T.S. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Edited by Jon Stallworthy, Jahan Ramzani, 8th ed., B, Norton, 2006.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Nietzsche Reader*, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson, and Pearson, Keith Ansell, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2006. ProQuest Ebook Central, com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lib/utxa/detail.action?docID=255298.