

THE FIRE SERMON

WL-III: THE FIRE SERMON

Waste-land sex outside of wedlock fares no better than in it. As Eliot explains in a note, this section culminates in the Buddha's Fire Sermon and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, where the "two representatives of eastern and western asceticism" warn about the flames of lust. "Asceticism" is an ancient Christian metaphor taken from the world of sports and means "training". It was used of the sacrifice of the martyrs and of the discipline of anyone seriously seeking God. Asceticism is essentially joined to mysticism.

WL-IIIa: Love on the River (173-206)

The scene is the river Thames after the summer vacation. Eliot contrasts the relations between the sexes in poetry and in the waste land. For the poet Edmund Spenser, the Thames is blessed by the nymphs, mythological maidens dwelling in wood and water; he repeats the refrain:

Sweet Thanes, run softly, till I end my song.⁷⁷

In the waste land the nymphs have fled the river. The filth and clutter should make us weep, as the exiled Hebrews in the psalm who refused to perform their folksongs for the Babylonians who had deported them:

By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept.⁷⁸

The Prince in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was also "sitting on a bank/ Weeping" during the time he thought his father had drowned.⁷⁹ Instead of "Babylon", Eliot says "Leman", another name for Lake Geneva in Switzerland where he finished writing *The Waste Land*. But the word, which also means "mistress", suggests lust.

The poet Andrew Marvel, in his *To His Coy Mistress*, had to seize the moment because he kept hearing at his back

time's winged chariot hurrying near.

In the waste land, sex by the riverside is not poetic. The only sound the lovers hear is the roar of traffic. All they feel at their back is the blast of cold air, not the holy wind of Ezekiel that brought the community back to life. Their “white bodies naked” writhe on the wet bank like the slimy bellies of rats amid broken bottles and cigarette butts or —when mating in some attic— amid bones to the scamper of rats. The relationships of the hollow men seem to end at the Acheron, river of the underworld:

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river.⁸⁰

The raunchy Australian ballad on “Mrs. Porter and her daughter” does not reflect the beauty of intimacy.

This sordidness contrasts with the nobility of the holy Grail legend. In Wagner’s opera *Parsifal*, the knight Parsifal must be purified in a ritual washing of the feet before he can enter the castle where the Grail is housed. Eliot quotes in French the last line of “Parsifal”, the sonnet by poet Paul Verlaine; Parsifal, the knight who, after overcoming temptations to lust,

...worships, glory and symbol,
the vessel pure where real blood shown,
— and, oh these children’s voices singing in the dome.

The blood of Jesus in the chalice has no effect in the waste land.

“Twit... jug” is the song of Philomel changed into a nightingale; they contrast with her screams as she is being ravished by her brother-in-law the King.⁸¹ His name in Greek, “Tereu”, in the vocative case, ends the section; it is as if his victim were making a final, vain, appeal: “No!”

WL-IIIb: Down to business (207-214)

We now have a closeup of a merchant in the “unreal City”.⁸² Mr. Eugenides, the Phoenician Sailor,⁸³ is no longer a devotee of the mystery religions, as

were his ancestors from Smyrna. His French is “demotic” —simplified or vulgar—, but the word connotes a late form of the ancient Egyptian language. Egypt was an important religious center—for Christianity as well as for the mystery religions— but Mr. Eugenides does not speak this kind of demotic Egyptian.

In first-century there was a Christian community in Smyrna, an important commercial center. It was one of the seven cities addressed in the book of Revelation. The angel of Smyrna advises its citizens:

Be faithful till death, and I shall give thee the crown of life.⁸⁴

Mr. Eugenides is no longer faithful; now he has another way of life: getting rich exporting “currants” (Eliot will play on this word when speaking of his death),⁸⁵ hobnobbing with the jet-set, weekendng at high-class hotels (perversion is implied).

WL-IIIc: What Tiresias sees (215-256)

Tiresias is a legendary prophet of the city of Grecian Thebes who was accredited great wisdom and clairvoyance. In his note, Eliot quotes the Latin poet Ovid describing the two “sex-change operations” of Tiresias, a sort of classical “trans”. All the men in *The Waste Land*, Eliot explains, blend into one man and all the women into one woman, everybody, man and woman, merge with Tiresias: “unisex”. In other words, the critique of the waste land targets the human being as such.

Eliot says in a note that Tiresias “sees the substance of the poem” (the Sibyl and Mme Sosostriis are also “seers”.) What he/she sees, “foretells”, “fore-suffers”, is the copulation of a typist and a clerk of a real estate agency, but more inclusively, he/she sees all the usual goings-on in the waste land. The fact that Tiresias can “see” even though he/she is blind shows that the waste land is so predictable that to know all that is happening—or has happened or will happen—, he/she does not even need to look at it. It’s all the same. Waste-land time collapses into an instant, into a tedious sameness.

Mr. Eugenides was the management side of business; now we shall see labor, just as we saw both high and low-class marriage. Two working people, a typist and a flunky, go home in the evening. But their homecoming is not as in the poem *Hesperie* where the poetess Sappho prays:

Evening Star, bringing back
 what light-bearing dawn has scattered wide:
 thou bringest back the sheep, the goat, back,
 the child to its mother,

or, as Eliot explains in his note, the “fisherman who returns at nightfall”. Nor is it the homecoming in Robert Louis Stevenson’s poem (and epitaph), when at the “violet” hour

Home is the sailor, home from the sea
 And the hunter home from the hill,⁸⁶

to find warmth and security— and to find peace after death.

The woman and her “expected” pimply boyfriend, as cocky about his mindless job as a nouveau-riche tycoon about his wealth, meet in her cluttered apartment, with her clothes strewn about, her underwear drying on the windowsill. After supper he “assaults” her, even though she is tired from typing all day and then has made dinner with the help of a can opener. Her indifference and passivity seem to excite him. After his orgasm he “gropes his way” out into the darkness, “the stairs unlit..”— the three dots seem to say his life will always be the same.

The “lovely woman” in Oliver Goldsmith’s novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, returning to the place where she was seduced and betrayed, sings that only death can cover her dishonor and shame. And Philomel, after being raped, sings, as a nightingale, a song of purity. But the secretary is “glad it’s over”, puts on a record and forgets her recent coitus.

WL-IIIId: The City (257-265)

Eliot now compares Ariel’s song from *The Tempest*, “the music . . . upon the waters”,⁸⁷ with the pleasant “clatter and chatter” of a group of fishermen in a London pub near the church of Magnus Martyr. The song promises well for the Prince, who will be redeemed by love. There is something “inexplicable” in the beauty of the church which was built for fishermen long ago and contrasts with the squalor and ugliness of its surroundings today.⁸⁸ The scene evokes another society from another time, when work and play were different.

The phrase “O City city” —a particular city, capitalized, or all of them— recalls the lament over the fall of Jerusalem in the book of *Lamentations*, or Jesus’s words:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
 who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to thee...
 Behold thy house is left to thee become a desert.⁸⁹

Ten years later Eliot will comment on the fate of the

...timekept City;
 Where My Word is unspoken,
 In the land of lobelias and tennis flannels
 The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,
 The nettle shall flourish on the gravel courts,
 And the wind shall say: "Here were decent godless people:
 Their only monument the asphalt road
 And a thousand lost golf balls".⁹⁰

WL-IIIe: Loss of the gold (266-306)

Eliot tells us in his note that these lines contain the songs sung in turn by the three "Thames-daughters". He contrasts them with the Rhine-daughters from Wagner's opera, *Götterdämmerung* (*The Twilight of the Gods*), who grieved their seduction—like Goldsmith's lovely woman—and mourned the darkness of the river, which had lost the gold that once shone in its depths.

Night lies on the deep;
 Once she was bright,
 When still Rhine-gold
 Gleamed in her depth;
 Gold, pure, noble,
 How thou shonest,
 Lofty star of the deep!
 Weialala leia,
 Wallala leialala.

Once the Thames, too, contained gold, but now her daughters can sing only of the filth and lust that has replaced it.

Greenwich, the London district lying on the river opposite the peninsula called the Isle of Dogs, was the birthplace of Queen Elizabeth. Her affair with the Earl of Leicester on a river barge that Eliot described in the second song also turned out to be childless—just as the romance of Dido with Aeneas, Cleopatra with Antony, Ophelia with Hamlet and the secretary with her boyfriend.

The three Thames-daughters blend with Queen Elizabeth, Mrs. Porter (or her daughter), and with the woman “undone”. Eliot is referring to La Pia de’ Tolomei, whom Dante met in his tour of Purgatory. She was born in Siena and died in Maremma— thrown by her husband from a window in his castle, apparently so that he could marry another woman. She speaks these pathetic words to Dante:

For pity’s sake, when thou returnest to the world
 And have rested from thy long journey,...
 Remember me who am La Pia;
 Siena made me, Maremma unmade me:
 This he alone knows who, wedding me,
 placed his gem upon my finger.⁹¹

Actually, all women are included—in a working-class neighborhood (Highbury Park) or in the slums (Mooregate) of London, or at the seaside (Margate)— with the same old story, all deceived by lust: “my heart under my feet”. For the secretary, unlike the lovely woman, there is nothing to “resent”. Not only is there no oneness, no understanding, no love, since we can “connect/ Nothing with nothing”, but “we expect/ Nothing”— not the *nothing* of St. John of the Cross, complement of the *everything*. The meaningless “la la” at the end seals the irony of the entire section.

WL-III: Burning (307-311)

Now comes a turning point in the poem. Eliot introduces religious tradition here explicitly, both Christian and Hindu, which before was notable for being absent or inverted. Specifically, he records what they have to say about lust. He says in his note that bringing in the ascetics St. Augustine and the Buddha,

the culmination of this part of the poem is not an accident.

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (“the Enlightened One”), was an Indian spiritual guide who lived about five hundred years before Christ. St. Augustine was the bishop of the Christian diocese of Hippo, near the city of Carthage in North Africa, about four hundred years after Christ. He was the greatest “Father” of the western church. Both men underwent a conversion that significantly changed their lives. Augustine understood this experience as an *aversio-conversio*: a “turning” away from a sensual life (repentance) to-

ward a new life of prayer and virtue. Dante, who was an important source in Eliot's poetry, also underwent a conversion that changed his life—it happened when at the age of nine he saw Beatrice for the first time.⁹²

The line about Carthage is from St. Augustine's account of his conversion in his famous autobiography, the *Confessions*:

To Carthage I came,
and all about me seethed a crucible of unholy loves.⁹³

The wanton life he led in the city was bringing him to despair. Carthage, by the way, is an important thread in *The Waste Land*: it was a Phoenician colony,⁹⁴ it fought wars with Rome over economic interests,⁹⁵ and it was the city of Dido, who threw herself on a funeral pyre after she was forsaken by her lover, Aeneas.⁹⁶

Later, while teaching rhetoric in Milan, Augustine felt increasingly called to receive baptism, but he resisted. He tells us that one day, feeling paralyzed by his uncertainties, he went off by himself to think. He cried out in prayer:

How long, how long?
Tomorrow, tomorrow?
Why not now?
Why not end my dishonor at this very moment?

Then he heard a child singing in a nearby house

Take, read!

He took the words to be a sign, since he had never heard the song. He opened the copy of St. Paul's epistles he had with him and read:

not in carousing and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.⁹⁷

He then entered fully into the ethical and intellectual world of church.

As a wealthy young man the Buddha lived a sheltered life amid luxury and sensuous pleasure. When he became aware of the human suffering around him, he was moved to seek solitude in a forest.⁹⁸ After a period of self-renunciation, meditation, and struggle with temptation, he achieved

enlightenment. He then spent over forty years preaching his message of liberation to others.⁹⁹

“Burning” is the subject of the Buddha’s *Fire Sermon*, which Eliot in his note compares in significance to the Sermon on the Mount. The Buddha says to the priests who followed him:

Everything is on fire.
And what are all these things on fire?

The eye and the ear are on fire with the impressions they produce, said the Buddha, the tongue also, the mind and its ideas. The fire is passion, infatuation, hatred —birth and death, grief, despair. The Buddha is warning his priests against any harmful emotional upset: involvements, obsessions, and vicious behavior.

But for Augustine, too, the conversion event is not the end but a beginning. He confessed that years after his *aversio* from lust, the “seductions of the eyes” still threatened to ensnare his feet. He could resist them only through God’s mercy, he said, quoting a psalm:

My eyes are turned ever toward the Lord,
for He will pluck my feet from the snare,¹⁰⁰

and he goes on to pray:

Thou pluckest them out over and over, for they are caught;
Thou dost cease not to pluck them out,
but again and again I entangle myself in snares laid about me.¹⁰¹

Lust is not the only burning. Things of beauty “catch” him, says Augustine, when he loses sight of the beauty of God that they contain:

mercilessly I am caught, but mercifully,
Oh Lord, Thou pluckest me out
Oh Lord Thou pluckest.¹⁰²

Eliot quotes these last two phrases.

“Plucking” is used in other Biblical contexts. The prophet Amos warned the Israelites against immorality: