

Studi danteschi – Dante-tanulmányok

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Ash Wednesday and T. S. Eliot's Dantean Vision of Unity

Introduction. Eliot, Dante, and Ash Wednesday

This essay examines Thomas Stearns Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* (1930) in relation to Eliot's Dantean vision of unity. It analyses how the poet interpreted and applied Dante's idea of harmony to the twentieth century by connecting the different fields of interests of his life in his poetry, more precisely, in *Ash Wednesday*. Dante's comprehensive influence on Eliot will be studied from two major aspects: its role in his public aspirations and his private endeavours.

The main hypothesis of this essay is that the Dantean influence was the uniting force that connected Eliot's different interests and that it helped him turn his poetry into a comprehensive system. In order to investigate the means by which Eliot created the unity of his poetry, and in order to determine whether these connections are actually traceable in Eliot's poetry, *Ash Wednesday* proves to be one of the most helpful poems. The complete version of the poem, with all six sections, was first published in 1930. By that time, Eliot had immersed himself in philosophy, history, literary theory, religion, and politics, and he had studied Dante's work extensively. Consequently, *Ash Wednesday* came to be a poem that displayed not only the influence of all of these subjects on his poetry but also how his studies and experiences shaped his poetic vision.

This essay will highlight the influence of these studies and experiences in the poem; it will proceed to point out how *Ash Wednesday* connects different aspects of Eliot's interests,

and how these aspects relate to each other. Daniel Albright describes the system of these relations as circles with one common place of intersection, the circles signifying separate fields of Eliot's life, and the intersection the place where these themes meet and create a comprehensive scheme (286). Due to this, it seems nearly impossible to fully understand Eliot's poetry without finding these connections. This problem is exactly what this essay sets out to solve: by treating Eliot's *oeuvre* as a living organism in which processes of thought and feeling are in constant interaction, it strives to attain comprehensive understanding of *Ash Wednesday*.

This perspective is important because it offers a new way to interpret the poem. Furthermore, by making the aforementioned connections, this holistic approach also allows for the creation of a comprehensive scheme in this essay that is similar to the one Albright claims Eliot's *oeuvre* represents (286). As this scheme of unity is central to the meaning of *Ash Wednesday*, the aim of this essay is as much to comprehend the nature of unity in the poem as to understand what progress of thoughts and feelings inspired it.

This progress was clearly influenced by Dante's poetry, especially his *Divina Commedia* and *La Vita Nuova*. In "What Dante Means to Me," a speech Eliot gave in 1950, the poet established the following: "I still, after forty years, regard [Dante's] poetry as the most persistent and deepest influence upon my own verse" (*To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* 125). Sixteen years later, in 1966, Ezra Pound called Eliot the "true Dantescan voice" of his generation (qtd. in Manganiello 1). Moreover, Dante is a figure to whom Eliot keeps returning in his literary and critical essays: the short essay "Dante," the last chapter of his 1921 essay collection, *The Sacred Wood*; "Dante," a longer study written in 1929; and "What Dante

Means to Me," the speech from 1950. In "Dante," Eliot explained the reasons for his appreciation of the Italian poet's *Divina Commedia*:

It is one of the greatest merits of Dante's poem that the vision is so nearly complete; it is evidence of this greatness that the significance of any single passage, of any of the passages that are selected as "poetry", is incomplete unless we ourselves apprehend the whole. (*The Sacred Wood* 154)

It seems that Eliot aspired to attain a similar "complete vision," as his poetry should also be understood as a "unified whole."

Nothing reinforces the claim that Dante had the greatest influence on Eliot's *oeuvre* more strikingly than the fact that the Dantean journey through *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* can be traced through Eliot's poetry. *Inferno* is already cited in the epigraph of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," while the infernal vision of the city becomes most fully realised in *The Waste Land*, where the people of London are compared with the dead souls suffering in Dante's Hell: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (62). However, in the last section of *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said," the scenery changes, and the possibility of rain foreshadows future hope; in this case, a chance for purgation and renewal. *The Hollow Men* continues this progress with an allusion to a distant vision of the "Multifoliate rose," the Dantean Paradise, while Arnaut Daniel, a sufferer in Dante's *Purgatorio* becomes a central character of *Ash Wednesday* (85). Even though *Paradiso* is frequently alluded to, its complete vision is only reached in Eliot's last long poem, the *Four Quartets*.

In Eliot's poems, the journey from *Inferno* to *Paradiso* is not only signified by these Dantean allusions, but by the

landscape and a kind of philosophical development as well. The three stages of the journey, Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, appear as metaphorical landscapes and states of mind at the same time. This allows for a parallel development of imagery and philosophy very similar to Dante's; at the beginning of the *Divina Commedia*, the speaker is near the entrance of Hell both metaphorically and physically. The speaker literally wanders near the gates of Hell, but he also finds himself in the dark wood "for the straight way was lost," which means he has not lived his life to be worthy of salvation (*Inferno* I, 3). In order to escape eternal damnation, he has to find the right way again, and for this, he has to travel through Hell, get to Purgatory, and eventually, arrive to Heaven, where Beatrice, his platonic love, awaits him.

While the landscapes of desert and garden in Eliot's poetry offer rather straightforward allegories of Purgatory and Heaven, equating the city with *Inferno* shows a Marlowean rather than Dantean approach to Hell. Eliot expressed appreciation of Marlowe's poetry in "Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe," which suggests that he was familiar with the view of Hell expressed in *Doctor Faustus* (*The Sacred Wood* 78). This similarity shows how the experience of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven are turned into states of mind in Eliot's poetry.

In the drama, Mephistopheles suggests that Earth is Hell by saying "All places shall be hell that is not heaven"; similarly to this, Eliot's city is an *Inferno* set on Earth (2.1.129). Furthermore, Ian McAdam points out that in *Doctor Faustus* Hell is "either a place of torment or a state of mind" that "has its roots in a sickness of the self," which means that the Hell of the individual sufferer on Earth is constructed from his vices (122). This view parallels Eliot's depiction of Hell in "The Love

Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"; Prufrock's tragedy is rooted in his inability to escape his own personality.

Eliot, however, proceeds to see Purgatory as a state of mind as well, constructing the progress of purgation from the individual mindset of the speaker of *Ash Wednesday*. Jewel Spears Brooker also suggests that this second chapter of the journey that is depicted in Eliot's *oeuvre* is of special importance: "*Purgatorio*, Eliot maintains, is "the most difficult" of the three [stages]. . . . *Purgatorio* refers to a process of purgation that can only be understood as a concept" (11). With this in mind, it seems clear that Eliot's artistic endeavour to recreate Dante's ternary structure in his poetry required him to present a system of thoughts through a modern, allegoric vision of *Purgatorio* in *Ash Wednesday*; very much like how Dante presented ideas through similes in the *Divina Commedia*.

Ash Wednesday parallels Dante's Purgatory, which is set on a mountain to where the souls of the dead who regretted their wrongdoings while they were alive get in order to be cleansed of their sins. Mount Purgatory leads to the Earthly Paradise that is atop of it; and then further, up to the stars where Dante imagined Heaven to be (Nádasdy 46). Purgatory is a place of hope and despair, where the penitents suffer the consequence of their past sins, but can look forward to their reunion with God in Heaven.

Similarly to Dante's *Purgatorio*, the religious development of *Ash Wednesday* is impossible to ignore. In his essay collection, *For Lancelot Andrewes*, Eliot foreshadowed that his next poem will be "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic [*sic*] in religion" (Chinitz 27). The phrase "next poem" referred to *Ash Wednesday*, which, even in its first, fragmentary state, did justice to the statement on religion. The six sections that later, in 1930, were collected to

form the long poem, *Ash Wednesday*, had been published separately before, bearing subtitles from Dante's *Divina Commedia*, alluding to some challenges he faced while – similarly to the speaker of the *Commedia* – he contemplated religion. The subtitles, which were removed in the final edition, served to signify a Dantean journey from exile to beatitude, from damnation to blessedness. Ronald Schuchard points out that “Perch’ io non spero,” the original title of section I, is a quote from Guido Cavalcanti’s ballad about his exile, while the following four sections – the last one never had a subtitle – are all quotes from the *Commedia* in an almost successive order, from *Purgatorio* to *Paradiso* (151-52). Thus, the speaker emerging from Purgatory to Heaven in *Ash Wednesday* passes through the same stages of journey as the narrator of the *Divina Commedia*. With this choice, Eliot connected his own religious path to the path that Dante had described.

Perhaps this apparent complexity of purgatorial themes in *Ash Wednesday* was the reason why Douglas Atkins regards the poem as one of Eliot’s “most under-read, misread, and most challenging and demanding work[s]” (vii). However, critical interpretations of Eliot’s poetry do not always set out to see the poet as a person who consciously built himself up and extended his knowledge in many different fields of study, seeking solutions for his dilemmas. While Barry Spurr and Atkins both give a detailed account of what religion meant to Eliot and how it influenced his life and poetry – including *Ash Wednesday* – they disregard other fields of the poet’s interest for the sake of an in-depth study of Eliot’s interest in religion.

Similarly to Spurr, Michael North and William M. Chace both immerse themselves in a particular field of Eliot’s interest: politics. While both North’s *The Political Aesthetic of*

Yeats, Eliot, and Pound and Chace's *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot* give a thorough account of Eliot's political vision in a historical context, North and Chace find that his political views can hardly be connected to his poems; they suggest that Eliot intended to disregard his political visions when writing poetry.

Schuchard gives immense attention to several informative details concerning *Ash Wednesday*. Apart from the allusions to Anglo-Catholicism, he examines the pre-text of the poem and Dante's influence as well (155). What is more, Schuchard points out that the poem can be seen as the dramatisation of Eliot's personal suffering (155). Jewel Spears Brooker and Denis Donoghue apply a similar perspective, viewing Eliot's poetic aspirations as a product of his emotional needs. Donoghue describes Eliot's poetry as "an effort at resolving diverse impulsions, recognitions, and needs," thus focusing on the personal element of the poet's source of inspiration (149).

Mervyn Williamson and Hugh Kenner, two of the first Eliot critics, point out that Eliot's poetry forms a unity, as it "represents a single and coherent dramatic action" (Kenner 446). Northrop Frye also notes that Eliot structured his poetic *oeuvre* according to the scheme of Dante's ternary division: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, and suggests that *Ash Wednesday* belonged to the poet's "purgatorial vision" (72). Audrey T. Rodgers, who specifically studies the manifestation of Purgatory in *Ash Wednesday*, confirms this suggestion; moreover, she connects the structure of the poem to the Christian ritual of the Sacrifice of the Mass (97).

Hungarian critics also consider the Eliot corpus a comprehensive scheme; Győző Ferencz, in particular, points out the deliberateness with which the poet composed his

oeuvre (166). Péter Dávidházi applies the same thought of deliberate intention to biblical allusions, making it clear that upon analysing their meaning in Eliot's poems, they ought to be interpreted in their new context (849). Benedek Tóta – in agreement with Frye – suggests that Eliot's aim was to present a harmonic way of life in his poetry (523). Moreover, Ferenc Takács points out that in his critical essays Eliot also promoted the idea of achieving a "unified sensibility" through entwining imagery with meaning in poetry (14-15).

The following two chapters will focus on how Eliot united the notions listed above in his life and in *Ash Wednesday* through a Dantean scheme. They will also organise the Dantean notions Eliot connected into two intersecting sets: those that affected Eliot's private endeavours and public aspirations, thus influencing his poetry as well. The development of Eliot's vision of his self and society are the two guiding aspects of the purgatorial progress that *Ash Wednesday* dramatises; therefore, the following two chapters will examine these most crucial themes.

1. *Ash Wednesday and the Dantean Vision of the Self*

Perhaps the most striking way Eliot followed Dante is shown through his desire to achieve unity on both artistic and personal levels. The era in which Eliot wrote his poetry and the literary movement of which he was a part of provides an explanation as to the roots of this aspiration. In his essay "Contradictions of Modernism," Terry Eagleton points out some of the characteristics of the Modernist movement:

Modernism proper is old enough to remember a time when there was still truth, reality, foundations, a coherent subject, the possibility of freedom and justice, and it is still

haunted by a nostalgia for this alluring world, not least in the way the modernist work of art still strives for unity. (35)

According to Eagleton, modernism had branches that strove to achieve wholeness through art. The endeavour towards unity that was characteristic of Modernism offered Eliot a reason to set Dante as an example, since the Italian poet was the master of capturing harmony in his poetry.

Frye draws attention to Dante's unique ability to versify this sense of unity. The critic mentions a non-literary issue that nevertheless influenced the development of literature since the Middle Ages: "the [cultural and religious] disintegration of Europe began soon after Dante's time"; in the Middle Ages, "society, religion and the arts expressed a common set of standards and values" (8). Thus, in the *Divina Commedia*, Dante was able to depict contemporary life and society using religious philosophy as an organizing force. The Christian idea of after-life provided him with the ternary division of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven; the journey through *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* gave the framework of the *Commedia*. Furthermore, Christian philosophy and morals provided a strong basis for the speaker's religious inquiries, visions, and contemplations, which are frequently reoccurring elements in the poem:

In the deep, transparent essence of the lofty Light
there appeared to me three circles
having three colors but the same extent.

(Dante, *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 115-17)

This depiction is of the Holy Trinity; the speaker experiences their nature of being one and three at the same time; thus, he understands the Christian dogma through a religious vision.

Therefore, Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages – in Dante’s description – provided a logical system in which there was an answer to every question and in which everyone had a place; this system was encapsulated and preserved in the *Divina Commedia*. In his 1929 essay, “Dante,” Eliot points out another aspect of the universality of the Italian poet’s work by calling the *Commedia* a long, allegoric poem (*Complete Prose* 3.704). In Eliot’s opinion, allegory is a universal device, as everyone can interpret pictures regardless of the languages they speak (*Complete Prose* 3.704). He also connects the use of these allegories to the ability to see visions:

Dante’s is a visual imagination . . . in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions. It was a psychological habit, the trick of which we have forgotten, but as good as any of our own. We have nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions . . . was once a more significant, interesting, and disciplined kind of dreaming. (*Complete Prose* 3.704)

According to Eliot, Dante had something other poets could not offer: an ability to see visions people have subsequently lost.

In *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, Eliot claims that the type of poetry Dante wrote can only be written at certain times and in certain places: “It becomes clear after a little inspection that this type of thought, the *Word made Flesh*, so to speak, is more restricted in times and places of its avatar than it is immediately evident” (54). To “make the Word Flesh,” according to Eliot, is to translate an idea, or something that can usually only be perceived as an intellectual statement, in a way that the reader can also sense it (54). The naming of this ability is quite significant as John the Evangelist writes that when Christ came to Earth “The Word became Flesh” (*New International Version*, John 1.14). He is also described in the same passage as “full of grace and truth.” This allusion shows

a correlation between the nature of Christ and Dante's poetry. Since the "Word" signifies God, and "Flesh" suggests human form, Christ connects God and humanity; thus, he also represents a bridge between Heaven and Earth, transcendence and immediacy. The ability to "make the Word Flesh" in Dante's poetry, according to Eliot, serves the same purpose.

After Dante's time and place – Italy in the Middle Ages – sociocultural, linguistic and philosophical conditions changed, and art changed with these; it lost the ability to "make the Word Flesh." Consequently, from Eliot's point of view, the aforementioned changes made the Italian poet one of the few who could present a unique ideal of wholeness for the upcoming ages from many aspects. According to Eliot, one of the most important aspects was language:

The Italian language, and especially the Italian language in Dante's age, gains much by being the immediate product of universal Latin. . . . Now mediaeval Latin is a very fine language; fine prose and fine verse were written in it; and it had the quality of a highly developed and literary Esperanto. . . . [M]ediaeval Latin tended to concentrate on what men of various races and lands could think together. (*Complete Prose* 3.701)

Eliot strove to achieve the ideal of unity by connecting Heaven to Earth and the immediate to the transcendent in his own poetry. As he endeavoured to do so in a different language and more than six hundred years later than Dante, he needed to find a new way to depict his own visions in a comprehensive manner that was able to represent the harmony he longed for.

In "Dante," the last essay of his 1921 collection, *The Sacred Wood*, the poet describes a way to experience and contemplate these visions:

The mystical experience is supposed to be valuable because it is a pleasant state of unique intensity. But the true mystic is not satisfied merely by feeling, he must pretend at least that he sees, and the absorption into the divine is only the necessary, if paradoxical, limit of this contemplation. (*The Sacred Wood* 154)

This contemplation of the nature of the mystical experience shows that Eliot needed the “absorption into the divine” to be able to explore the transcendent and the infinite; an eternity to work with as a poet. Furthermore, it also suggests that he drew inspiration from Dante’s mysticism to be able to have his own visions.

Eliot was indeed deeply engaged with the question around the existence of the divine; the process of his conversion is suggestive of this. According to Spurr, the first instance when Eliot notably expressed interest in Anglo-Catholicism was in 1911, during his first trip to London, where he visited four Anglican City churches originally built in Gothic or neo-Gothic style: St. Helens, St. Stephens, St. Bartholomew the Great and St. Sepulchre (*Anglo-Catholic in Religion* 34). After these instances, Eliot’s admiration towards these “historical sacred places” of the Anglican Church kept growing; as Spurr points out, he saw their presence as “unobtrusive, but potentially redemptive” (*Anglo-Catholic in Religion* 34). He also extended his knowledge of religious texts ranging from the Bible to the works of St. John of the Cross, a Spanish Carmelite mystic, and the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes, the Bishop of Winchester who lived in the seventeenth century, and who had a salient rhetorical talent. Mark Jones points out that Eliot was rather fond of Andrewes’s sermons; the poet even dedicated his 1928 essay collection, in which he announced his conversion, to him (153).

After these studies, as David Chinitz argues, Eliot sought the company of William Force Stead, an American poet and Anglican chaplain at Worcester College, Oxford; he also turned to him when he made up his mind about becoming a member of the Church of England in November 1926 (27). There has been much speculation about the poet's choice of religion; around 1911, when Eliot took up an interest in Anglo-Catholicism, it was a quite young branch of the Church of England; founded in Oxford, in the 1830s, it was only eighty years old. Anglo-Catholics officially belonged to the Church of England, but there were several doctrinal differences between them and Low Church Anglicans who preferred the Protestant tradition. Spurr points out that – in contrast to Low Church Anglicanism – the Anglo-Catholic service borrowed many characteristics of the Roman Catholic liturgy in its prayers as well as in the partaking of sacraments (*Anglo-Catholic in Religion* x).

This similarity between the two religions not only explains the frequency of allusions to Catholic liturgy and prayers – which became elements of the Anglo-Catholic service as well – in Eliot's poetry, but also sheds light on what the poet found attractive about this branch of the Church of England. While Eliot sought a universal order in life and admired the wholeness of religious philosophy in Dante's age, to him, "unity also meant the fusion of the universal with the concrete" (Patea 18). According to Paul Robichaud, the poet saw this "fusion" in his chosen religion; to him, Anglo-Catholicism meant a link that connected the "local" church that only existed in England to the more widespread Roman Catholic faith (213).

However, the choice of Anglo-Catholicism is not the only interesting feature of Eliot's conversion. There is a more

general question to be asked: why the poet felt the need to believe in God in the first place. In his 1930 letter to Paul Elmer More, Eliot explained what his faith meant to him:

To me, religion has brought at least the perception of something above morals, and therefore extremely terrifying; it has brought me not happiness, but the sense of something above happiness and therefore more terrifying than ordinary pain and misery; . . . I had far rather walk, as I do, in daily terror of eternity, than feel that this was only a children's game in which all the contestants would get equally worthless prizes in the end. (210)

Therefore, Eliot chose to believe in the infinity of God – consequently, afterlife as well – as he felt the sense of meaninglessness a greater torture than contemplating the eternal.

Furthermore, religion also gave the poet a strong basis to reach the “mystical experience” that Eliot described as something which “elevates sense for a moment to regions ordinarily attainable only by abstract thought” and “clothes the abstract, for a moment, with all the painful delight of flesh” (*The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* 55). From these words it seems that attaining the “mystical experience” is the way to be able to “make the Word Flesh.” If Eliot was indeed able to realize this type of poetry through religion, it is safe to assume that the contemplation of the eternal not only helped him in his aspirations as a private person but also as an artist.

Eliot's pursuit of the “mystical experience” sheds light on another important aspect of his admiration for Dante. In her essay on Eliot's turn from the ideas of Francis Herbert Bradley – a nineteenth century philosopher – to Dante's poetry, Brooker points out that the poet was preoccupied with the search for this transcendent state of mind ever since he had read Bradley's theory on dissolving dualism (5). This means

that Eliot's interest in the mystical dates back to 1914; his year at Oxford, when he finished his PhD thesis entitled *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (5). As Brooker points out, the poet chose this preoccupation because he hoped to find a solution to an ambivalence he faced within himself, namely, the irreconcilability of body and mind:

Bradley divides Experience into three categories: "immediate experience", "intellectual experience", and "transcendent experience", the first two of which are almost identical to the body and mind facing off in Eliot's early poems and letters, and the third of which tenuously suggests not only a truce, but a comprehensive peace. (6)

However, Eliot found himself unable to achieve this "comprehensive peace" with the help of philosophy; as Brooker claims, Bradley's idea of the three kinds of experiences provided him with the ideal of unity, but not with means to achieve it (5). As Eliot first encountered the kind of harmony he sought in Dante's work, he felt that the field of poetry is able to present him with a solution to the problem of not being able to attain a unified consciousness (8).

The Italian poet's *oeuvre* was intriguing for Eliot from the first moment, as it showed a great resemblance to his previous studies in philosophy while it was also able to exceed them. Brooker points out two features in Dante's work that Eliot was already familiar with through Bradley's philosophy:

The first relates to Dante's images, which transform ideas into sensations – in Bradleyean terms, turn intellectual experience into immediate experience or transcendent experience. The second relates to the overall structure of the *Divine Comedy*. Eliot describes the three canticles – *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso* – in language that suggests a parallel with Bradley's three stages of experience. (9)

With the help of Dante's work, Eliot found evidence of the possibility of realising Heaven as a state of mind in poetry. For him, this Paradise was the harmony of body and intellect, a "comprehensive peace"; something, he believed, philosophy could not achieve. Therefore, he decided to depict this harmony, this "transcendent experience" in his poetry through religion, just as Dante had done before. This discovery adds another layer to the meaning of Purgatory as a state of mind in Eliot's poetry: it is where and when "intellectual experience" is transcended, and the thoughts of despair are replaced by contemplations of the eternal. Only through this change is it possible to achieve a unified state of mind, to embrace a "transcendent experience"; in other words, to arrive to Paradise.

Ash Wednesday is the poem that describes this journey to Heaven through Purgatory. It depicts this progress as the reconciliation of opposites with a transcendent vision; the development of recurring images since *The Waste Land* is suggestive of this. The scene where the purgatorial progress of the soul plays out is introduced in section II of *Ash Wednesday*: "the quiet of the desert" (92). This place is strikingly similar to the one reached in *The Waste Land*'s last section entitled "What the Thunder Said":

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road. (72)

This desolation of the soul, however, is an image that is constantly developed through Eliot's poems; in *The Waste Land*, "There is not even solitude in the mountains"; no quiet, but the ruins of a civilization. Everything awaits decay and death except a cock that "stood on the rooftree" as the symbol

of a new dawn (72-74). *The Hollow Men* shows slightly more signs of life as a vision appears in section IV:

The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose. (85)

This vision is seen in the desert, but is not the part of the wasteland where the “prickly pear” is the only living thing near the empty men; thus, vision and actuality, transcendent and immediate are still separate. The long wait for redemption, for the arrival to the “Multifoliate rose,” the perpetual star that is Heaven, that the voices of *The Hollow Men* have to suffer mirrors the Ante-Purgatory of *Divina Commedia*, where excommunicates circle Mount Purgatory the same way the voices “go round the prickly pear” (85). In *Ash Wednesday*, which is a transit between actual and transcendent, these two places – the desert and the place of vision – intersect, as the Lady and the three white leopards are in the same desolate tract as the speaker. This sense of arriving to a transit between tangible and abstract is further strengthened by the ending lines of section V describing the speaker’s whereabouts:

In the last desert between the last blue rocks
The desert in the garden the garden in the desert. . . . (97)

As Frye points out, “Desert and garden are central symbols in our literary and religious tradition,” the desert usually identified as the place of temptation and suffering, while the garden as Paradise or Heaven (72). Thus, the scenery of *Ash Wednesday* depicts a transitory place between Earth and Heaven. The process of reconciling the earthly with the divine

takes place on this bridge between immediate and transcendent, just as Dante's Mount of Purgatory is set on the Earth but leads up to the stars. From this act of spanning the distance between earthly and divine, tangible and abstract, immediate and transcendent, it is visible that *Ash Wednesday* strives to resolve ambivalences to be able to achieve that "comprehensive peace" Eliot was preoccupied with since he encountered the idea in the writings of Bradley.

The foundations of the process of transcending "intellectual experience" in order to reach the aforementioned peace are already laid down in the first part of *Ash Wednesday*. After the speaker of section I professes that "I do not hope to turn again," the announcement of inabilities continues with lines of such as "I shall not know" and "I cannot drink / There, where the trees flower and springs flow" (89). These lines suggest resignation; Atkins says of this first section that the speaker is dishonest: an unreliable narrator of his own suffering, who rejects "outside assistance," and insists on carrying on by himself (49).

The fact that the speaker of "Burnt Norton" states something entirely different about time also suggests the speaker's unreliability. In the first poem of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot's last poem sequence, *Ash Wednesday's* "what is actual is actual only for one time" changes to "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable" (89, 171). This means that the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* is yet to comprehend the nature of time that is discussed so clearly in the *Four Quartets*, and especially in "Burnt Norton."

The speaker's false disillusionment suggests that the voice of section I tries to fix his mind on what he believes to be true, but he is not yet in the state of mind to achieve complete understanding of it. He is yet to take the spiritual journey of

the poem to see clearly and to be able to rejoice without “having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice” (89). Section I shows the need and intention of renewal, but the speaker is yet to understand the difference between resignation and humility, impotence and purity.

What highlights the aim of the voice of *Ash Wednesday* in section I is his prayer:

And pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain. . . . (89)

These lines are clearly different from those regarded as dishonest; it is a prayer, which means the speaker is asking for God’s help. Here, the persona admits that he alone cannot bring about the change that is needed in his life; the peace of mind that also connects to the following lines of the same section:

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still. (90)

These lines with their motive of stillness are the forerunners of the following verse from section III of “East Coker,” the second poem of the *Four Quartets*:

I said to my soul be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. (180)

Thus, as the theme of stillness reappears in *Four Quartets* in a similar manner – in contrast to the aforementioned statement about time that is the exact opposite of what the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* says – this prayer can be regarded as an honest

turn towards patience and faith. This turn from untruthfulness to sincerity marks the first step in the “progress of one person,” which is how Eliot described *Ash Wednesday*; it means that Purgatory requires a patient stillness (*Letters V*, 201). Only through embracing this state of waiting can the speaker become worthy of Heaven, and his union with God. From this need of the speaker to turn from a fruitless form of hopeless waiting towards a faithful stillness, it seems that the Purgatory drawn up by Eliot parallels Dante’s *Purgatorio* in the sense that it serves as a place where the speaker can become a better version of himself.

The misunderstandings and misuses of faith in the beginning of section I of *Ash Wednesday* shed light on the fact that intellect is not enough to reconcile all opposites; the whole of the mystical experience cannot be comprehended solely by thinking. Thus, the speaker needs to surpass mere logic to find the peace of mind that means Paradise to him. However important the renunciation of dogmatic thinking is for the progress of the speaker, it seems it is not enough to point out the shortcomings of the solely intellectual way of seeing religion and to depict the journey towards “transcendent experience” for him to move on. Section II offers another solution to annihilate ambivalences:

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull. . . . (91)

The purgation of desires and thoughts happens in a notably violent manner. As the white leopards – usually identified with the three predators that appear in the beginning of Dante’s *Inferno* – feed on the speaker’s body, it seems that the

cleansing of the soul is only possible if the divine absorbs the earthly. In this reading of section II, the white leopards are the agents of the transcendent just as the Lady, who is – as Frye points out – a reminder of Dante’s muse, Beatrice, who leads the speaker to *Paradiso* in the *Divina Commedia* (73).

The parts devoured by leopards – regarded as “all possible sources of subconscious motivation” by Tony Sharpe – are the usual metaphors for doing, feeling, desiring, and thinking; in other words, they signify the body, the mind, and the soul, that – in case of opposing needs – create ambivalences in one’s psyche (190). Thus, the act of separating and devouring these organs is the resolving of inner conflicts:

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other. . . . (92)

This gladness is in contrast with the “rejoice” of section I; the speaker does not “rejoice that things are as they are” but glad of the spiritual change that the division of his bones brought about. The bones sing praise to the Lady of silences, and know that they “did little good to each other”; they were divided when they were complete, and in their scattered state they are “united / In the quiet of the desert”; thus, they came to understand what unity of the self means (92).

The theme of reconciling ambivalences seems to be a recurring motive throughout the poet’s work; it was first mentioned in connection with his own inner conflict of body and mind in his youth. As Brooker points out, this ambivalence was deeply embedded in Eliot’s personality:

In retrospect, this split between feeling and intellect, desire and refinement, can be seen as part of his DNA. His family, one of America’s most distinguished, was self-consciously dynastic, enlightened, public-spirited, and respectable, all characteristics that

facilitated a gap between surface and depth, public and private, self-discipline and promiscuity. (4)

As it has been mentioned, Eliot chose the Italian poet as his master in poetry because, upon abandoning philosophy, Dante's work offered him a way to resolve the inner conflicts Brooker listed above. Therefore, it seems that Eliot's aspiration to depict the "progress of one person" was not only an artistic choice but a personal endeavour as well; while he explored the options to achieve a "comprehensive peace" through personas in poetry, he also proceeded to find solutions to his own ambivalences.

This personal implication behind the motive of dismantling the self means that it is not only intellect that is surpassed through the course of *Ash Wednesday*, as those who want to attain this higher vision face another challenge; "immediate experience" should also be transcended. This especially applies to Eliot, who took a vow of chastity in 1928, for he felt he needed "the most severe, . . . the most Latin kind of discipline" (qtd. in Schuchard 169). The poet's personal attitude towards the sensual kind of feeling is accounted for through his correspondence with Paul Elmer More about the *Vita Nuova*, Dante's first collection of poems – written to Beatrice – that elevates courtly love to sacred love:

[T]he *Vita Nuova* . . . seems to me a work of capital importance for the discipline of the emotions; and my last short poem *Ash Wednesday* is really a first attempt at a sketchy application of the philosophy of the *Vita Nuova* to modern life. (209)

Therefore, the *Vita Nuova* can be seen as a path from "immediate experience" towards transcendental. By elevating courtly love into something sacred, Dante turned desire to platonic admiration. As a result, he exceeded the sensuality of

love and affection that so terrified Eliot as a young man that it had become a recurring theme in his poetry before *Ash Wednesday*.

One of the best examples of this dread is found in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The horror Prufrock felt upon encountering women was so great that the depiction of feminine figures in the poem is almost entirely metonymical; their appearance is mainly signified by objects such as shawls, bracelets, and perfume. In *Ash Wednesday*, this kind of fear is not present anymore; temptation, however, is heavily featured in section III: "Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown, / Lilac and brown hair" (93). The tempting and sensual picture of beauty is transcended as the figure of Mary – the embodiment of sacred love – appears in section IV. She walks "between the violet and the violet," which, unlike lilac, a flower that can symbolize earthly beauty, is the last visible colour on the spectrum of light next to ultraviolet, a colour unperceivable to human eye, therefore, perfect to signify transcendence (94).

There is another figure in the poem who belongs to this transcendent vision; the 'Lady of silences,' for whom the bones sing in section II of *Ash Wednesday*, is the embodiment of reconciled opposites: "Calm and distressed / Torn and most whole" (91). She is, therefore, the Ideal of the peaceful state that the speaker wants to achieve. In their song, the bones praise her: "The single Rose / Is now the Garden" (92). The Ideal of the 'Lady of silences' is thus intertwined with the Garden that is *Paradiso* through the symbol of the Rose that represents the order of Heaven, the place of beatific souls around God in the *Divina Commedia*. Rose also signifies the Virgin Mary in Dante's poem; she is "the rose, in which the divine word became flesh" (*Paradiso*, xxiii, 70–73). Therefore,

'The Lady of silences' is the vision of everything the speaker wants to achieve through the course of *Ash Wednesday*: she is the symbol of Paradise and "the Word made Flesh," pure poetry, as well.

After these visions, as a last reminder for the speaker to purify his emotions, Arnaut Daniel of Dante's *Purgatorio* also appears in section IV saying "sovegna vos." The original context of this expression is "sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor," which means "remember, when the time is fit, my pain" (*Purgatorio*, XXVI, 147). Arnaut suffers on the seventh terrace of Mount Purgatory, where those who loved lecherously have to be cleansed of their sins in a fire. Thus, through showing Dante his penance in the flames of Purgatory, Arnaut reminds him – and the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* too – not to be lustful as he was, for it is not the right way to love.

The sacred love of the poem, just as in the *Divina Commedia*, clears the speaker's sight and mind. As Beatrice makes it possible for Dante to comprehend the nature of Heaven and to see God and all the saints with his mortal eyes, in *Ash Wednesday*, Mary purifies the desire of the speaker and restores life and vision to him:

White light folded, sheathing about her, folded.
The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream. . . . (94)

By Mary's grace, the speaker can have his vision back; he is now able to reach "the higher dream." In his long essay entitled "Dante," Eliot uses the same expression, "high

dream," to describe the end of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, connecting them to the *Vita Nuova* (*Complete Prose* 3.722).

The religious meaning of Dante's *Vita Nuova* is essential to Eliot for other reasons as well. In the same essay he connected it to antiromanticism, vision literature and Catholic philosophy – all of which are relevant topics in connection to *Ash Wednesday*:

There is also a practical sense of the realities behind it, which is antiromantic: not to expect more from life than it can give or more from human beings than they can give; to look to death for what life cannot give. The *Vita Nuova* belongs to "vision literature"; but its philosophy is the Catholic philosophy of disillusion. (*Complete Prose* 3.733)

It is not surprising that Eliot should point out the antiromanticism of the *Vita Nuova* as a remarkable trait, since he regarded himself as a classicist in the essay collection *For Lancelot Andrewes*. Throughout his works as a critic he had made many degrading statements about Romanticism calling it "popular and pretentious" (*The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* 5). Considering literary theory, what Eliot most promptly disagreed with in Romanticism was its use of emotions in the creative process. Wordsworth had said that intelligence should be an intermediary between passion and poetry; the only tool to regulate the otherwise instinctual flow of feelings (*Lyrical Ballads* 98). Contrarily to this, Eliot believed that an ideal artist should be able to separate "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" during the creative process to "transmute the passions which are its material" in the clearest way possible (*The Sacred Wood* 48). The word "transmute" also suggests that Eliot only saw feelings as some mouldable material or inspiration to write poetry, not as central themes of poems, like Wordsworth had seen them.

Eliot's other, perhaps more personal problem with Romanticism was that it lacked a system of thought and philosophy that was characteristic of what he considered metaphysical verse. Therefore, according to him, Romantic poets could not "feel a philosophical idea as to make it yield its emotional equivalent" (*The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* 203). This, in other words, was the inability to "make the Word Flesh"; thus, to achieve the "transcendent experience" in which Dante had excelled.

On the other hand, Eliot provided a different reading of Romanticism in his essay "Baudelaire" by pointing out that "In much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires" (*Selected Essays* 343). The "romantic" sorrow described in the quote is the same issue the *Vita Nuova* touched upon; according to Eliot, its message was "not to expect more from life than it can give or more from human beings than they can give" (*Complete Prose* 3.733). However, the poet deemed the *Vita Nuova* "antiromantic" because of this very philosophy, the one he attributed to "romantic poetry" in "Baudelaire"; this contradiction suggests that Eliot had a strong bias against Romanticism.

Furthermore, Michael O'Neill discovers the influence of Romantic poetry, such as Wordsworth's and Coleridge's works in Eliot's poetic *oeuvre*; the parallel between the transcendent visions of Wordsworth expressed through images of nature and Eliot's pictures is especially conspicuous (203). In his essay on the similarities between Eliot's and Wordsworth's poetry Asad Al-Ghalith evinces the following:

Wordsworth attached his significant mystical moments to some glimmer of the divine in nature, and Eliot's "moments, in and out of time" give hints of time and timelessness and a world dependent on

inhuman powers. In the sense that both Wordsworth's "spots of time" and Eliot's "moments" hint at the supernatural manifested through the imagination, both Wordsworth and Eliot display Romantic concerns. (43)

While Al-Ghalith also highlights the resemblance between the role of time, memory, and nature in the *Four Quartets* and "Tintern Abbey," and compares the structure of the quartets to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the poets' similar relationship to the transcendental is perhaps the most striking evidence of Eliot's conscious use of Romantic characteristics in his poetry (42). The fact that Eliot's "transcendent experience" is connected to the same intersection of time and timelessness that Wordsworth had described shows that the modernist poet drew inspiration from Romantic poetry despite his serious criticism of it.

The irony of Eliot's disapproval of Romanticism is not only shown through the aforementioned contradiction, but also in his famous theory of impersonality introduced in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent." Eliot states that "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (*The Sacred Wood* 53). However, later on in the same essay he gives away one of his reasons for creating this theory: "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (*The Sacred Wood* 58). Therefore, his theory of impersonality is partly built upon the personal need to avoid dealing with some of his unwanted feelings during the creative process. Eliot needed a poetry that required this extinction of the self to find a peace of mind; this finding adds the theory of impersonality to the list of ambivalences and paradoxes Eliot dealt with through his life and in his works.

Timothy Materer argues that Eliot's Classicism – thus, his theory of impersonality, too – is a manifestation of his “belief in traditional order”; therefore, it is, in a sense, a theoretical and political choice (57). However, while Materer gives a thorough account of the theoretical side of Eliot's dislike of Romanticism, he fails to address the antagonism between the message of essays and poems that was pointed out beforehand. The paradox of the personally needed theory of impersonality and the contradiction between Eliot's disregard and use of Romantic features are both, in other terms, the opposite of theory and practise. The poet regards this problem in *After Strange Gods*: “I should say that in one's prose reflections one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in writing verse one can only deal with actuality” (28). It seems that Eliot was reluctant rather than unable to exclude the influence of Romantic poetry from his *oeuvre*, as in other cases he had no problems with living up to his ideals. After all, he managed to reconcile – among other conflicts – the opposite of feeling and intellect in a *Purgatorio* of his own; this also means that he successfully depicted the Dantean unity and transcendence in his poetry without abandoning his philosophy.

2. Ash Wednesday and the Dantean Vision of Society

Not long after the publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot began to raise his voice in connection with a topic he deemed “a subject beyond his usual scope”: politics (*Christianity and Culture* 5). This decision would seem rather surprising if it was not for some of Eliot's earlier essays such as “Tradition and Individual Talent” and “Dante,” the last essay of *The Sacred Wood*. The first essay clarifies that “the historical sense, . . . nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a

poet beyond his twenty-fifth year . . . involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (*The Sacred Wood* 44). As Tóta points out, the simultaneous consideration of all of history was already a characteristic of *The Waste Land*, where the cries of humanity could be heard concurrently, transcending time and space (522). William M. Chace observes that Eliot was conscious of the development of history and literature, and – as the aforementioned historical allusions of *The Waste Land* show – he also possessed a high level of social sensitivity or empathy (116).

The deliberate development of his historical and political views and their depiction in *The Waste Land* is a clear sign of Eliot's refusal to live in an ivory tower. Even before the composition of *The Waste Land*, he published several manifestations of his opinion on style, the creative process, and other questions of literary theory, that were collected to form his first essay collection, *The Sacred Wood*. His devotion to the careful evaluation of the artistic merits of literary pieces served him well when he became the editor of the publishing company Faber & Faber, and the *Criterion*, his literary review.

Eliot, together with Ezra Pound, felt responsible for the future of literature (Chace, 115). According to Chace, in 1924, when Eliot first made a statement in connection with politics, he believed that a reformed political culture would save literary culture from its past; that is, Romanticism (115). This shows that Eliot saw a relation between literature and politics that he deemed important enough to turn his attention to political theory.

Eliot was not the only poet who felt that the effect of politics is significant in the development of literature. In his book entitled *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*, North argues that the titular poets all felt disappointed in the

liberal movements of the beginning of the twentieth century and before, as the ideal of equality and human rights failed to present them with the freedom they hoped for (2). Therefore, according to North, one of the strengths of aesthetic modernism was its ability to make people experience the liberation in literature they felt deprived of in politics. Furthermore, the failure of liberalism had taken its toll on the aforementioned modernists to the effect that as they started to develop their own political theories, they all occupied anti-capitalist, anti-liberalist, and right-wing conservative or far-right political standings (2).

North also suggests that the three poets depicted history in their work in order to make a political statement; this, of course, was also a way for them to criticise liberalism, saying that it created chaos (10). Eliot, Yeats, and Pound had all written extensively on their political standings, as often as not, describing their own theories or visions. Perhaps among the most well-known works on their political views are Pound's *Guide to Kulchur*, Yeats's *A Vision* and Eliot's *Christianity and Culture*.

However, the connection Eliot made between politics, history, and literature seem to be inspired not only by his age, but by his master in poetry as well. It is visible from his short essay, "Dante," that Eliot admired the Italian poet because he managed to establish a link between society, arts, religion, and culture (*The Sacred Wood* 152). This connection, according to Eliot, made for the "most comprehensive, and the most ordered presentation of emotions that has ever been made," therefore, it seems logical that he also endeavoured to find a link between the aforementioned notions (*The Sacred Wood* 152).

However, after a time – though he never stopped looking at Dante – Eliot’s focus shifted from reforming political theory for the sake of literature to feeling responsible for his age and its dominant philosophies. As a result, Eliot developed a twentieth century-version of the Dantean vision of uniting religion and politics, which he felt was needed for multiple reasons. At first, as Viorica Patea points out, Eliot “believed that the adoption of a Christian model could present a cure for the prevailing materialistic values, expediency and spiritual bankruptcy,” that he believed to be the effect of liberalism (25). This phenomenon is, in Eliot’s words “wavering between the profit and the loss,” a line featured in *Ash Wednesday*, that already appeared in a similar manner in *The Waste Land* (98).

The poet also had his opinion about the fragmented consciousness of his age. In *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* he elaborated on what he considered problematic in his era: “In our time, . . . there are more moral and social circles than there were circles in Dante’s *Inferno*, . . . there are more philosophies, complete, incomplete, and inchoate, than there were builders at Babel” (52). It seems that Eliot missed that unified way of thinking that was so peculiar to Dante’s age. However, while the poet was certainly irritated because of the apparent diversification of religion, culture, and philosophy, there was a more pressing matter that made the poet feel the need to speak up. Eliot promoted the religious unification of communities through speeches and lecture series such as his own “The Idea of a Christian Society” of 1939, for a grave reason: his well-founded fear of another World War. What is more, he had created a channel through which he could communicate his opinion long before he gave the aforementioned lectures at Cambridge; in 1923, the poet

started the *Criterion*, a quarterly that was active until 1939. In *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, Russel Kirk discusses on the role of *Criterion* between the two World Wars:

Of missions to the masses, the twentieth century knew too many; Eliot's mission was to the educated classes. The drift toward Marxism, or toward some other totalist ideology, was apparent already among literary people: Eliot would offer them an alternative – in philosophy and religion, in humane letters, in politics. (81)

Kirk thus confirms that Eliot wished to bring an end to the advancement towards extremism by uniting the same spheres Dante connected when he announced the need for cultural and religious unity.

This well-meant nature of the endeavour almost makes up for the impossibility of Eliot's ideas. Early critics of Eliot have already expressed their dislike of these beliefs; János Kenyeres points out that Eliot's theory met the opposition of one of the poet's most devoted critics. Frye "believed that while the poet was one of the most ingenious authors of modern times, the theorist was a dogmatist falling short of the level of his art" (Kenyeres 39-40). What is more, while every political theory is flawed, as the ideals they present can never be put into practise the same way they were imagined, some philosophies prove to be especially utopistic – terrifying, even. Perhaps the easiest way to distinguish between the two kinds of impractical is to determine if the theory can be put into practise without aggressive measures and the violation of basic human rights. Unfortunately, Eliot's ideas belong among the ones that are inherently problematic, for as long as there is democracy and free will, there is no considerable chance to make humankind, or even Europe, a

believer of one single religion, which makes the theory's aim to avoid totalitarianism paradoxical.

For this very reason, despite his elaborated definition of how a Christian society could avoid the threat of extremism, Eliot was able to do little more than spreading his ideas, and for that, the *Criterion* remained his main platform until 1939. When the Second World War broke out, Eliot chose to discontinue his quarterly. According to Robichaud, the poet felt that he – and other artists and intellectuals of his age – failed to protect Europe from the consequence of the development of totalist regimes; that is, from the Second World War (207-08). This sense of failure suggests that Eliot felt artists had a responsibility to their age that expanded to the field of politics; that, as Dante also was, they should be preoccupied with the matters of the state in times of tension. From this, it seems that Dante as a statesman influenced Eliot as much as Dante as a poet did.

The first parallel that can be drawn between Eliot and Dante as statesmen is the far-fetched nature of their political visions; as Charles T. Davis points out, Reade, a fellow critic of Dante called the Italian poet's historical view a "vision" because "he thought that the poet's providential ideology was not rational enough to be called a philosophy" (244). Eliot's ideas were, in a way, really similar to Dante's; John Joseph Rolbiecki claims that the Italian poet envisioned the unity of the world through the birth of a Christian "super-state or world empire" (11). Similarly to Eliot's thoughts, this vision is closer to ideals than actuality. However, Rolbiecki points out that Dante also endeavoured to find solutions to more tangible problems of his age:

Dante seeks to remedy the defects of contemporary statesmanship, he offers solutions for the numerous problems which confronted

those guiding the political destinies of Europe, and he presents a program which, he believes, will pacify Europe and insure the steady progress of all mankind. (14)

Dante's wish to find a way towards the peaceful coexistence of humanity also parallels Eliot's endeavour to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War.

It is not the least surprising that Eliot followed the lead of the Italian poet in yet another field; he yearned for his ability to see visions, to create a comprehensive system in poetry and to present a universal order that can bring stability into a fragmented world. It also seems that both poets lived in an age of instability, when political tension was almost tangible, and past philosophies started to decline. Perhaps it was the perceived failure of liberalism in politics and the decline of the Modernist movement that created this feeling of insecurity in Eliot, along with the acute crisis of politics and economy between the two World Wars. In Dante's era, as Rolbiecki argues, the instability was due to the sharpening conflict between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire; in Florence, where Dante lived, this conflict manifested itself in the clash of Guelphs and Ghibellines (15-16). Dante was a White Guelph, who highly respected the Roman Church, but believed that papacy should not hold political power and wealth; when the Guelphs were defeated, he had to flee Florence.

Dante's time in exile made him revise his thoughts about the White Guelphs, and, as József Nagy points out, by the time he wrote *Paradiso*, he felt alienated from them, and focused his thoughts on the well-being of Italy, and the whole of humanity instead (1). Similarly, Eliot never declared his support of any of the forming political parties or groups in England; he only favoured theories that could unify the world,

thus, create peace. His politics, as Chace points out, “were ones of disposition, and not of active partisanship” (140). This sheds light on another similarity between the two poets; ultimately, they both refused to favour political parties, as their ideas transcended what these sides stood for. At the same time, this means that their work was unfit to bring immediate change for the better or the worse, as they chose to disregard actuality by “transcending” it.

At times, when the impending change is visible and inevitable, the insecurity of humanity usually produces two kinds of visions: utopistic and dystopian ones. Dante and Eliot both created their utopias: the former in *De Monarchia*, the latter in “The Idea of a Christian Society” and “Notes Towards the Definition of Culture,” the two long essays that made up *Christianity and Culture*. However, the dystopian opposite of these visions is also present. While Eliot’s *The Waste Land* can be viewed as a manifestation of hopelessness with its post apocalyptic imagery, Dante provides an even clearer picture of apocalypse in the *Divina Commedia*. Davis points out that the Italian poet believed that the end of times was close (250). In *Paradiso*, Beatrice says that there are not many places left in the Rose of Heaven, where beatific souls rejoice, which suggests that Dante thought the world will soon end:

See our city, with its vast expanse!
See how many are the seats already filled –
few are the souls still absent there! (Dante, *Paradiso* XXX, 131-32)

Eliot, however, preoccupied himself with the question of beatitude nearly seven hundred years later, which suggests he did not share Dante’s opinion on the end of times or the hardships of redemption. In fact, *Ash Wednesday*, a poem that

was written at a time when Eliot already saw the signs of an impending war, considers this topic a great deal.

What is more, despite Eliot's apparent interest in public matters, *Ash Wednesday* differs from the *Divina Commedia* in that it seems it does not feature prophecies for society or public opinions. The signs of Dante's political vision appear in the *Divina Commedia* in several places, sometimes as explicit statements or judgements about contemporary nobles, kings, popes and other politicians, sometimes as metaphors. One of these visions of society is Virgil's prophecy of the wolf and the greyhound at beginning of *Inferno*:

Many are the creatures that she mates with,
and there will yet be more, until the hound
shall come who'll make her die in pain. (Dante, *Inferno*, I. 97-99)

Davis argues that the wolf resembles an immoral Italy; especially a lustful Florence and a power hungry papacy in Rome, while the greyhound is the symbol of a wise, Augustan emperor who would take back worldly power from Rome, thus, he would unite Italy and restore the poor and pious grace the Church had lost (251-253). This vision parallels Dante's hopes for Italy in the future; it shows that he did not hesitate to include his personal vision for contemporary society in his great poem, even though he primarily concerned himself with answering moral questions throughout the *Commedia*.

From the lack of these Dantean remarks on contemporaries or socio-political visions it seems that, rather than to draw up a criticism of society, *Ash Wednesday's* objective was to give hope to its readers, or to present them with a harmony in art that they could not experience in other fields of life. Ultimately, as it was already mentioned, Eliot

always turned to poetry to create unity, and the responsibility he felt towards his era was no exception; as the theme of the poem suggests, this feeling manifests itself in *Ash Wednesday* as well.

The message of *Ash Wednesday* to the public is especially important from the aspect of religion, since it was written after Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism; it is an account of what Eliot, as a socially responsible poet and a man who had found his faith, felt necessary to convey to his readers. Perhaps the initial notion that would come to the readers' attention is Christianity, since the poem is heavy with lines of prayers and allusions to Christian liturgy:

Lord, I am not worthy,
but speak the word only. (93)

The brilliance of this type of message is in its simplicity; similarly to the process of interpreting the meaning of the *Divina Commedia*, the reader has to comprehend the theoretical framework behind the poem to fully understand it. Moreover, to be able to appreciate *Ash Wednesday*, perhaps the public needs the "absorption into the divine" as much as the poet did.

Another interpretation of the words quoted beforehand is that they are not only written *to* the people but *for* the people as well; from this perspective, *Ash Wednesday* is a prayer for the world. Considering the responsibility Eliot felt for his people, it seems logical that he would put his beliefs in the service of society. The lines that serve as proof of his intention specifically refer to Eliot's historical era:

Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgement not be too heavy upon us. (90)

The last line definitely sounds like a prayer, and although the second one is rather vague, from the presence of 'us' it is deducible that it refers to an event that not only influenced the life of the individual speaker but that of the community. Considering Eliot's sense of mission to hinder the outbreak of another World War it seems logical that his speaker would pray to avoid this greatest threat of destruction (90).

Furthermore, Rodgers proves that the prayers of *Ash Wednesday* are more than recurring allusions, as the speaker celebrates Mass for the world:

The entire poem is in the nature of a ritual. Superimposed upon the Sacrifice of the Mass, it may be traced through the rites of Preparation, Offertory, Consecration, Communion, the delivery of the Gospel, and Thanksgiving. (99)

From the use of a liturgical structure, it is safe to assume that through *Ash Wednesday* some of the speaker's voices take on the role of the priest who prays for his community. Part V, which is "the delivery of the Gospel" according to Rodgers, is almost entirely addressed to the public; as Jones claims, its style is borrowed from the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes. In Eliot's words, the seventeenth century bishop "takes a word and derives the world from it," which is exactly what the speaker of section V does in the first two stanzas (Jones 157).

After the second stanza, the speaker finds a new line of thought; following the search for the Word he begins to seek forgiveness for people who fell out of God's grace for various reasons:

Will the veiled sister pray for
Those who walk in darkness,
.....
For children at the gate
.....
Pray for those who chose and oppose
.....
for those who offend her. (96)

In this part, the speaker assumes the voice of a prophet: “O my people, what have I done unto thee” is a direct quote from Micah 6.3 (Jones 161). The original Old Testament context is very similar to the upper quote in that its topic is forgiveness. Micah’s people stopped worshipping God and the prophet thinks about ways for sinners to redeem themselves, while the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* not only seeks forgiveness for his people, but, as Jones points out, also feels guilty because of the content he previously provided his audience with (161).

This remorse shows in the previous quote as well as in the contrasting depiction of Christian and pagan poetry in the poem. To describe the quality of his forthcoming works, Eliot provided a counterpoint to show what his future poetry will not be like: instinctual, driven by desires, like Pan, who represents ancient, pagan poetry in *Ash Wednesday*. In section III of the poem, he is depicted as a source of distraction:

And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green
Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.
.....
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the
third stair,
Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair. (93)

As the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* finds strength to disregard the distraction, in section IV, Mary silences the temptation, and the flute of Pan turns “breathless” (94). However, the poem does not end with this silence, which implies that there is, indeed, a form of poetry that is purer than what is depicted in this pastoral scene. From the rejection of the tempting song it seems that Eliot wanted to present his readers with this purer form of art, which can become “the Word made Flesh,” a religious vision.

Perhaps the first appearance of this purer poetry in *Ash Wednesday* is the song of the bones in section II. The fact that God asks them to sing is suggestive of their transcendence:

And God said
Prophesy to the wind, to the wind only for only
The wind will listen. And the bones sang chirping. . . . (91)

As God asks the bones to sing, they finally come to life, and produce lines that are unlike the rest of the poem; they are short and filled with an otherworldly tension. These lines also suggest that the speaker assumes the role of the prophet, as they refer to Ezekiel’s ‘The Valley of Dry Bones’ (Jones 161). In the Old Testament, revival is possible through God’s grace:

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.’” (Ezek. 37.1-5)

Similarly to the quote, the bones are also filled with life in *Ash Wednesday*, and the state of being scattered is accepted: “We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other” (92). Bones are one of those “indigestible portions / Which the

leopards reject," making them a means for the speaker to live on, and even sing, thus, "make the Word Flesh" (91).

Even though the speaker is given the ability to prophesy in section II, he is not ready to turn to the people; the contrast between him and Ezekiel sheds light on this fact. While Ezekiel is given the ability to revive bones, the speaker himself feels he needs God's revival, and that "only / The wind will listen" to his prophecies and songs (91). As it was already mentioned, in section IV, Mary purifies the desire of the speaker and restores life and vision to him. Furthermore, section V of *Ash Wednesday* serves as the "delivery of the Gospel" to the people, which shows that – through the course of the poem – the speaker gained strength to prophesy to the public; therefore, he can finally assume the role of both a priest celebrating Mass and a prophet who is responsible for his people and delivers the word of God to them.

The fact that the speaker feels responsibility for his readers and concern for the faith of humanity also draws a parallel between him and a religious leader. Ultimately, he recognizes that his position allows him little more than praying and delivering the truth to those who would listen. With an allusion to the third canto of Dante's *Paradiso*, section VI clarifies that the speaker has to trust God to forgive sinners: "Our peace in His will" (99). Although it is a part claiming a more personal voice, it shows the persona's worry for his and humanity's fate; therefore, it is only the perspective that is changed.

The speaker's final request is towards God, and it is both a personal and social request: "Suffer me not to be separated / And let my cry come unto Thee" (99). The closing line of the poem, which is, according to Spurr, the last sentence of Psalm 102 and also one of the closing lines of the

Anglican service for Ash Wednesday, is quite easy to decipher (“Anglo-Catholicism and the “Religious Turn” in Eliot’s Poetry” 141). With this last line, the speaker asks God to listen to his prayer for humanity. The penultimate line has a more complex meaning; although Spurr points out that it is a quote from a prayer, “The Anima Christi,” considering Eliot’s quest towards wholeness and the theme of ambivalences *Ash Wednesday* deals with, the speaker may also ask for the unity and harmony of his soul as well as not to be separated from Christ (*Anglo-Catholic in Religion* 224).

The interpretation of *Ash Wednesday* from this social aspect, as a prayer for humanity, raises significant questions in connection with Eliot’s intentions and beliefs. One of these questions is whether the poem can be seen as the Purgatory for mankind, like Dante’s *Purgatorio*, or only for the self. Since Eliot regarded the poem as “a particular phase of the progress of one person,” it seems that the nature of cleansing is not a universal but an individual process (*Letters V*, 201). Nevertheless, if the reader as a person is able relate to the purgatorial vision of the poem, then, even if *Ash Wednesday* is not a general Purgatory for society, it may become just that for a group of individuals.

It is very possible that Eliot saw the poem – among other things – as a guide of how to make the progress from Purgatory to Paradise through the reconciliation of opposites that he depicted. As Peter Dale Scott points out, Eliot believed “that the problem of the unification of the world and the problem of the unification of the individual were one and the same problem, the solution of one being the solution of the other” (63). As the unification of the world was clearly – at best – an idealistic notion out of reach, this left the poet with the only possibility of saving humankind one by one, soul by

soul. To redeem the world at once was something only done once – by Jesus Christ – according to Christian beliefs. What is more, even Jesus needed to preach and prophesy in order to not only bring redemption but teach humanity to redeem themselves in the times to come. This thought parallels the philosophy of Dante's *Divina Commedia* stating that everyone gets to Hell, Purgatory, or Heaven on their own accord. However, it also means that a poet – as Dante in the *Divina Commedia*, and in *Ash Wednesday*, Eliot, too – can assume the role of a preacher and help people find the way to Paradise.

Conclusion

This essay argues that Eliot intended to recreate the medieval type of unity of thought and feeling that made it possible for Dante to build a comprehensive system of thought through faith and religion in his *Divina Commedia*. *Ash Wednesday* can be seen as the dramatisation of the quest towards “wholeness” and attaining a “unified conscience,” and is crucial for the understanding of Dante's influence on Eliot's poetry. As the poem serves as the middle stage of Dante's scheme of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, one of its main themes is “the progress of one person” towards Heaven.

Ash Wednesday depicts various aspects of this progress, and the implications of this development all contribute to the Dantean vision of unity that Eliot strove to recreate in his life and in his poetry. The purgatorial process of the poem is central to this progress; it allows the speaker to be reborn as a poet, a prophet, a priest, as well as a new person. In *Ash Wednesday*, the poet is reborn by God's grace, when he finds new inspiration and the way to “make the Word Flesh,” to use the biblical imagery Eliot had employed in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*. During the course of the poem, the poet

devotes himself to writing a purer form of poetry, turning his love of earthly things into a love of the sacred and the divine. As the poet's vision is purified, he becomes able to leave the purgatorial state behind and create his own vision of Paradise. The process of abandoning the earthly for the divine also links to Eliot's idea of personal development. Eliot's aim was to reconcile body and mind in order to be able to have a transcendent experience, which, he hoped, would help him rise above his own inner conflicts. Therefore, the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* is pulled to pieces and built up again as someone who is more at peace with himself and with the world, and who is more worthy of salvation.

Nonetheless, in *Ash Wednesday*, the process of purification demands of the person not only the acceptance of a passive kind of suffering but also a willingness to fight to achieve "wholeness." Therefore, with a strong will to live and prosper, the speaker constructs his own Purgatory. Although he is motivated by the promise of inspiration and salvation, he also wants to progress for the sake of sending a message to the society in which he lives and works. The blessing of inspiration and the ability to "make the Word Flesh" allows the speaker to prophesy and to deliver the gospel as a priest in section V of the poem.

Therefore, the roles of the prophet and the priest are responsibilities that the speaker had to become worthy of in the course of *Ash Wednesday*. Through composing the six sections of the poem parallel to the Sacrifice of the Mass, Eliot turned his speaker into a priest, and *Ash Wednesday* into a prayer for the world. Since Eliot is known to have had a political and social vision of the world as united through Christianity, the absence of this subject in *Ash Wednesday* suggests the conveyance of a more amiable message.

By striving to create harmony and leaving the follies of his age – such as politics – out of *Ash Wednesday*, Eliot chose to convey hope and empathy to his readers instead of criticising the era. Furthermore, by depicting his fight between feeling and intellect, Eliot presented his readers with his own philosophy, his way to find peace of mind. Therefore, this progress of reconciling opposites and attaining a unified consciousness not only has a highly personal meaning for Eliot, but it also serves as a suggested path for the reader.

As Eliot's idea of Paradise was both Christian and Bradleyan, the way of progress he suggests is not only psychological but also religious. Apart from offering an alternative to find peace of mind by reconciling opposites and unifying the psyche, Eliot also depicts a way towards salvation. This means that the progress of the individual towards Heaven in *Ash Wednesday* is strongly linked with the journey Eliot wished society would undertake. The speaker of the poem shows the reader an example to follow, thus depicting a personal progress for the sake of mankind as well. Therefore, Eliot's vision of the self and society manifest in *Ash Wednesday* as the same ideal projected at the individual and the masses. This parallel between the unification of the self and of society can be easily seen as the reconciliation of a final opposite.

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ANNA TÖRÖK

T. S. Eliot's Dantean Vision of Unity

– Abstract –

This study examines the uniting force of the Dantean influence in Thomas Stearns Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* (1930). It not only argues that Eliot used the ideas and imagery of the *Divine Comedy* to create the unity of his poetry, but also that Dante's thoughts changed the way Eliot viewed religion, literature, self, and society, and this process also had a forming influence on *Ash Wednesday*. The study shows how the poem incorporates these areas of literature, religion, and social and personal struggle, and how they become the part of a vision of unity that – due to Dante's forming influence on Eliot's thoughts – is inherently Dantean.