

CHAPTER ONE

In the Beginning was a Voice. John the Baptist in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'



In this chapter I focus on the last prophet of the Old Testament, John the Baptist and the role assigned to him in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. I point to a distinctly sorrowful note to the story of the Baptist, whose appeal proved irresistible to many writers of the twentieth century. Conrad and Joyce, for instance, evoked his solitary life in the desert, but lampooned his preaching and his role as the Predecessor of Jesus. For them, the Baptist was a voice without a Word, and they associated the prophet's mission with the agonies of desolation, doubt, futility and barrenness. The allusion to the Baptist in Eliot's text seems likewise irreverent and apparently void of any immediate religious import, yet at the same time different dimensions and layers of the poem remind us that blasphemy and flawed faith can be two sides of the same coin. As Eliot acknowledged himself in his introduction to Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals*: 'Genuine blasphemy, genuine in spirit and not purely verbal, is the product of partial belief, and is as impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian. It is a way of affirming belief'.¹ In what follows, I explore these rarely visited nooks and crannies of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. In order to achieve this aim, I first recall different aspects of the

¹ In: T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), p. 52. Cf. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1986), pp. 421–422.

Baptist's story recorded in the Bible and presented in visual arts. I present his figure as the Predecessor, 'a voice of one crying in the wilderness', and finally a martyr. I wish to foreground all the paradoxes embedded in this story: John was not God's 'spokesman', as the Greek word *prophetes* suggests, but His witness; he was a 'voice' which came before the Word; an orphan who prepared the way for the Son; a penniless vagrant who announced the plenitude of divine mercy; a hapless preacher who proclaimed the fulfilment of the Scriptures; a weeper who invited people to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. I shall also seek to explore the possible link between the section in which Prufrock mentions the Baptist with the refrain: 'In the room women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo' ('Prufrock', 13–14 and 35–36), looking at the works of Michelangelo Buonarroti and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

1. The Predecessor

In the liturgy of the Anglican and the Catholic Churches, the Gospel readings during Advent contain no *logia*, no sayings of Jesus. It is as if the Church were hushed in expectation of the Nativity. The absence in the Gospel readings is filled by the 'voice crying in the wilderness', that of St. John the Baptist. In Christian tradition the Baptist is called *Prodromos*: The Predecessor. He responds to the word of calling and announces the arrival of the Word, but his mission ends on the threshold of wonder. The time of the momentous event is precisely defined: 'Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests...' (Lk. 3:1–2). And the significance of the event is meticulously specified: 'the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias' (Lk. 3:2), which in the original version reads: *egento rhema Theou epi Ioannen*.

'The word' mentioned in this fragment, despite its divine origin, is nothing more than a message to be transmitted further; the inspired author of the Gospel makes it clear that the Word itself is yet to come. The fact that this author chose the Greek noun *rhema* here, highlights the difference between this anticipatory message addressed to the prophet, on the one hand, and Logos, the articulate and articulated divine Word made Flesh, on the other. It is fortuitous, however, that the past tense form of the same Greek verb *gignomai*, which in the quoted fragment denotes the calling of the prophet, also occurs in the Prologue to the Gospel in which John announces the mystery of the

Incarnation: *kai ho Logos sarx egento*. The Greek *ginomai* can be rendered in English as: ‘to come into being’ or ‘to happen’, and it was frequently used in sentences which describe ‘God’s actions as emerging from eternity and becoming (showing themselves) in time (physical space)’.² The word which ‘came’ to John actually ‘happened’ to him, already foreshowing the event of the Incarnation. This verbal pattern of the Greek original of the Fourth Gospel would certainly have not escaped the attention of the poet who declared Incarnation to be the central theme of his work and the crucial issue of all poetry.

The very beginning of John’s story narrated in the Gospels was weighted with promise and assurance. His mission was foreshadowed by a most joyful portent when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also expecting a child. ‘For lo’, exclaimed John’s mother, ‘as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy’ (Lk. 11:44). So the man who in all four Gospels is introduced as the unyielding ‘voice of one crying in the wilderness’ (Mk. 1:3; Mt. 3:3; Lk. 3:4; J. 1:23), responds here to the ‘voice’ of Mary’s greeting with a spontaneous gesture of leaping or perhaps of dancing for joy. The author of this account, St. Luke, provides us with some details about John’s background. He says that the prophet of the desert was a descendant of Aaron; and through his father, Zechariah, an heir to Aaron’s priestly office.

In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’s baptism in the River Jordan marks the beginning of His public life, but John’s portrayal of the Baptist is laden with additional symbolic significance. The author of the Fourth Gospel introduces the Baptist as ‘a witness to the light’:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness [*martyrian*], to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness [*martyrese*] of that Light. (J. 1:6–8)

The fact that in the original version the words *martyria* and *martyreo* simply denote the act of giving testimony (from Latin *testis*, a ‘witness’ or the one who testifies) does not exclude the possibility of construing them as if ‘proleptically’, in order to indicate that John was to become a ‘martyr’ whose testimony was indeed sealed with blood. Bearing in mind the meaning which the underlined Greek words acquired later in the history of Christianity, the reader of this passage may surmise that the author of the Fourth Gospel foretells the way in which John’s entire life – his preaching, imprisonment and death – pointed to the Passion of Christ. It is because of his conflict with

² <https://biblehub.com/greek/1096.htm>. Access 2 August 2019.

Herod and his execution that we can think of him as a precursor of ‘the sign which shall be spoken against’ (Lk. 2:34).

This transition from ‘witness’ to ‘martyr’ is not the only interesting aspect of the concept of ‘bearing witness’. The quoted fragment of the Prologue of the Gospel of John may be also interpreted in the light of the phenomenological reflection of Jean-Luc Marion. In his essay *The Visible and the Revealed* the philosopher offers the following account of what distinguishes the viewer, who is only a bystander unmoved by the event, from the witness, who is constituted by the event. Marion writes:

Thus, the phenomenon is no longer reduced to the *I* that would look at it. Incapable of being looked at, it proves irreducible. There is no drift or turn here, not even a “theological” one, but, on the contrary, an accounting for the fact that in certain cases of givenness the excess of intuition could no longer satisfy the conditions of ordinary experience and that the pure event that occurs cannot be constituted as an object and leaves the durable trace of its opening only in the *I/me* that finds itself, almost in spite of itself, constituted by what it receives. *The constituting subject is succeeded by the constituted witness*. As a constituted witness, the subject remains the worker of truth, but is no longer its producer. (emphasis added)³

The highlighted sentence in this passage helps us imagine the Baptist vis-à-vis Jesus, when the Baptist’s non-constituting *I* is comprehended by the uncreated Light, and therefore constituted as ‘a witness’ to this Light. Later on, Marion explains further that the activity of the witness always ‘remains that of response’.⁴ Paraphrasing the philosopher we may say that the Word is more interior to the Baptist than the most intimate within him, as it is more him than he had ever been himself, ‘and forever because always already’.⁵ There is an interesting parallel here between John’s first response to the Word which occurs at the moment of the Visitation, when he leapt in his mother’s womb ‘for joy’, and his encounter with Jesus on the bank of the river Jordan. Although we know that John was six months older than Jesus, both these stories show his dependence on the originary Word which, as Marion says, is ‘always already’, the Word anterior to the voice.

Marion’s philosophy can also illuminate the unassuming nature of John’s role as ‘a witness of the Light’. The philosopher contends that the witness ‘develops *his* vision of things, *his* story, *his* details, and *his* information – in

³ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. by Christina Gschwandtner, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

short he tells *his* story, which never achieves the rank of history'.⁶ The issue at stake here is the distinction between 'the constituted witness' and the 'devoted' subject, one who is given (*l'adonné*) and gives himself over to the phenomenon. Strictly speaking, the horizons of the *adonné* 'are overwhelmed and submerged'; he is more 'the subject constituted by its [the phenomenon's] givenness, than it [the phenomenon] is the object constituted by [his] subjectivity'.⁷ A good case in point here could be the bedazzling irruption of transcendence when Jesus was transfigured before His disciples on Mount Tabor.

Marion uses both concepts, the witness and *adonné* in a different context, but although he does not make the distinction explicit, we may surmise that according to the definition provided in *The Visible and the Revealed*, John's grasp of the event of the Incarnation, unlike the disciples' participation in the luminous mystery of Mount Tabor, was limited to his 'bearing witness' to the Light, and thus fraught with the acute sense of the insufficiency of the witness's partial understanding. Hence the moment of uncertainty recorded in the Gospel of St. Matthew: 'Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?' (11:2). For many readers of the Gospel, this may sound as a tough test of the witness's reliability, who in the moment of doubt – a dark night of the soul – turns to Christ for witness through his messengers.

We may venture to say that John's entire life was a response to the 'call' of Mary's Visitation in the small village of Ein Karim. And so, in this respect, the event of the Word in the desert – literally speaking, the fact that the Word 'happened' to John in the desert – transformed the contingencies of his being a child of elderly parents. John's arrival in this world late in his parents' marriage, his being orphaned before coming of age, which may have prevented him from succeeding his father in the priesthood, and his consequent exile in the desert gained a completely new meaning in the light of this event. The Word did not give John a new name, but brought him to understand both himself and the desert differently: in the aftermath of the event he became a 'voice', and the desert the space of his life adventure. The misery which he must have experienced after the death of his parents was radically reconfigured by this event; his weeping and fasting ceased to be marks of unearned suffering, and turned into prayer and asceticism.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Making the most of the etymology of the word ‘adventure’, which has its origin in the Latin verb *ad-venire*, ‘to arrive’, we make recourse to Claude Romano’s displacement of Marion’s *adonné* by the concept of the *advnenat*, who is constituted by the ‘advent of a world’ and ‘the event of meaning’.⁸ Romano’s neologism designates ‘man apprehended outside the subject, in the light of his event-advent to, and as himself starting *from*, what happens [*advient*] to him’.⁹ This serendipitous similarity between the language of contemporary philosophy and the traditional way of envisaging the Baptist as the prophet of Advent will inform our analysis of the role conferred on him in Prufrock’s imagination.

2. John the Baptist in the Bible

St. Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on the Gospel of John calls the Baptist ‘the precursor’ and stresses the authority inscribed in his role as ‘a man sent by God’.¹⁰ This aspect of the Baptist’s mission is also highlighted in the Gospel of Mark, where the Evangelist evokes the prophecy included in the Book of Isaiah, ‘Behold, I will do a new thing ... I will even make a way in the wilderness, a river in the desert’ (Is. 43:19):

As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger [*apostello ton angelon*] before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (Mk. 1:3)

The first sentence in Mark’s account contains a citation from the Book of Malachi, where *malachi* is not a proper name but a common noun which denotes an ‘angel’ or ‘messenger of God’. Hence the custom of calling John the Baptist ‘an angel of the desert’ and the Eastern Orthodox tradition of portraying him as a man with wings. But in fact John lived a solitary, ascetic and earth-bound life as a desert preacher; perhaps as an Essene. The ‘making’ of paths ‘straight’ in the mountain area of Palestine involved filling the valleys and levelling the hills which may perhaps be read as a metaphor of the prophets’ commitment to the cause of social justice and equity. And it perhaps would not be an erroneous interpretation of the passage in question, for John certainly inherited from Old Testament prophets the vocation to speak on behalf of the

⁸ Claude Romano, *Event and the World*, trans. by Shane Mackinlay, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁰ <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/SSJohn.htm>. Access 15 June 2019.

biblical *anawim*: ‘the poor and the lowly’; the defenceless and dispossessed; the excluded and shunned; widows and orphans. In contemporary language, we would speak here of the outsiders, ‘the people deprived of power, wealth, education, high birth, high culture’, in brief, everybody ‘low-down and low-born’.¹¹ John the Evangelist makes it clear, however, that moral reform and compassion for the weak was not the only message that the Precursor had for those who gathered around him and for the readers of the Gospels in the centuries and millennia to follow. Had it been so, Jesus’s teaching, which as old Simeon prophesied indeed brought about ‘the fall and rising again of many’ (Lk. 2:34), could also be reduced to a political project and would rank Him among the greatest revolutionaries of all times, but would certainly fail to point beyond this world.

The crucial episode, to which the name of the Baptist refers, has been portrayed in countless paintings and sculptures, which are to be found all over the world. In the Church of St. John the Baptist in Gdańsk, for instance, the central scene of the beautiful Baroque altarpiece sculpted in stone by a Flemish Mennonite, Abraham van den Blocke, shows Jesus stooping low in the river with his arms crossed across his chest, and John, who looks much taller, leaning over Him. In the upper part of the relief we see a dove surrounded by rays of light, which symbolises the Holy Spirit, and the Tetragrammaton, i.e. four Hebrew letters in a cloud of glory, which denote the unpronounceable name of God. Another inscription, also in Hebrew letters, running vertically from the dove to Jesus along the central shaft of light, reads: ‘This is my beloved son’ (Mt. 3:17). The use of the Hebrew alphabet points to the early modern debate about the fall of language and attempts to restore the same to Edenic perfection; the orientation of the inscription situated on the axis parallel to the figure of the Baptist who pours water on Jesus’s head suggests that God speaks through the prophet even when he does not utter any words. The vertical axis of the altar reveals the theophany of the Holy Trinity. At the same time, the baptism foreshadows Jesus’s death. The riverbed is the symbolic equivalent of the grave and the depths of Sheol, and Jesus’s posture signals the kenosis of the Son: His descent into the darkness of the world. On the left, in the background, Adam and Eve stand in front of the Tree of Knowledge, whose fruit they have just tasted and by so doing became expelled from Paradise. The proportions of the sculpture are revealing: henceforth Jesus will ‘increase’, just as John must ‘decrease’, indeed he will step down into the abyss of the

¹¹ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God. A Theology of the Event*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 46.

grave. The same message is conveyed by the arrangement of other parts of the altarpiece: two panels above the central scene depict John firstly in the desert and then at the time of his execution, while the topmost relief shows Christ triumphantly emerging from His tomb.

Matthias Grünewald portrayed the Baptist together with Jesus's mother, Mary Magdalene and the 'beloved disciple', John the Evangelist, at the foot of the Cross, although the Baptist did not live long enough to witness either the Crucifixion or the Resurrection. The forerunner of the Word and the witness of the Lamb had died too early to share in the joy of the Resurrection with the apostles or the assurance of faith with the martyrs. Yet in Grünewald's painting the Prophet of the Desert does not mourn the death of Jesus. He stands on the other side of the Cross, away from the weeping women and the Evangelist, pointing his finger at the Crucified, as if wanting to repeat without words the message uttered on the banks of the Jordan river: 'Behold the Lamb of God' (J. 1:29). At the feet of the Baptist we see a real lamb whose blood spouts into a cup that evokes the chalice of Eucharistic wine. In this way, the painter portrays the Lamb of God 'who lives forever slain', to invoke here the literal translation of the Easter Preface in the Roman Missal, *agnus qui vivit semper occisus*.

The fundamental importance of the Baptist's proclamation for the Christian faith is corroborated, for instance, by the inclusion of these words in the Catholic liturgy of the Mass, where the reception of Holy Communion is preceded by a short dialogue between the priest and the faithful; the celebrant utters the formula, 'Behold the Lamb of God', while presenting the Body and Blood of Christ to affirm the Real Presence in the sacramental signs. A similar phrasing can be found in a number of Anglican prayers, for instance, 'for *he is the very Paschal Lamb*, who was sacrificed for us, and hath taken away the sin of the world; who by his death hath destroyed death, and by his rising to life again hath won for us everlasting life'.¹² The Latin inscription on Grünewald's painting: *Illum oportet crescere, me autem minui* (J. 3:30),¹³ throws new light on what it means 'to prepare God's way'. Clearing a passage denotes not only a removing of the obstacles which obstruct the path, but also stepping aside – or being moved aside – so that a more worthy person may come in. It therefore transpires that not only did the Baptist's preaching, but also his death 'prepare' Christ's way.

¹² Paul V. Marshall, *Prayer Book Parallels*, vol. 1, (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), pp. 358–359.

¹³ 'He must increase, but I must decrease'.

Although crowds gathered to see the Baptist, perhaps driven by curiosity rather than a genuine desire to hear his preaching, Jesus presented them with a manifest understanding of their own wonder and sense of marvel when he asked them: ‘What went ye out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? ... A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and *more than a prophet*’ (Mt. 11:7–9; emphasis added). In the same speech He also proclaimed a total change of perspective: ‘For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John’ (Mt. 11:30). Unlike in our everyday experience, where words are formed in our mind before they appear on our tongue, the voice preceded the Word and had to cease when the Word made Flesh began His preaching.

3. Prufrock in the Wilderness

Prufrock says: ‘But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed, / Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter, / I am no prophet ...’ (81–83). This allusion to John the Baptist, has been convincingly linked by Lee Oser to Eliot’s American background and the religious and literary culture of New England. Oser avers to Sacvan Bercovitch’s observations included in *The American Jeremiad* pondering ‘the figural use of John the Baptist’ as a distinctive feature ‘of the New England pulpit, and part of the Puritan legacy to the American rhetoric’.¹⁴ He invokes Bercovitch’s list of American writers, from Samuel Danforth, Thomas Hooker, Edward Johnson and Increase Mather to Jonathan Edwards, who made ample use of biblical typology enlisted in the service of ‘the prophetic history of America’.¹⁵ According to Bercovitch, all these writers recognised in the story of John a foreshadowing of their own task ‘to prepare the way of Christ in the American wilderness’, while at the same time the role of the biblical exemplum was invoked in their respective narratives as ‘at once recapitulative and prospective’;¹⁶ both a hindsight of the well-known pattern and a foresight of future developments.

Oser argues, however, that ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ dispensed with this Puritan heritage of the poet’s American ancestry. His analysis is worth quoting at length, for it helps us understand Eliot’s ironic treatment of the idea of a preacher-poet in his early poetry when the author of ‘Prufrock’

¹⁴ Lee Oser, *T.S. Eliot and American Poetry*, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 36.

¹⁵ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012). p. 11. Cf. Oser, *T.S. Eliot and American Poetry*, p. 36.

¹⁶ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, p. 13.

wished to liberate himself from the American past and the habits of thought haunting his mother's tongue, so as to search for his poetic voice far abroad, in the foreign accents of the French symbolists:

By the nineteenth century, the figure of John the Baptist prophesying to Americans had become a familiar sight to readers in New England. ... Charlotte Eliot also wrote in this tradition. Among the miscellaneous poems that survive in a scrapbook in Harvard's Eliot Collection is one entitled: "God's Kingdom Is at Hand. Repent!"¹⁷

Oser notes that this short text, published in *Christian Register*, a Unitarian weekly magazine, 'helps confirm the ubiquity of John the Baptist as a symbol of the prophetic and missionary ideals of late-Puritan culture' and therefore constitutes a perfect example of what he defines as 'the clerical ethos of the Eliot family'.¹⁸ He explains how Eliot modifies this pattern to serve the aims of the project on which he embarked in Europe:

From Eliot's perspective the figure of John the Baptist prophesying was very probably a cliché, a tenuous link to Puritan traditions that were becoming part of the dead past. ... Applying Laforgue's example, Eliot outdid his teacher in the sheer form of his iconoclasm: the *Moralités légendaires* had presented the Baptist in an aspect ripe with expressive possibilities for a disaffected late-Puritan writer circa 1910. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the prophet no longer prophesies in the American wilderness; instead he is silenced and somewhat comically disfigured. With the image of Prufrock's "head ... brought in upon a platter", Eliot disrupted a long tradition of American Puritan iconography, and implicitly repudiated a legacy of mission and prophetic calling that survived within his immediate family.¹⁹

But Eliot's treatment of the motif of the poet-preacher which he may have remembered from his native American culture and from which he may have indeed wanted to depart, signals not only a move away from one version of the story of the Baptist, but also leads us towards a new understanding. First of all, the biblical reference is strictly connected with the theme of death and dying, which in Eliot's dramatic monologue quickly takes precedence over a love entanglement (or the lack of it!). His Baptist is 'dead on arrival', as instead of listening to the voice of a prophet crying in the wilderness, we are reminded of the canvas representing Salome with John's bloody head on a platter. This allusion is followed by the introduction of the figure of the 'Eternal Footman', cast in the form reminiscent of a similar forewarning included in *The Waste*

¹⁷ Oser, *T.S. Eliot and American Poetry*, pp. 36–37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.