

**Dantean Returns in the Works of Thomas Stearns Eliot,  
Eugenio Montale, and Seamus Heaney**



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**Ph.D. Thesis**

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**Submitted to Mary Immaculate College:**

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## **Declaration of Originality**

Declaration: I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original research and does not contain the work of any other individual. All sources that have been consulted have been identified and acknowledged in the appropriate way.

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### **Conferences**

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‘Butted together, so much wrath o’ercame them’ (*Inf.* XXXII, l. 32), *Limerick Postgraduate Research Conference, Developing a Culture of Research*, Limerick Institute of Technology, 29 May 2014.

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## **Dedication**

To the sweet memory of my father, and of my nana,  
and to my dears, mum, Fabbri and Andrew.

*Alla dolce memoria di mio padre, e di mia nonna,  
e ai miei cari, mamma, Fabbri ed Andrew.*

## **Abstract**

This project analyzes Dante's influence on the poetry of Thomas Stearns Eliot, Eugenio Montale, and Seamus Heaney. A comparative reading of the poetry and criticism of the four authors will display that Dante's presence in these three modern poets' works is of significant import, as through stylistic and thematic Dantean references, Eliot, Montale, and Heaney shape the meaning of their texts and evolve a new poetic craft. Moreover, detecting the numerous references to Dante's work in their verses can shed light on the poetic message they want to transmit. An essential part of this project will be to establish interconnections between the works of the modern poets as well, as their decision to draw on Dante's poetry is a major link between them and creates an affinity in their verses.

This study will be divided into three sections. The first section will explore Dante's world: his life and works, and the social, political and intellectual atmosphere he lived in. The second section deals with the stylistic influence that Dante had on Eliot, Montale and Heaney; while the third section concerns the cultural and thematic influence. The medieval master's experiments with linguistic techniques mirror the poets' preoccupation with language, and influence their poetic style. Eliot drew on the hellish dialectic and imagery found in Dante's *Inferno* to display the lack of hope of modern civilization after the First World War. Montale's use of the Dantean allegory, displays his tendency to describe the spiritual through the physical, and images of aridity and ruins become emblems of the human condition and of the lack of religious beliefs. Finally, Heaney is attracted to Dante's

plurilinguistic style, which allows him to transcend a mono-cultural way of making poetry, and to open to the confrontation with other traditions.

The cultural influence is explored through the device of the journey towards salvation, which is the means by which artistic, social and religious issues are addressed. Common cultural experiences and affinities with Dante induce the modern authors to draw on his works. His Christian and Classical backgrounds are important features that they share with him. In addition, Dante lived in times of war and revolutions. His anxiety with the social strife in Medieval Tuscany mirrors Heaney's concerns about the Troubles, and Eliot's and Montale's preoccupation with the aftermaths of World War I. However, through Dante they are able to transcend their cultural givens, as in him, they find a universal mode of making poetry that is in tune with the world they seek to attain in their lyrics. By using Dantean intertextual allusions, the poets obtain a different perspective on their own societies, and, their works, like Dante's work, assume historical significance because they portray human life across all boundaries of time and place.

## List of Abbreviations

*Conf.:* *Confessions*, St. Augustine

*Conv.:* *Convivio*, Dante

*DM:* *De Monarchia*, Dante

*DVE:* *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante

*HF:* “*Hercules Furens*”, Seneca

*Inf.:* *Inferno*, Dante

*Met.:* *Metamorphoses*, Ovid

*NE:* *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle

*Par.:* *Paradiso*, Dante

*Purg.:* *Purgatorio*, Dante

*ST:* *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas

*VN:* *Vita Nuova*, Dante

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## **Epigraph**

‘Here let dead poesy revive again’ (*Purg.* I, 1.7)

## Introduction

The aim of this research is to offer a detailed analysis of some fundamental aspects of the influence of Dante Alighieri on the poetry of Thomas Stearns Eliot, Eugenio Montale, and Seamus Heaney. A comparative reading of Dante's *oeuvre* with the three modern poets' works of prose and poetry, will examine his influence on them, and will suggest how this pervasive influence has shaped their respective poetics. The influence of Dante on the three modern poets' artistic creations is a subject that has been noted by literary critics. Particularly worth mentioning is the seminal study by Maria Cristina Fumagalli, in her book, *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante*, in which she examines Dante's influence on Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott. The author sets out to describe 'what Dante means' (Fumagalli 2001, p.xi) for the two poets, emphasizing the Dantean features most appealing to them, namely, the contemporaneity of his poetry; the function that it has in society; and the authors' attitude towards language. Particularly, Fumagalli looks at Heaney's position within Northern Irish literature, and at the role of the vernacular in his lyrics. The religious aspect of Heaney's poetry has been explored by Andrew J. Auge in his book, *A Chastened Communion: Modern Irish Poetry and Catholicism*. In this illuminating study, Auge analyzes modern Irish poets' relationship with religion. Of particular relevance to this study is chapter four, which focuses on Heaney's effort to transcend the Christian and

political ‘ressentiment’ (Auge 2013, p.134) that divided Northern Ireland, an effort that is notably visible in “Station Island”. Auge emphasizes the ‘marvelous’ (Auge 2013, p.139) nature of Heaney’s later verses, and acknowledges the influence of Dante on this aspect of his poetry.

As regards the relationship between Dante and Eliot, the first and most comprehensive study on this subject was Dominic Manganiello’s *T. S. Eliot and Dante*. Manganiello traces the literary strategies used by Eliot in his poems, “The Waste Land”, “The Hollow Men”, and “Ash Wednesday”, such as allusions, imitations, and citations, and he goes on to probe how Dante’s philosophical, theological and political vision invades the Anglo-American poet’s entire *oeuvre*. Concerning Dante’s influence on Montale’s works, Arshi Pipa’s study *Montale and Dante* offers invaluable insights into Montale’s poetic semantic structure. Pipa argues that conceptual images and allegories in the modern poet’s works are taken from Dante, and he contends that Dante’s idea of politics seems to constitute ‘the very ground of Montale’s work’ (Pipa 1968, p.3). Pipa concludes that the medieval poet was for Montale not only a literal and linguistic model, but also a political ideal.

The connection between Eliot, Dante and Montale was also noted by the Italian critic Silvio Ramat, in his article “*Il Novecento e una Traccia Dantesca*” (“The Nineteenth Century and a Dantesque Trace”). He argues that the two contemporary poets are attracted to Dante’s lexical-figural method, in which they find a new mode of creating poetry. Nonetheless, for Ramat, Eliot’s approach is more allegorical, while Montale’s method is more symbolic. At a thematic level however, contrary to Dante, both poets express the same sense of impotence, and of an inability to escape the empirical confines of reality; thus, they remain eternally trapped in a purgatorial atmosphere, aware of their natural limits. As regards the

interrelationship between Eliot, Dante, and Heaney, the American scholar Richard Ruskin Russell, in chapter eight of his book, *Seamus Heaney's Regions*, gives a fascinating account of Heaney's use of Dante's *terza rima* (and his use of the vernacular) in the collections *Station Island*, *Seeing Things*, and *Human Chain*. Russell argues that this form should be seen as a main characteristic of Heaney's poetry. He also brings Eliot into his argument, and compares the Irish poet's use of the Dantean poetic form, with Eliot's own use of it in "Little Gidding". Given that in English *terza rima* is difficult to achieve, as English lacks the rhyming terms in which Italian is rich, the form has to be adapted, and, as Russell states, Heaney 'learned how to modify his own tercet [...] from Eliot's tercet in "Little Gidding"'. Russell argues on the importance of *terza rima* for both poets, and particularly for Heaney, for whom it represents the move from the physical regions of Northern Ireland to an ideal region of harmony and peace, 'the region of eternity' (Russell 2014, p.251).

My indebtedness to these, and other seminal works, is evident throughout this research. I aim to offer a contribution to existing research by analyzing Eliot, Montale, and Heaney in relation to Dante's poetics, and also by tracing the importance of his influence in their interrelationships. While synthesizing how each poet relates to Dante, and exploring the differing strengths they find in his work, the present study will also highlight the associations and interconnectedness between the works of the modern poets themselves. Their decision to draw on the Florentine writer's literary creations is a major link between them, creating deep and complex layers of affinity in their poetry. As Matthew Arnold stated, everywhere 'there is a connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures'

(Arnold 1857, p.1). Each writer is drawn to a different aspect of the Dantean poetic – Eliot is attracted primarily to the religious intensity of the *Divine Comedy*; Montale appeals to the metaphysical character of Dante’s poetry; while Heaney is fascinated by the ‘generating power of the *Commedia*’ (Heaney 1985, p.7), and by the way the medieval writer places poetry at the centre of his life. However, the three poets also share an interest in stylistic varieties and experimentation, and each communicates a desire to produce a poetry ‘more sensitive to contemporary realities’: a ‘morally, socially, and artistically responsible’ poetry (Barański 1986, pp.366; 360). These common preoccupations create a grid of relations between them, producing a triangular dynamic which provides valuable insight into the nature of twentieth-century poetry. Moreover, the use of Dantean quotations and allusions is a means by which the modern poets ‘can establish and assert their identity as poets alongside and against their [...] precursor’ (Buxton 2004, p.15). Dante’s influence on them is not perceived as Harold Bloom would say, as a source of ‘anxiety’, but rather it is recognized as an inherited and enabling resource. Their engagement with him is not a ‘wrestling with the mighty dead’, but a ‘convers[ation] with the mighty dead’ (Douglas-Fairhurst 2002, p.51), through which they can assert independence of voice.

Dante’s positioning is brought into play in the poets’ works as his preoccupations with language, poetry, and society are relevant to their current communicative purposes. As Eliot affirmed:

when you “borrow” an image, [you have to] have spontaneously, something like the feeling which prompted the original image [...]. You are entitled to take it for your own purposes in so far as your fundamental purposes are akin to those of the one who is [...] the inventor of the image. (Eliot 1932b, p.12)

The three poets' affinity with Dante stems from their individual stylistic and thematic preoccupations. Eliot recognized in the medieval master, 'a temperament akin to [his] own' (Eliot 1965, p.126), and thus his attraction to, and borrowing from, Dantean imagery springs from the kinship he feels with the poet, and through this, he achieves 'the idea of a Christian society' (Manganiello 1989, p.5). Similarly, Heaney states that 'when poets turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs' (Heaney 1985, p.5). The Irish poet identified with Dante in various ways; for example they have the same Catholic background and share similar concerns for themes such as culture, land, politics and language. While Eliot was attracted to the religious aspect of Dante's work, Heaney admires the way he could 'accommodate the political and the transcendent' simultaneously (Heaney 1985, p.18). Through the adaptation of Dante's images and symbols in his own writing, Heaney can achieve self-confirmation, and believe in poetry 'as an agent of possible transformation of evolution towards that more radiant and generous life which the imagination desires' (Heaney 1995b, p.133). Finally, Montale's relation with the Italian master stems primarily from their shared cultural heritage. He built into his poetry a steady implicit dialogue with Dante, who was, for him, 'the poet in comparison with whom there are no other poets' (Montale 1982, p.11). Through the appropriation of the medieval writer's imagery and style, the three authors create a close relationship with their ancestor, displaying a 'Dantean frame of mind, and [...] by means of assimilating and re-elaborating [the master's] lesson' (Fumagalli 2001, p.156), they are able to find an answer to their artistic questions.

The *Divine Comedy* embodies the endless struggle of human beings caught between good and evil. The pilgrim's persona as a displaced individual who loses

everything held most dear, became significant for modern writers who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, found themselves in the midst of historical disillusionment and uncertainty. European culture was reduced to ruins by two world wars, and the horror of several civil conflicts. As a result, questions regarding the aim of poetry, and how it could describe the death, misery and degradation, became a major concern for modern poets. As Macha Louis Rosenthal states, the image of the 'post-war poet is utterly different from his predecessors. He is no longer a superhuman or a strange creature inspired, nor enclosed in his ivory tower' (Rosenthal 1970, p.201); now, the poet is an individual who seeks to understand how to make meaning from the dislocation and fragmentation of the world in which he/she lives. Questions regarding the aim of poetry, and how it could describe such despair and degradation, became a major concern for modern poets. In his book *Prisms*, the German critic Theodor Adorno declared that cultural 'criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today' (Adorno 1997, p.34). These injunctions advance questions about representation and about the function of poetry in society. For Adorno, 'the horrors of the twentieth century leave little room for lyric' (Campbell 2003, p.65). The risk is that, as Adrienne Richs suggests, 'poets who too fluently find language for what they have not yet absorbed, [might] see human suffering as "material"' (Rich 1993, p.141). Thus, Paul Muldoon's enquiring, 'how does one find an adequate reprise to the latest reprisal, a strophe equal to the latest catastrophe?' (Muldoon 1998, p.125), echoes the preoccupation of all modern poets who feel the necessity to respond to historical events as a powerful force.

Among these poets, Eliot, Montale and Heaney recognized the power of ‘poetry in keeping memory and spiritual community alive’ (Rich 1993, p.141). However, they also realized the inadequacy of conventional language and ordinary representational techniques in light of contemporary suffering. They needed adequate means of representation in order to create ‘a poetry which both face[d] the destruction of culture and attempt[ed] to find an aesthetic response’ (Campbell 2003, p.67). As Heaney stated, they needed to find ‘images and symbols adequate to [their] predicament’ (Heaney 1980, p.56). Through adopting Dantean intertextual images and allusions, the three poets engage with present experiences by ‘refracting [them] through some exterior [...] material’ (Corcoran 1986, p.184). In this way, they can comment on the present reality without openly illustrating the violence, while offering a new perspective on modern society. Through Dante, they found new modes of representation: analogies, installations, metaphors, performances, and portraits to evoke the atrocities of their time.

Part of this analysis will be informed by Julia Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality, as there is a relationship between this theory and the notion of literary tradition that the modern poets champion in their critical essays, and I will draw a parallel between these two concepts. The theory of allegory by Paul De Man and Walter Benjamin will be used in the third chapter to highlight the difference between the modern allegory adopted by Montale in his poetry, and the exegetical method described by Dante in his *Epistle XIII* (letter to Cangrande della Scala). The use of these theories will cast light on how, through the use of Dantean intertextual linguistic and thematic references, the modern authors convey their message and, simultaneously, develop original creativity and expressiveness through the influence of a prominent artist of the past. There is a fundamental difference between the terms

‘intertextuality’ and ‘influence’ that needs to be addressed at this juncture. ‘Intertextuality’ refers to an artist’s interpretation of another artist’s work, with ‘a conscious reference of integrative structure and configurations, as well as the author’s borrowing and transformation of prior texts’ (Genç 2010, p.1). On the other hand, the word ‘influence’ indicates ‘the effect that somebody/something has on the way a person thinks or behaves or on the way that something works or develops’ (OED 2014). However, it could be stated that it is exactly through the use of Dantean intertextual linguistic and thematic references, that the modern authors achieve an innovative art and original expression. The choice of Dantean allusions is crucial for their acquisition of a different perspective, and for the development of their works. Through sustained references to the work of the Florentine master, Heaney, Eliot and Montale explore their personal and cultural realities, while evolving a new poetic craft.

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot expresses the idea that, ‘by invoking the coherence of ancient myth, a writer can lend shape and significance to the chaos of modernity’ (Polizoes 2009, p.405). Dante himself was also aware of the importance of predecessors; more than most writers, he ‘showed literature to be an on-going conversation with the past’ (Hawkins and Jacoff 2002, pp.xviii-xix). In his treatise, the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he described creating an artistic work as a combination of innate genius with the best that can be ‘taken or extracted from [others], so that from these [one] may concoct the sweetest possible mead’ (DVE I, i, 1). Dante’s universal approach to poetry is what the modern poets admire, because, although synchronically distant, it is in tune with the contemporary world and capable of responding to their artistic questions. By adopting Dantean intertextual references, these three poets both convey their message and,

simultaneously, develop original creativity and expressiveness. This study will be divided into three sections. Section one, 'Dante's World', contains an introductory chapter on Dante's life and works. The second section, composed of three chapters, deals with the stylistic techniques that Eliot, Montale, and Heaney took from Dante. Finally, the third section, contains the final three chapters, and regards Dantean cultural and thematic influences on the modern poets.

Section one deals with Dante and his life and art. The first chapter, entitled 'Dante's Life and Works', will outline Dante's life and literary works in order to give a sense of the artistic and existential experience of the poet. Modern literary theorists, including Roland Barthes, discuss the lack of importance of prior knowledge of a writer's identity, biographical events, historical context, and political view (Barthes, "The Death of the Author", 1967). However, this chapter will argue that Dante's social and political circumstances, his religious beliefs, and his vision of life in its various ethical and intellectual experiences are important factors that allow a greater understanding of his poetic credo. This analysis will allow individualizing the features in his works that most attracted the modern poets, and will lay the groundwork of the thesis, providing further evidence of the nature and scope of Dante's pervasive influence on their works. The *Divine Comedy* and Dante's minor works, such as the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the *Epistles*, the *Convivio*, the *De Monarchia*, and the *Vita Nuova*, will be discussed to provide a complete picture of the poet's philosophy, of his poetic creeds and of his considerable preoccupation with style and language. The *Divine Comedy* was the first Italian literary work written in the vernacular, and was fundamental to the evolution of Italian as a literary language in medieval times. Dante had renounced Latin as a literary language, and instead adopted the vernacular, as it was characterized by more transparency and

intelligibility. Examining the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* will show how Dante achieved great semantic and lexical flexibility of the language. Dante's vision of allegory is described in *Epistle XIII*, where he explains the exegetical method of the *Comedy*. He represents allegory as the Christian vision of the world, and attributes to it the merit of leading the reader to a greater understanding of his or her place in the universe, thus preparing him or her for the next life. Moreover, the *Vita Nuova*'s and the *Comedy*'s analysis will display Dante's progress from a poetry of *eros* to a poetry of *caritas*, which is a fundamental aspect of his soteriological message that the modern poets employ in their poetry.

The second section, entitled 'Stylistic Influences', looks at Dante's influence on the other poets in terms of style. This section is divided into three chapters, analyzing the techniques that Eliot, Montale, and Heaney have appropriated from Dante, and the role that these techniques played in their poetic approach. Connections between the three modern authors will also be addressed throughout the thesis, displaying how the medieval poet's artistic experiments profoundly challenge and motivate them. However, in order to provide a complete picture of the different ways in which they use Dante's stylistic methods, each chapter will be dedicated to a single writer. The perception that each poet has of their predecessor is in fact 'highly subjective'; each author 'takes from Dante what he needs for his own poetic, and what is more relevant to his life and theoretical or spiritual philosophy' (Kratz 2012, pp.13; 7). The poets' need for particular stylistic skills varies depending on the message they seek to communicate.

The first chapter of this section, chapter 2, 'The Search for Poetic Language', will start by establishing the importance of Dante and of literary tradition for Eliot. His essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" will be examined, and the notion that

no ‘poet, no artist, of any art, has his complete meaning alone’ (Eliot 1921, p.44), will be compared to the theory of intertextuality, which emphasizes the importance of the relationship between different texts. Subsequently, Eliot’s appropriation of Dante’s lexical and figurative style will be outlined. This appropriation occurs through the infernal diction of the dark phraseology, and the gloomy images that the modern poet adopts in his own verse. His employment of this style mirrors his preoccupation with the chaotic post-war atmosphere of early twentieth century Europe, which was signified by a sense of emptiness in modern people and by a crisis of religious belief. Through Dante’s intertextual lines, Eliot attempted ‘to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader’s mind the memory, of some Dantesque scene, and thus establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life’ (Eliot 2001, p.113). Notions of Hell are introduced in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) through the intertextual epigraph of *Inferno*, depicting a man enclosed in a ‘*fiamma*’ (‘flame’) which would never die away (‘*staria senza più scosse*’) (Eliot 1963, p.3 / *Inf.* XXVII, l.63 [1971]),<sup>1</sup> an image that sets the mood for the whole poem. In “The Waste Land” (1922),<sup>2</sup> the bleak atmosphere of London is associated with Dante’s hellish landscape through the words: ‘I had not thought death had undone so many’ (Eliot 1963, p.55).

These representations are symbolic of human disillusioned desires and modern dissatisfaction, further emphasized by Eliot through depicting a failure of speech that characterizes the central figures of both poems. This failure encapsulates

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<sup>1</sup> Dante’s Italian quotations are taken from: Alighieri, D. (1971) *Dante Alighieri: La Commedia*, Alessandro Russo and Enzo Schiavina, eds., Bologna: Zanichelli. While all citations in English are taken from: Alighieri, D. (1914) *The Divine Comedy of Dante*, translated by E. M. Shaw, London: Constable and Company Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> In some chapters, the same poems, or collections of poems appear twice; however, they are analyzed from a different perspective. These are: Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land”, and Montale’s collections *Ossi di Seppia (Cuttlefish Bones)*, *Le Occasioni (The Occasions)*, and *La Bufera e Altro (The Storm and Other Things)*.

Eliot's preoccupation with the ineffability of language. Prufrock's inability to verbally express his feelings to the world ('It is impossible to say what I mean' [Eliot 1963, p.4]), and the similar difficulty found in "The Waste Land" ('I could not / Speak' [Eliot 1963, p.54]), is the result of the central figures' experience of overwhelming emotions they cannot express, mirroring the sense of loss of the human condition. Dante undergoes a similar experience in *Paradiso*, where he realizes the inadequacy of language when expressing God and his transcendent status. Both Eliot and Dante explore the limits of poetic language, the inexpressibility *topos*, which proclaims that words can never satisfactorily articulate ultimate meanings. However, poetic language for Dante is the 'supremely rewarding form of eloquence'. His willingness to find a form of expression 'efficacious and true' (Iannucci 1997, p.170), made him reject the deceivment of ornamented words (*Inf.* XVIII, l.76) for a language characterized by simplicity and clarity. Eliot's insatiable search for a poetic language that could articulate the most complex thought with the least amount of words, found in Dante's 'common idiom' a model to follow, and thus he achieved the Modernist ideal of linguistic clarity. By exploring the limits of language, Eliot replicates Dante's ability to convey directly any image or feeling in his poems. Language must communicate clear images and emotions, and his promotion of Dante's style further increased his interest in including resonances of the local and familiar in a poetry which echoes the displacement of man in modern civilization.

Chapter 3, 'Montale's Allegorical Language', explores Montale's engagement with Dante's stylistic techniques in his collections of poems, *Ossi di Seppia* (*Cuttlefish Bones*) (1925), *Le Occasioni* (*The Occasions*) (1939), and *La Bufera e Altro* (*The Storm and Other Things*) (1956), which was achieved through

the adoption of a typical Dantean ‘stony style’, and through the use of allegory. In these works, the medieval master’s exegetical model represents the ‘centre of resonance’ (Montale 1982, p.5) through which Montale displays his inner feelings about the cultural and historical world in which he lives, and through which he meditates on complex subjects such as culture, society, politics, philosophy and theology. However, his allegory differs from that of Dante, as Montale’s poetics cohere with those of the stream of modern poetry that was characterized by a vision of the world in ruin, which was composed of fragmentary, incomplete objects. These ruins function as a reminder of the precariousness of any human endeavour. For Walter Benjamin, ruins are an important *topos* in modern allegory, as they emblemize the human condition, and the lack of religious beliefs, which herald a process of irresistible decay (Benjamin 1998, p.180). This idea of allegory will be compared with the medieval method described by Dante in his *Epistle XIII* (to Cangrande), where he represents allegory as the Christian vision of the world, which leads the reader to a greater understanding of his place in the universe. Comparing these readings allows identifying the different ways in which both Dante and Montale use allegory in their works. For Dante, vision is fundamental; he presumes the identity of sight and knowledge. On the contrary, Montale is often sceptical of the prospect of any certain knowledge, whether mediated by vision or by language. His allegory becomes a cry against twentieth century evil, symbolizing the rupture between man and belief, and the distance of man from nature in an increasingly progressive society. Montale’s appropriation of Dante’s allegory is a process of substitution. Dante’s figure of religious salvation, embodied by Beatrice, is transformed in Montale’s works through a multiplicity of secular allegories in which

he can reflect on the role and value of poetry in society, thereby displaying great originality and authority in manipulating Dante's lessons.

The fourth chapter, 'Kinship between Languages in Heaney's Poetics', will display how Dante's lexical attainment and his plurilinguistic style becomes a model for Heaney. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the medieval poet expresses his desire to create an idiom, common to all Italy, uniting all the dialects of the peninsula. His belief in achieving a sense of national solidarity through the creation of a unitary poetic language was fundamental to Heaney's identification with him. Like Dante, Heaney does not live in a monolingual country, and his works address his preoccupation with language and land. However, rather than expressing a committed, political idea of literature, the Irish poet tried to find a middle voice that would express both halves of his culture, English and Irish. This is encapsulated in the place name poems, "Broagh" and "Anahorish" in *Wintering Out*, where the poet's meditation on the cultural and linguistic elements of the two traditions exemplifies his desire for different forms of reconciliation. Like Heaney, Dante had a profound attachment to his local culture and to the vernacular language; however, he also had a great ability to transcend those aspects by placing them in a universal framework. Through allusions to the medieval master, Heaney was able to transcend ethnic boundaries and create an increasingly cosmopolitan poetry, as is visible in *Electric Light*, a collection where the specifics of public and personal history are considered alongside those of world culture. Thus, like his predecessor, Heaney can acquire a 'perspective beyond history' (Heaney 1985, p.18). This stylistic richness was mainly realized through his several translations of various international authors, including Dante. Through his version of the "Ugolino" episode, from *Inferno* XXXII and XXXIII, Heaney could treat the concerns about Northern Ireland in his poetry

through the lenses of another culture, extending, as Dante did before him, the universal into the personal and vice versa.

The third section of the thesis, entitled ‘Cultural Influences’, looks at how different cultural topics addressed by Eliot, Montale and Heaney, have been strongly influenced by their engagement with their predecessor. This section deals with Dante’s cultural influences on the three poets through the theme of the journey. Dante’s figure of the poet-pilgrim in his cultural, religious and social contexts becomes a model with whom they can associate, and through whose example, they can acquire new insights and inspirations. Like the *Divine Comedy*, their poetry is characterized by the poet’s self-questioning in his mid-life crisis, and by motifs of departure (Kratz 2009, p.6), and through these themes, they seek to achieve meaning and understanding ‘in a divided and profoundly changing world’ (Kratz 2009, p.6). Relevant to this analysis is the premise of intertextuality which holds common cultural experience as the principal characteristic in the sharing of texts. As Charles Bazerman argues, ‘orientation to common utterances creates the ongoing culture and evokes common objects of desire’ (Bazermanb 2004b, p.54). Common cultural experiences and affinities with Dante induce the modern poets to draw on the medieval author. In him, they find a mode of making poetry that is in tune with the contemporary world. Dante’s journey towards salvation is a device that Eliot, Montale, and Heaney appropriate for their poetry as the means by which artistic, social and religious issues are addressed, and each of them explores the journey motif in a diverse and unique way. Intertextual connections are balanced by the different perspectives that different literary, social and cultural contexts can bring to bear on issues and subject matters. Thus, the treatment of a theme by a writer can shed new light on another writer’s treatment of that same theme. As in the first

section, the chapters in this section will each deal with an individual author, and, when possible, the connection between them will be emphasized. Their collections of poems will be analyzed chronologically in order to show the poets' progression from one artistic vision to another.

Chapter 5 is entitled 'Eliot's Spiritual Quest for Meaning and Redemption'. The development of the Dantean journey in Eliot's poetry is perceived in the poet's relationship with an increasing spirituality, as seen in his poems "The Waste Land", "Ash Wednesday" and "Little Gidding". These poems display the poet's scrutiny of the plight of contemporary individuals, the condemnation of their moral recklessness and the presentation of a resurrection of lost spiritual values. Through his engagement with the *Comedy's* spiritual message, Eliot experiences a vivid hope for renewal, and reaches a more positive worldview, and these poems trace this conversion. His journey into the desolation of "The Waste Land" resembles Dante's own crossing of the *Inferno*. The tantalizing intercession of faith in "Ash Wednesday" is imagined as Eliot's own *Purgatorio*, and finally the triumphant resolution of "Little Gidding" expresses the same joyful triumph as the *Paradiso*. This chapter will illustrate how Eliot's poetic voyage towards spiritual regeneration affirms his fascination with Dante, not only for his artistic achievement, but for his religious fervour as well.

Chapter 6, entitled 'The Evil of Living: The Impossibility of Redemption', will concern issues of evil and salvation as perceived by Montale, and expressed in his poetry. In contrast to Dante and Eliot, Montale did not accept the journey as a figure of exploration and regeneration, as he rejects any notion of restoration. For Montale, this world has no consolation. His first collection, *Cuttlefish Bones*, best encapsulates the poet's torment, as it depicts the individual's disharmony with a

barren and Godless world. The book depicts an existential despair that could be paralleled to Dante's *Inferno*, as it displays the poet's yearning to experience 'another dimension' (Montale 1982, p.302); however, his desire remains unfulfilled. His second volume, *The Occasions*, could be seen as a 'close counterpart of Dante's purgatorial process' (Cambon 1982, p.92). The sense of hope expressed in these poems, and especially in the section called "*Mottetti*" ("Motets"), is represented by Clizia, who resembles Dante's Beatrice, a figure through whom the poet can try to escape the boundaries of his life and thereby achieve some form of salvation. However, his hope is shattered by an increasing sense of imprisonment in his frustrating and grey quotidian reality, a state of affairs rendered more dramatic by Fascism and the Second World War, as evidenced in his third collection, *The Storm and Other Things*. The storm allegorizes the war, and the cruelty of Nazism and Fascism, both seen as the destroyers of Western civilization's values. Clizia here becomes the woman-angel, and continues to provide hope and comfort to the poet. Like Beatrice, she mediates in his tormenting search for hope. However, contrary to Dante's muse, Clizia does not guide the poet to a religious rebirth. The war forces Montale, by the end of his poetic journey, to abandon the hope of a liberating salvation symbolized by Clizia. The woman-angel ultimately disappears, unable to survive in a world where 'only drought and desolation sting' (Montale 1998, p.385), and the poet remains earthbound, unable to escape the empirical confines of reality.

In the last chapter, 'Heaney's Journey into the Self: Towards the Light', the identification of intertextual references to Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Heaney's poetry will argue that the Irish author's poetic endeavour is perceived as a Dantean journey. Like Dante, the poet goes through an *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, attempting to disengage himself from political and cultural pressures. Heaney's

collection of poems, *North*, displays an imagery of Hell: the depiction of tortured bodies, downwards movements, the underworld, and a general darkness of tones, reminds one of the suffering of the *Inferno*. The bodies that remained intact for centuries, protected by the bogland of Aarhus, in Denmark, and those which were found in Ireland, become for the poet a metaphor for the ancient hatred between Catholics and Protestants that still plagues Northern Ireland today. At the end of the collection, Heaney's sense of uncertainty is clear as he asks himself how a writer, born and bred in Ulster, should react to the endless violence and hostilities. This sense of insecurity reaches its deepest intensity in the collection *Field Work*. Here, although the poet tentatively attempts to trust poetry as a means to attain moral freedom, his sense of guilt at being unable to react to the atrocity in a more convincing way, is paramount.

However, this sense of guilt is gradually replaced in *Station Island* by his desire to rise out of a sense of cultural attachment, and to create an art based on the recovery of his own individual past. This collection is more purgatorial in tone, and depicts Heaney's symbolic journey to the underworld seeking personal purgation. The poet engages in dialogues with shades from his past, which is redolent of Dante's methodology where the self is placed in dialogue with different voices to display the affliction of the people around him, and also to affirm his commitment. Like the *Comedy*, *Station Island* is a journey towards a new light, a new understanding, and a new self. Finally, *Seeing Things* represents Heaney's most successful attempt at creating a more transcendental poetry that deals less with history and the Troubles and more with the individual. Here, as in *Station Island*, the poet tends to resort fairly frequently to *terza rima*, demonstrating Heaney's conversion to what Maria Cristina Fumagalli calls, 'a Dantean frame of mind and, at

the same time, his conversion (in)to himself by means of assimilating and re-elaborating Dante's lesson' (Fumagalli 2001, p.156). This collection's main feature is an all-encompassing luminosity, a sense of serenity that is characteristic of the atmosphere of Dante's *Paradiso*. Like his literary master, Heaney has to escape from that 'dark wood' of the Northern Irish conflict in order to find his original and personal truth as a poet. With Dante's guidance, Heaney can interpret his experience in the joy of his verse and place poetry at the summit of things, leaving behind the sense of entrapment that had been at the core of his experience as a committed Northern Irish writer.

The present study will demonstrate that the choice of intertextual Dantean references is crucial for the modern poets' acquisition of a different perspective in their poetry. Dante is a vital presence in their works, and generates approaches and revalidations despite the apparent temporal and cultural distance. Through using Dantean linguistic and cultural discourses, the modern authors convey their message, developing simultaneously original creativity and expressiveness through the influence of a prominent artist of the past.

## **SECTION ONE: DANTE'S WORLD**

## Chapter 1: Dante's Life and Works

This chapter will explore the relationship between Dante and the political, cultural, literal, and religious traditions of his time. It will introduce his literary works, namely, the *Vita Nuova*, the *Convivio*, the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the *De Monarchia*, his *Epistles*, especially *Epistle XIII* to Cangrande della Scala, and the *Divine Comedy*, in order to establish the poet's social and political circumstances, his religious beliefs, and his vision of life in its various ethical and intellectual experiences. In addition, it will highlight Dante's poetic creeds, his considerable preoccupation with style and language, and his peculiar aesthetic conception of the figurative and allegoric spheres. Dante is seen as the most significant literary figure who was able to combine medieval culture and classical history and consciousness. This is conveyed in numerous features of his work: the outstanding power of his own life and spirituality; the intricate ideological and cultural systems he articulates; his immense range of genres; his acute notional meditation and critical aptitude employed in his poetry. Moreover, his modern worldview in its various shapes, and his audacious employment of different stylistic and linguistic techniques, emphasize Dante's unparalleled originality. His work has provoked a diverse range of critical responses over the years. Modern poets are attracted to Dante for his immense spirituality and for his incessant experimentations. The Italian historian Gianfranco Contini states that Dante's language hits more than 'culture and it is its real advanced point [...]; the descendant who meets with the poet, has the genuine impression not

of coming across a tenacious and well preserved survivor, but of reaching someone who got there before him. This Dante [...] accompanies all the way of Italian literary language' (Contini 1976, p.110). The modern poets' desire to achieve the best possible language in their poetry draws them to Dante's poetics.

### *Life of Dante*

Dante was born in Florence in 1265, of a prominent family. His father, Alighiero di Bellincione di Alighiero, was probably a notary, but very little is known of him. His mother, Bella, died when Dante was only five years of age; his father married again (Curtayne 1969, p.3). While still a child, Dante's marriage with Emma Donati was arranged, as was the custom at the time (Curtayne 1969, p.11). They married in 1285 and had five children: Jacopo, Pietro, Giovanni, Gabriele and Antonia. Regarding his education, we know that Dante was a man of great sensitivity and loved arts and learning. He studied grammar, philosophy, literature, and theology, and was probably taught rhetoric by Brunetto Latini, from whom he learned 'how man should win his fame' (*Inf.* XV, l.74). His interests brought him to discover Provençal literature and Latin culture. As a young poet, he met the poets Guido Cavalcanti, Lapo Gianni, and Cino da Pistoia; together (with Brunetto Latini) they became leaders of a literary movement entitled *Dolce Stil Novo* (*Sweet New Style*). When he was nine, Dante met Beatrice Portinari, the daughter of Folco Portinari, a Florentine aristocrat. Although they never had a relationship, the poet felt instant love for her, and she became the lady of his poetic mission, destined to inspire him to compose the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's love for Beatrice became the reason for poetry and for living. When Beatrice died in 1290, Dante dedicated himself to philosophical studies

at the Dominican school of Santa Maria Novella, and the Franciscan school of Santa Croce, and became familiar with St. Thomas Aquinas' and Aristotle's theories. Through these studies Dante sought, as he says in the last chapter of the *Vita Nuova*, 'to write of [Beatrice] that which has never been written of any other woman' (VN XLII, 2), anticipating her glorious triumph in the *Divine Comedy*.

### ***The Thirteenth Century and the Political Struggle***

Dante's poetic world emerges from a complex and tormented intellectual research into the society he lived in; consequently, his work can be better understood by investigating the historical atmosphere in which it was created. The thirteenth century was one of history's most politically agitated periods. In Europe, a major fracture between Church and State had resulted in clashes between the Emperor and the Pope in the struggle for supremacy. Both had supporting political parties, the Guelphs supporting the Pope, and the Ghibellines the Emperor. The names *Guelfo* and *Ghibellino* are the Italian forms of Welf and Waiblingen. In Germany, these names delineated the conflict involving the Welfs of Altdorf and the imperial succession of the Hohenstaufen. In Italy, they became used to distinguish papal from imperial sympathies. Medieval Italy was a mosaic of small states, suffering 'continual civil strife' (Hollander 1984, p.95). The regions of Italy did not share a language or culture, and they were divided by political conflicts. Half of the Italian towns were Ghibellines, such as Cremona, Pavia, Genoa, Tortona, Asti, Alba and Turin etc; whereas on the Guelphs side were Venice, Treviso, Padua, Verona, Brescia, Mantua, Florence, and several others. The Guelphs-Ghibellines division also involved most cities' internal politics. In Florence, this occurred because of

serious conflicts between the town's leading families, the Donati and the Uberti. As Niccolò Machiavelli writes:

The struggle between factions in Florence had its origins with a family dispute. The heir to one of the noble houses of Florence was about to marry the daughter of another; however, he fell in love with another and married her. This was an outrage for the other family, and all the aristocracy of Florence took one side or the other. Soon the family quarrel became a party division. (Machiavelli, in Cunnington 1911, p.11)

This dispute soon grew into political warfare. In 1260, at the battle of Montaperti, the aristocrat Ghibelline Farinata degli Uberti led his party to a victory over the rivals. In 1266, the Guelphs 'began [their] successful recuperation' (Hollander 1984, p.95). They gained two important victories over the Ghibellines at the battles of Benevento, and at Colle Val d'Elsa. Gradually, the Guelph party drove the remaining Ghibellines out of Florence, and the city remained under their control for several decades (Hollander 1984, p.96). However, in Florence:

the nobles were divided against each other, then the people against the nobles, and, lastly, the people against the populace; and it oft-times happened that when one of the parties got the upper hand, it split into two. (Machiavelli, in Cunnington 1911, p.10)

The Guelphs themselves soon separated into Whites, led by Vieri dei Cerchi, who were distrustful of papal influence, and Blacks, led by Corso Donati, who continued to support the papacy. In 1301, after the violent struggle intensified, the Whites took control of the city, and some of the most influential Black leaders were banished from Florence (Hollander 1984, p.98).

### ***Dante's Involvement in Politics***

Between 1285 and 1302, Dante was active in Florence's cultural and civic life. He served as a soldier in the battle of Campaldino (1289), between Florentine Guelphs and Arezzo Ghibellines. After White and Black Guelphs split, he became a White, as he was strongly antipapal. In the years his party held power, he received several political offices; he was first Ambassador to San Gimignano, and in 1300, he was prior (a high magistrate) for two months (15 June - 15 August). Unfortunately, Dante's political advancement coincided with the papacy of Boniface VIII, 'a mysterious man', 'proud, ambitious', and 'fierce', with a keen instinct for the Church's advantage (Duffy 2002, p.160). He 'declared the first Jubilee or Holy Year in 1300, when tens of thousands of pilgrims converged on Rome to gain indulgences, adding enormously to the prestige of the papacy and the spiritual centrality of Rome' (Duffy 2002, p.160). Boniface sought control of both temporal and spiritual power, as displayed in his papal bull, *Unam Sanctam* (one of the most extreme statements of papal spiritual supremacy), where he affirmed: 'we declare, state, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff' (Boniface VIII 1302).

Dante passionately opposed the activities of Boniface, 'so much so that he became the centre of antagonism to the Pope within the White faction' (Hollander 1984, p.98). The papacy's intervention in the civil strife of Florence in favour of the Black Guelphs, generated a religious revulsion in Dante, whose morals and idealism struggled to find a place in the complex web of politics and religion. He aspired to an ideal society, where the church would be detached from earthly goods, not involved

in politics, and brought back to poverty and purity (Marchese 1978, p.12). As he says in the *De Monarchia*:

those who call themselves zealots for the Christian faith I have raged and imagined vain things against Roman dominion; they have no pity for the poor of Christ but defraud them in the church revenues, even stealing their patrimony daily, and render the Church destitute. (*DM II*, xii, 1)

In order to bring back honesty and justice, Dante supported the ideal return of ancient Imperial authority, the coming of a 'saviour' who would restore world happiness. As he affirms: 'justice is preeminent only under a Monarch; therefore, that the world may be disposed for the best, there is needed a Monarchy, or Empire' (*DM I*, xi, 1). However, the Pope was inflexible in his race for power, and in 1301 planned a military occupation of Florence. He sent Charles de Valois (brother of Philippe le Bel, King of France), as a peacemaker for Tuscany. However, the leaders of Florence suspected that this was a politically inspired strategy. The government sought independence from papal influences, and sent a delegation to Rome, in order to ascertain the Pope's intentions. As one of the six city priors, Dante was 'drawn into a conspicuous role in attempting to thwart the ambitions of Pope Boniface VIII' (Mandelbaum 1982, p.322); he was the delegation's chief. Once in Rome, Boniface rapidly dismissed the other delegates and detained Dante. Meanwhile, Charles de Valois entered Florence with the Black Guelphs, and in six days they destroyed the city and slew their adversaries (November 1301). Dante, together with several other leaders of the Whites, was condemned to exile and sentenced to death if he ever returned to Florence.

Although Dante and his friends made several attempts to regain their lost power, these failed due to disloyalty and treachery. Contrasts and incomprehension

among his own former companions made Dante realize that his fellowmen were no better than the others. They wanted to reaffirm their control in Florence, but were not motivated by a sense of justice and love for their country. Convinced of the honesty of his own political view, he distanced himself from their 'Cruel and mad and thankless' company (*Par. XVII*, 1.56) to make a party of his own. Dante began his wanderings and never saw his native city again. First he lived in Verona, from 1303 to 1304, hosted by Bartolomeo della Scala, 'the great Lombard' (*Par. XVII*, 1.62), who was Cangrande's brother; and from 1312 to 1318, he was hosted by Cangrande himself.<sup>3</sup> From there, he moved restlessly on to the courts of other powerful lords of central and northern Italy, still full of resentment for the 'most foolish of the Tuscans' (*Epistle VI*, 21), the Florentines, but continued dreaming of going home. When the emperor, Henry VII came to Italy (1310), Dante felt a growing sense of hope, seeing Henry as the long evoked 'just king' (*Epistle VII*, 4), who would bring 'protection' (*Epistle VII*, 4), and peace between the factions, and would 'establish us again under our own justice' (*Epistle VII*, 4), being certain that the Roman Emperor's mission is validated 'by Divine Providence' (*Epistle VII*, 1). Dante did not see how dangerous the venture of the king actually was in the intricate interweave of the *Communal* Tuscan and Lombard struggle. The Emperor's death represented the loss of Dante's last illusion to return to his native city. He spent the last years of his life in desperate misery, travelling like a 'homeless wanderer, reduced almost to beggary, and showing against [his] will the wound inflicted by fortune, which is very often imputed unjustly to the one afflicted' (*Conv. I*, iii, 4).

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<sup>3</sup> Cangrande was an important figure for Dante as he gave him refuge and support during the years of exile; he is the dedicatee of the third canticle of the *Divine Comedy*, the *Paradiso*, and to him is addressed *Epistle XIII*, where Dante explains the exegetic value of the poem.

***Earlier Vision of Love and Poetry: From the Troubadours to the Dolce***

***Stil Novo***

In the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, Florentine poets were familiar with the courtly poetry of the *Troubadours* and the Provençal tradition (written in vernacular *Oc*). Their method spread through European cultivated circles, and exerted enormous influence on early Italian lyric poetry. It was characterized by a blend of Latin heritage, Arabic civilization (Chambers 1985, p.3), and Christian elements (Chambers 1985, p.261), creating a new, and striking lyric poetry composed of secret love themes, and passion's spiritualization. Worshipful love appeared as a notion of humble and unrequited adoration of a lady venerated from afar; this was a new and important theme in Western literature. The principles of *Troubadour* love poetry were 'successfully transplanted to the court of Frederick II in Palermo, which became the capital of the first group of Italian vernacular lyric poets, the so-called Sicilian School' (Barolini 2007, p.14). The subject of poetry was still courtly love; however, the Italian poets' works represented a more psychologically characterized and gentler type of woman than that found in French models.

*Stilnovismo* completely transformed courtly love poetry by exploring the philosophical, spiritual, psychological and social effects of love, championing the Tuscan vernacular. Founded by Guido Guinizzelli di Magnano (1235-1276), the poetic tradition gradually spread among young poets. One passionate exponent of this style was Guido Cavalcanti, a poet devoted to the *commune* and to the vernacular language, and against the Empire and Latin. Dante considered him his 'best friend' (VN III, 14), and this friendship made a deep impression on his poetic development (Curtayne 1969, p.21). Cavalcante's poetry was characterized by an ennobling, exalted love of woman, praising her physical as well as interior beauty (Marchese

1978, p.31). However, for Cavalcanti, love was a cruel force, inspiring fear and confusion. Initially, Dante embraced wholly that tradition of courtly love. However, later he came to deny Cavalcanti's view of love as an irrational force, and a destroyer of virtue. Dante's transformation through commitment to intellect and learning ultimately transcended the old tradition. Love became a marriage of intellect and feelings, of spirit and emotion.

### *The Vita Nuova*

The *Vita Nuova* represents Dante's 'dual, parallel evolution, in poetry as well as in sentiment' (Carrai 2006, p.56). Written between 1293 and 1294, in the spirit of the courteous ideology and of the *stilnovistic* taste, the book is a collection of poems (composed for Beatrice), structured within prosaic observations which warrant narrative organization and development, exposing the circumstances which triggered the verses. The alternation of prose and poetry is called *prosimetron*, and is the first example of its kind in Italian literature. It is modelled on Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 'attributed in Medieval times to the elegiac genre, to which [...] the *Vita Nuova* could also belong' (Carrai 2006, p.37). In idealized terms, the narrative outlines Dante's love for Beatrice, and his consequential spiritual renewal, depicting the itinerary from love-passion to love-charity. Dante's sentiment of love is initially an egotistical need for his affection to be rewarded (as in the courtly convention). However, it gradually develops into selfless love and detached admiration for his lady, which becomes the only reward essential to gratify his desire. Love itself empowers the spirit to rise to Heaven. The poet experiences a personal revision, that is, the rejection of a philosophy full of implied earthly allusions. The representation of Beatrice as a transfigured sign of love – not *eros* but *caritas*, not company of a

brief and fallacious worldly itinerary, but guide to the ecstatic *visio Dei* (the beatific vision) – symbolizes this transformation (Marchese 1978, p.31). Beatrice, the ‘true praise of God’ (*Inf.* II, l.100), opens the way to the contemplation of God’s ‘glory, by whose might all things are moved’ (*Par.* I, l.1). Through her help, the poet can achieve the superior mastery and a sense of power which elevates him to the status of guide and judge of his time. The spiritual renewal outlined in the *Vita Nuova* is a model that both Eliot and Montale appropriate in their poetry, as will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6 of this study.

### *The Convivio*

Written during Dante’s first years of exile (1304-1307), the *Convivio* (*Banquet*) had been envisaged as a medieval vernacular guide. The originally planned fifteen treatises were to offer comments on the text and allegory of Dante’s *canzone*, which deals with both ‘love and virtue’ (*Conv.* I, i, 14). However, the work was interrupted at the fourth treatise. Dante presents his book in the form of a banquet of science and knowledge – in which his songs are the dish, and his prose commentary the bread (*Conv.* I, ii, 1) – for all those who, busy with their civil occupations, have missed spiritual nourishment, namely, learning the language of the classics. The *Convivio* displays Dante’s profound familiarity with Aristotle, Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas, and is the first model of Italian vernacular prose on doctrinal subjects, with a Latin syntactic structure that produces a great effect in his line of reasoning.

In the first treatise, Dante claims that, as the vernacular is the language understood by everyone, it is a worthy substitute for Latin. This language is 'a new light, a new sun which will rise to take the place of the old sun [Latin] which is setting, and give light to those now lost in darkness because for them the old sun sheds no light' (*Conv.* I, xiii, 11). In the second treatise, Dante deals with the interpretation problem through his *canzone* "*Voi, che 'Ntendendo*" ("You whose Intellect"), on the basis of the four meanings of the Scriptures (literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical), and their fundamental divine theme. Here the poet also discusses philosophy as 'a woman full of sweetness, adorned with goodness, wonderful in wisdom, glorious in liberty' (*Conv.* II, xv, 3), where 'salvation' lies (*Conv.* II, xv, 4); she is the 'eyes of the intellect' (*Conv.* II, xv, 4), who pushes us to love the redemptive power of truth, which was given to us by God. In the third treatise, his commentary on "*Amor che ne la Mente mi Ragiona*" ("Love that Speaks to me within my Mind") celebrates the *donna gentile* (gentle woman), an allegory for philosophy, the only way to reach happiness in this life. The fourth commentates on "*Le Dolci Rime d'Amor ch'i' Solia*" ("Those Sweet Rhymes of Love I must Forsake"); here Dante affirms spiritual nobility as a moral and individual virtue, which represents the 'seed' of the happy life that man should achieve in social activities and in the beatitude of contemplation.

In the *Convivio*, Dante also puts forward for the first time the idea that a universal monarchy is the basis for achieving earthly happiness. The book marks a point of conversion in Dante's life from the aristocratic idealistic *stilnovism* of his first creative experience (as in the *Vita Nuova*), to increasingly mature political and religious views, which are fundamental to the problematic found in the later *Commedia* (Marchese 1878, p.16). The Italian scholar, Salvatore Battaglia states that

the *Convivio* is vital to understanding Dante's cultural and doctrinal formulation, and the *Comedy*'s structure, as it 'traces Dante's steps into a new and difficult territory [...]. In his literary exercise now Dante aspires to the truth' (Battaglia 1967, p.15). The *Convivio* represents the abandonment of amorous lyrics, and the overcoming of sentimental training in favour of rational reality.

### ***De Vulgari Eloquentia***

The *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is a treatise in Latin written between 1304 and 1305, which was supposed to be composed of four books, but it was left unfinished at chapter xiv of Book II. The work's purpose is 'to enlighten [...] the understanding of those who walk the streets like the blind' (*DVE* I, i, 1), and to promote the language of common people through 'the theory of eloquence in the vernacular' (*DVE* I, i, 1). Dante indicates the way to progress through the 'ugly words used by Italians, [their] convoluted constructions [and their] defective formations', and by eradicating these errors, to develop a 'lucid', 'perfect' and 'civilised' (*DVE* I, xvii, 3) Italian vernacular, and thereby form a decorous and illustrious language for Italy. Dante asserts the superiority of the vernacular, a natural language acquired spontaneously, compared with Latin, which he saw as an artificial language. He sought to move forward in terms of poetic expression, abandoning the traditional and 'immutable identity' (*DVE* I, ix, 11) of Latin, and welcome the 'variation', simplicity and immediacy of the vernacular (*DVE* I, x, 7). This modern aspect of Dante's thought was greatly admired by modern poets, who sought to achieve clarity and simplicity in their poetry.

In the first book, Dante refers to the vernacular as the language 'shared by all' (*DVE* I, x, 2), and as the 'language' 'created by God' (*DVE* I, ix, 6), which was common to all men until the Tower of Babel was built (Corti 1981, p.52). The poet uses the Tower of Babel metaphor to describe language's present variety, among which he distinguishes Provençal, French and Italian, concentrating on the latter. He analyzes various Italian dialects, concluding that none coincide with the illustrious vernacular – the cardinal, (around which the others revolve), aulic (worthy of the royal palace), and curial (or universal) language – common to all Italy (*DVE* I, xvi, 6). Book II is a treatise on poetics and language, which exposes the themes relevant to the illustrious vernacular (*salus*, *venus* and *virtus*: feat of arm, joy of love, and rectitude of will), and its primary metrical characteristics.

The search for the illustrious language among the various vernaculars, requires a work 'of pruning or uprooting' to drive 'the tangled bushes and brambles out of the wood' of Italy (*DVE* I, xi, 1); only in this way, can the most pristine Italian can be created. This is the logical and political viewpoint of universality or, as Dante calls it, of *curialità*: 'whatever is well balanced in our actions is called "curial". Therefore, since this vernacular has been assessed before the most excellent tribunal in Italy, it deserves to be called "curial"' (*DVE* I, xviii, 4). Dante's concerns here are political. The vernacular is 'curial' as it was the language spoken at the Italian court of Frederick II in Sicily: 'since Sicily was the seat of the imperial throne, it came about that whatever our predecessors wrote in the vernacular was called "Sicilian"', and 'all who were noble of heart and rich in graces' spoke it (*DVE* I, xii, 4). For Dante an illustrious vernacular could bring into existence the universal monarchy. As Antonio Gramsci writes, the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is to be considered 'an act of national-cultural policy [...], as an aspect of the political struggle has always been

what is called “the question of the tongue” (Gramsci 2007, p.23) (an issue of primary importance in the works of several modern writers as well). The political-cultural programme exposed in the treatise directly derives from Dante's profound understanding of the importance of men's social and linguistic unity. He ascribes to the poetic role of the vernacular the function of an instrument indispensable for revealing the ‘historical range of his nation’ (Grassi 1988, p.9), and for achieving the political unity necessary for a universal monarchy.

### *De Monarchia*

Dante's works generally denounce the political disaster of Church and State competing for total rule over both spiritual and temporal domains. The *De Monarchia* is the most political treatise, where the poet asserts his belief in separating temporal and spiritual powers. Written in Latin, it highlights Dante's political thought. The composition's exact date is disputed. Bruno Nardi suggests between 1307 and 1308, while other scholars argue 1312-1313 (Davis 1957, p.14), or 1316-1317 (Ricci, in Dante 1965, p.3). Divided into three books, and investigating whether monarchy is necessary for men's wellbeing, the book affirms that the emperor's authority ‘derives directly from God’ (*DM* III, iii, 5), and is not mediated by the Church: ‘the church is not the cause of the empire's power, nor therefore of its authority’ (*DM* III, xiii, 3). It also highlights the perfection and completion of ethical and rational men's life when they are in peace, and peace is only achieved under a single monarch: ‘mankind is most a unity when it is drawn together to form a single entity, and this can only come about when it is ruled as one whole by one ruler’ (*DM* I, vii, 4). Empire is the only institution capable of guaranteeing peace and justice.

Dante rejects the various theocratic theologies of the '*potestas directa*', of the Church's primacy in political reality, as he considers them as contrasting with the gospel's commandment of poverty, taught by Christ to the apostles (Marchese 1978, p.16). He asserts the superiority of spiritual over temporal power, as the sun is more important than the moon: 'just as the moon, which is the lesser light, has no light except that which it receives from the sun, in the same way the temporal power has no authority except that which it receives from the spiritual power' (*DM* III, iv, 3). Church and Empire have to be independent from each other so that humans can reach the two ends of their destiny 'the beatitude of this life, consisting of the execution of one's own virtue (represented in the Earthly Paradise); and the beatitude of eternal life, consisting in the enjoyment of seeing God (given in the celestial Paradise)' (Marchese 1978, p.16). Dante maintains that since imperial and papal authorities both derive directly from God, neither can be subordinate to the other; their respective goals are earthly and eternal happiness, to be pursued independently and autonomously.

### ***Epistle XIII (to Cangrande della Scala)***

Between 1304 and 1317, Dante wrote thirteen letters in Latin following the medieval conventions of the *ars dictaminis*, or letter-writing art, focusing on socio-cultural issues. This thesis will mention several of the epistles that Dante wrote; however, analysis here will be directed on *Epistle XIII* (the last letter), which Dante wrote to his friend and host Cangrande della Scala, as this letter has exceptional exegetic value for interpreting the *Divine Comedy*. It clarifies poetic, moral and political motivations at the poem's core, and provides detailed self-commentary on the

*Paradiso*'s first lines, as well as being an invaluable manuscript for comprehending the use of allegory in Dante's work. Dante begins his letter by presenting his poem as 'polysemous', that is, having plural meanings (*Epistle XIII*, 20). He tells us: 'for the elucidation [...] of what we have to say, it must be understood that the meaning of this work is not of one kind only; rather the work may be described as "polysemous"' (*Epistle XIII*, 20). This notion not only pertains to the *Comedy*'s complex construction, but also to its interpretation. Having already learned the pilgrim's path to salvation, Dante seeks to enlighten his contemporary readers on how to achieve 'the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace' (*Epistle XIII*, 21). In order for readers to have the same insight that the pilgrim achieves in *Paradiso*, they must interpret the poem on different hierarchical levels.

The *Comedy* has to be interpreted through a four-fold-method: literal, allegorical, moral, and analogical. The 'first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical [or moral, or anagogical]' (*Epistle XIII*, 20). The literal meaning is real and immediate, but insufficient; the allegorical, which can be also called the symbolic, corresponds to the moral and religious sense. Dante identifies the poem's literal sense as 'the state of souls after death' (*Epistle XIII*, 24), and its allegorical sense as the exercise 'of [man's] free will [by whose merits or demerits] he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice' (*Epistle XIII*, 25). However, Dante emphasizes that literal and historical senses are as important as the allegorical; together they produce an artistic wholeness that contributes to the final vision. As Francis Fergusson points out in his book *Dante*:

It is by means of “allegory” that Dante leads his readers to the moral and religious meanings he sees in human life. But the basis of his kind of allegory is realistic or experiential: life comes first [...] and the allegorical meanings come second, they emerge from the concrete dramatic situations of the unfolding narrative. As he had explained in *Convivio*, the literal meaning of the poem, in this case the scenes and characters, contains the allegorical meanings. (Fergusson 1966, p.93)

Allegory has been defined as ‘otherspeech’, or to speak with a meaning other than the literal one (Isidore, Bishop of Seville, in Martinez 2000, p.25). Dante uses an allegory similar to scriptural allegory, where theological and mystical reflections encourage men to interpret and decipher beyond the word the spirit’s analogical meaning. The Scriptures’ allegorical exegesis reflects man’s need for a total comprehension in every event of life. Reality is symbolically charged: the sun indicates divine light and grace, illuminating the spirit; the wood indicates a sinful life and its confusing passions, as in the *Inferno* (Marchese 1978, p.22). Dante attributes to allegory the merit of leading the readers to a greater understanding of their place in the cosmos, thus preparing them for their union with the divine. Through his journey to the otherworld, the poet reaches the ‘*itinerarium mentis*’, namely, the ‘conversion of the soul from the struggle and misery of sin to the status of grace’ (*Epistle XIII*, 7).

### ***The Divine Comedy***

The *Divine Comedy*, considered a masterpiece of Western literature, represents the real process of unification of Dante’s poetic and social experiences. Though it is his last work, its exact composition date is uncertain. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), Dante’s first biographer, in his book *The Life of Dante*, affirmed that the initial seven

Cantos of the *Inferno* were written before Dante's exile, whereas the rest of the Cantos were written after his exile (Boccaccio 2003, p.xxvi). However, the volume is considered unreliable, as it contains 'misinformation, the influence of literary convention, the misreading of Dante's works, or pure invention on the part of the author' (Boli 1988, p.389). A more trustful source is represented by the modern Italian Dante scholar Giorgio Petrocchi. He carefully compared references, allusions and prophecies from the *Comedy* with the historical events of the time, and concluded that its composition occurred entirely during Dante's exile, between 1304 and 1321 (Petrocchi 1969, p.85). The poem narrates the pilgrim's seven-day journey in the three realms of the otherworld – *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* – starting on Good Friday in March 1300. The lost pilgrim finds himself in a dark wood, which allegorically represents sin and error. He tries retracing his path back, but the road is blocked by three wild animals, a she-wolf, a lion, and a leopard, allegorically the world's three major sins: incontinence, violence, and malicious fraud. The Roman poet Virgil, symbolizing reason, comes to his aid, and together they start their walk out of the wood and towards salvation. Written in the first person, the poem is characterized by a double narrative focus. The first is the story of a pilgrim caught between the diachronic events and encounters that he still cannot comprehend; the second is the poet's synchronic narration of the story having already experienced it (Mazzotta 2008). The tensions between author and pilgrim make the poem's complex movement, and 'sustain its suspense [...]. The pilgrim reveals to the reader both the story and its meaning as he learns it; it is a growth of understanding' (Fergusson 1953, p.12).

Through the device of the journey, Dante reproduces the cultural preoccupation of his time, namely the notion of human life as a journey, and the

related concept that 'the guides of the race must [travel] beyond the grave and meet the spirits of the ancestors in order to grasp their earthly way and ours' (Fergusson 1953, p.4). Man considered himself a *viator*, a pilgrim in search of a haven in which to find truth and love, but he had to travel and struggle before achieving illumination. In Dante, this *homo viator* is also *capax Dei*, that is, through the awakening of consciousness, he is capable of experiencing the divine mystery (Cacciari 2010). Dante the pilgrim embodies every human being; his journey symbolizes the route taken by all men every time they fall into evil and have to find the road leading to truth. Throughout his voyage, Dante encounters shades from his personal past and from the historical and literary world. In the Dantean figural conception, the character emblemizes a problem or an experience. The dialogue with this endless gallery of human portraits enables the poet to deal with a wide range of subject matters. It empowers him to explore past memories, and the historical realities in which he lived, addressing several medieval crises: political, religious, and philosophical. These conversations also stir the poet's confrontation with his own views on language and literature; on the question of free will; and on the relationship between faith and reason. By the end of the poem, Dante acquires an absolute truth, which enables him to indicate the right way to men, to teach them how to escape earthly appetites, and reach religious enlightenment. The poet sees himself as a predestined guide who will drive human beings out of misery. However, at the beginning of the poem, in one of his several classical and religious intertextual appropriations, Dante expresses to Virgil his self-doubts about accomplishing the journey. He says: 'But I, how should I go? Who yield me passage? Aeneas I am not, nor am I Paul' (*Inf.* II, ll.31-2). The references relate to Aeneas's journey to the underworld in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and to St. Paul's rapture in Heaven,

recounted in the Gnostic text *Visio S. Pauli* (Brandes 1885, p.1). At first, Dante's uncertainty appears as modesty; however, as Anthony Oldcorn suggests, this hesitation is instead 'an invitation to compare Dante to his illustrious precursors and one of the most extreme statements of the poet's conviction that he, like Aeneas and Paul, has been especially chosen by God for this prophetic visionary mission' (Oldcorn, in Lombardo 2009, p.179). These visions are conceded to these two men through a special blessing; Dante implies that 'special grace is granted to [him] to descend to the *Inferno*, to [...] go up on mount *Purgatorio*, and thus to travel through the celestial spheres to see God face to face' (Nardi 1949, p.362). The authoritative models of Aeneas and Paul also emblemize Dante's intention of adopting both Classical and Religious texts as the major sources of his poem. However, pagan stories are appropriated and reinterpreted for Dante's Christian purposes.

The *Comedy* represents Dante's highest achievement in poetic language and poetic techniques. It is written in the vernacular, as the poet sought to develop his language through poetry, in order to go beyond immediate perceptual realities and express 'that which has never been written' by anyone before (*VN XLII, 2*), namely, the '*novum*, the Divine, the ineffable' (Boldrini 2004, p.4). He wanted to demonstrate that the 'common tongue' was suitable for the highest form of poetic expression. As affirmed in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*: 'since nothing provides as splendid an ornament as does the illustrious vernacular, it seems that any writer of poetry should use it' (*DVE II, i, 2*). As Guido Mazzoni states, Dante 'not only [raised] the Italian vernacular to the height of the classical tongues, but in the Italian vernacular [he raised] poetry high above the range of transitory personal feelings to that of sublime doctrine and eternal things' (Mazzoni, in Sinclair 1961, p.28). In the Middle Ages, poetry was considered inferior to philosophical and theological

writings. For Thomas Aquinas, 'poetry [was] the least of all the sciences' (*ST I*, ix), while the philosopher Boethius declared that 'poetry be banished from his ideal society because [...] it is pedagogically harmful' (Boethius, in Gualtieri 1971, p.146). Even Virgil was considered more a neo-platonic philosopher than a poet. The *Aeneid* was viewed as a philosophical text illustrating the pattern and movement of life (Mazzotta 2008). Dante changes this interpretation, as poetic language is for him the 'supremely rewarding form of eloquence' (Iannucci 1997, p.170), and the *Comedy* re-asserts its value. In the first Canto of the *Inferno*, Virgil's poetic powers are praised as follows:

Master mine thou art;  
My author too, from whom alone I learned  
To weave the words that, woven, bring me honour. (*Inf.* I, ll.71-3)

Dante declares that the *Aeneid's* author is the master of his art, pronouncing the supremacy of poetry over philosophy. As Luigi Alfonsi proclaims, in Dante:

the movement from human wickedness to divine harmony does not happen primarily through reason but through poetry. For the Florentine, God is achieved, not so much with reasoning, but through a magical transportation of our entire world, spiritualised and purified, to a sacred vision. (Alfonsi 1944, p.28)

This aspect is a significant factor in the attraction of the modern poets to Dante, specifically his emphasis on the redemptive power of poetry, which was for him the form of expression best representing God's mystery.

In his letter to Cangrande, Dante explains the poem's '*polysemous*' exegetic value (*Epistle XIII*, 20). He lays particular emphasis on two levels, literal and allegorical, and explains: 'the exposition of the letter is in effect but a demonstration

of the form of the work' (*Epistle XIII*, 42). The 'letter' is the pilgrim's literal journey to the otherworld; the 'form' is what the narration implies, 'the drama of the Pilgrim's growing understanding' (Fergusson 1953, p.13), and his desire 'to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness' (*Epistle XIII*, 39). Dante planned the *Comedy* to be an educational vehicle for Christian salvation. Readers who comprehend the poem at various levels, can achieve the same moment of understanding that the pilgrim attains in *Paradiso*. In his journey towards self-discovery, the pilgrim has to understand evil before reaching salvation; as Seneca said, we must 'touch [...] the lowest depths, to be able to achieve the greatest heights' (HF, l.423). Dante and his guide start their descent in the *Inferno*, which is portrayed as a cavity shaped like an inverted cone, and is divided into nine circles which, like a spiral, go down to the centre of the Earth. The pattern of three and ten (and their multiples) is the three canticles' fundamental architecture; in medieval mysticism, the numbers 'three' and 'ten' symbolized the Trinity and the mystery of God respectively. Thirty-three Cantos form each of the three canticles, plus one at the beginning of the *Inferno* which serves as a prologue, bringing the total to one hundred. To the hendecasyllabic meter, the poet combines the symbolic *terza rima* (or *terzina*, a three-line stanza), a rhyme scheme where the first and third lines rhyme with each other, and with the previous *terzina*'s central line (aba bcb cdc), 'producing the effect of two steps forward and one step back' (Pinsky 1995, p.1). This rhyme system has great narrative drive and thematic suggestibility, as it is seen as representative of the Trinity in the poem's linguistic composition (Finch and Varnes 2002, p.117). The location of the souls in the nine circles depends on the sin committed by the individual in his or her lifetime. Eight circles relate to eight categories of sin and their punishment. The first circle is

Limbo, where the souls of pagans and of un-baptized children are located, and their punishment consists of being unable to see God. However, sins and punishments become increasingly worse the lower the pilgrim descends. To highlight the belief that sins are not all the same, the poet imagines a division separating the upper and lower part of Hell, distinguishing the sins due to weakness from those due to malice. Evil born out of human weakness leads individuals to make mistakes and choices with negative consequences on themselves and on others; however, they are unintentional acts, born from unrestrained passion, and not intended to cause anyone suffering. On the contrary, sins derived from malice, such as fraud and violence, 'most displease [...] / God' (*Inf.* XI, ll.21-2), as they are actions born from 'man's peculiar' evil (*Inf.* XI, l.21), and are performed to harm with a specific intent.

Dante's punishments in Hell are based on Aristotle's specific structure of justice, that Dante calls *contrappasso*, an old moral-juridical notion of retribution – echoed in the biblical expression 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' (*Exodus* 21, 24). The term that Aristotle uses in *Nicomachean Ethics* is 'reciprocal justice' (*NE* V, 5), consisting of relating the pain to the sin by both analogy and contrast. Dante's adoption of this literary device creates a compelling argument for the degree of punishment that each sin deserves. For example, the lustful in *Inferno* V are whirled around, slashed, and molested by an infernal storm's merciless winds; in life, they were blown by the tempest of their passions, betraying reason for pleasure, and now their destiny is to be blown about by hellish winds forever. Similarly, the wrathful in *Inferno* VII are the endless focus of each other's resentment. They destroy each other, push each other down, and deny each other speech. The *Inferno* springs from the realization of the existence of evil in men; the fights and ferocious contrasts present here reflect the medieval crises' historical components, and the Tuscan

*Communal* societies' machineries and corruption. These sinners broke God's eternal laws, without repenting, thus making salvation impossible. God's retribution in Hell castigates each soul for their life sins, and the punishments' accuracy mirrors Dante's Christian idea of divine justice. The poet displays that sin is a choice, and that continuing with dissolute and egotistical ways of living, will result in the soul's eternal torment. In Canto XXVI, Dante warns readers of the dangers existing when seeking self-knowledge without faith or love through the figure of Ulysses.

In Dante's own retelling of Homer's story, the hero goes on a sea-quest of exploration and discovery. He seeks to go beyond God's forbidden place on Earth, the Pillars of Hercules, and the western limit of the known world. As a punishment, his ship is sunk by a whirlwind. Ulysses sinned by advising his companions to go beyond human boundaries, promising 'worth and understanding' (*Inf.* XXVI, 1.115), but instead brought them to their death. As Nardi argues, 'Dante's Ulysses is a new Adam, a new Lucifer; his sin is precisely Adam's, namely, *il trapassar del segno* [the trespassing of the forbidden sign]. Ulysses is thus a transgressor, whose pride incites him to seek a knowledge that is beyond the limits set for man by God' (Nardi, in Barolini 1997, p.113). Ulysses's journey is comparable to Dante's journey, as both men go beyond what is permitted to humans. However, Dante's experience is dictated by what Massimo Cacciari terms as 'an ordered love' (Cacciari 2010); the poet uses his knowledge to temper his passions, to put order into himself. By contrast, Ulysses's desire for knowledge is a 'disordered love' (Cacciari 2010); it is an egotistical passion for knowledge to uncover something anew that nobody else knows. In the last circle, Dante confronts absolute evil, Satan himself: 'The ruler of that realm of final woe' (*Inf.* XXXIV, 1.27). The analogy with Ulysses is prominent here; Satan attempted to transcend divine will, and was defeated. His symbolic

punishment in the *Inferno* is to be immersed in ice up to his waist, unable to move in that world that he sought to control. The portrayal of the *Inferno*'s lowest area as a frozen abyss, the lake of Cocytus, symbolizes its distance from God. In traditional Christian symbolism, fire represents love, thus ice and frost represent hatred. Satan is portrayed with 'Three faces' (*Inf.* XXXIV, l.37), 'and in each mouth / He gnawed a sinner' (*Inf.* XXXIV, ll.50-1), including Judas, Christ's betrayer, and Brutus and Cassius, Caesar's assassins (Caesar for Dante represented the Empire's dignity). With the endless movement of his three wings, Satan produces the ice that 'froze from end to end' the lake of 'Cocytus' (*Inf.* XXXIV, l.48), thus, ironically, he becomes the agent of his own punishment, as the more he moves his wings, the more it becomes impossible to liberate himself from the ice trapping him. Dante depicts Satan as a miserable figure overcome by grief and death. He is a parody of the Trinity; if God is power, wisdom and love, Satan is impotence, ignorance and hatred.

After the atrocities of the *Inferno*, the pilgrim is finally ready to start his purification in *Purgatorio*. He depicts the joy he experiences at arising into the pure air:

Now hoists her sail to speed o'er quit waters  
My little craft of Fancy's pilotage,  
Leaving behind for aye a cruel sea.  
And I will sing that second realm, wherein  
The human spirit purifies itself  
Till it is fit to enter into heaven. (*Purg.* I, ll.1-6)

Dante opens the first Canto suggesting resurrection and triumph over death and horror. *Purgatorio* is a transitional place between *Inferno*'s evil and *Paradiso*'s glory. Here occurs the cleansing and purification of individuals who strive forward in the effort to achieve salvation. It is a place infused with hope, where the

downward journey is halted, reversed and becomes an upward movement towards bliss. In medieval culture's cosmological vision, purgatory was a mount located on the Earth's southern hemisphere, directly opposite to Jerusalem on the northern hemisphere (the part men inhabited). Being part of human geography, this realm is the closest to men's life. As John Sinclair observed, the 'life of *Purgatory* is the Christian life, life under the dispensations of grace and under some of the limitations of the earth' (Sinclair 1961, p.103). Contrary to the *Inferno*, where no sense of time exists because it is a location of eternal suffering, *Purgatorio* is time-bound because it is a transitory place, similar to our world. This time, as Giuseppe Mazzotta states, is 'understood as future oriented' (Mazzotta 2008), because the souls look forward to salvation after the purging fires cleanse their sins. Moreover, while in the *Inferno*, 'there is, who hopes to rise to crush his neighbour' (*Purg.* XVII, 1.99), Dante highlights the communal sense of the souls in *Purgatorio*. Its inhabitants support each other and wish each other freedom. In Canto II, the poet cites directly the *Exodus* story: '*In exitu Israël de Ægypto*' (*Psalms* 114, 1), 'When Israel from Egypt came' (*Purg.* II, 1.41), where the Jews sing their exodus from their slavery in Egypt. Clearly, there is a parallel between the Jews' journey towards hope, and the journey towards Paradise in *Purgatorio*, as both epitomize a quest for freedom: political, civil, and theological (Mazzotta 2008). Dante implies that the *Purgatorio*, and the *Comedy* as a whole, are lyrical representations of the biblical *Exodus*; human histories are journeys from slavery to freedom, 'from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace' (*Epistle XIII*, 21). Dante's depiction of the importance of freedom reflects his distress at losing that 'liberty [so] dear' to him (*Purg.* I, 1.65). Dislocated from his family and affections, and from his native city for political reasons, the poet affirms that men can liberate themselves from the slavery of what he calls, the

'rapacious wolves' (*Par.* XXVII, 1.47), sitting on Peter's throne. Following Aquinas' teaching, the poet emphasizes the power of agency. Humans are rational beings, with a God given freedom of choice:

The greatest gift which God's creative bounty  
Gave man; chief mark of goodness, highest value;  
Was that free will with which intelligent  
Created beings all, and singly, were,  
And are, endowed. (*Par.* V, ll.19-23)

Here Dante sets out an ardent exaltation of man, who, empowered by God's gift, free will, has in himself the ability to rise from the depths of agony, because, as he says in the *De Monarchia*, 'the human race is ordered for the best when it is most free' (*DM XII*, 1).

In *Purgatorio*, souls wait until Judgment Day, when they will finally be free from all errors. The sins here are more conceptual in nature than those of the *Inferno*, as they are centred on intentions, rather than conducts. As Dorothy Sayers affirms, 'hell is concerned with the fruits [whereas] *Purgatory* [deals] with the roots, of sin' (Sayers, in Dante 1955a, p.15). Purgation's seven Terraces correspond to the seven capital sins. These are collected into three main parts, in which Dante delineates the concept that all sin results from 'love gone astray' (Bellioti 2011, p.46). In the first (lower) division are placed those who had a perverted love or desire to see others fail or suffer; in the middle sector are those who had a defective, weak love toward good ends; while the upper division holds sins caused by a disordered and excessive love for good things. Dante suggests that humans who distance themselves from God's true love cannot achieve real happiness. Dante's extraordinary conception of love is the *Divine Comedy's* most important message, which the poet sets out at the very start of his journey. In *Inferno II*, we learn that Virgil was summoned to rescue the

pilgrim by three women: Beatrice (embodiment of divine love), the Virgin Mary, and St. Lucy. Their intercession symbolizes humans' inability to find happiness and salvation by themselves; they need divine love's intervention and grace. Virgil symbolizes reason and wisdom, the judgments through which men can re-build their moral lives. However, reason must be guided by faith; without Christian laws, there is no salvation for men. From the very beginning, Dante suggests that his poem is a 'movement of compassion and intercession; an act of love' (Kline 2002, p.17). The relationship between reason and faith is a notion Dante takes from Aquinas, who developed his ideas within the context of Aristotle's thought.

The moral organization of the *Comedy* is based on Aquinas' and Aristotle's theories. In *Epistle XIII*, Dante illustrated his poem's ethical aim. He established the 'branch of philosophy to which the work is subject, in the whole as in the part, is that of morals or ethics; inasmuch as the whole as well as the part was conceived, not for speculation, but with a practical object' (*Epistle XIII*, 40). The poet emphasizes the relationship between humanity's moral components and society's political aspects, stressing an aspiration for justice through the treatment of the political events of the time. He appeals to a human and social awakening, in order to fight secularized faith. In Aristotle's ethics, human beings' fundamental moral inclination is naturally virtuous, but easily corrupted by an immoral society. Men can achieve total happiness only through using their intellect (*NE X*, vi). However, Aquinas' teaching stresses reason's 'spiritual' nature. He believes that intellect cannot completely determine man's virtue, but has to be accompanied by the Christian disposition towards faith and hope. Dante adopts Aquinas' ethical system, emphasizing that happiness can be perfect only within God's light; outside of it, it 'fails'. As he says in *Paradiso XXXIII*: 'Since all of good, the aim of every will, / Is gathered in it; all

that fails outside / is perfected within' (*Par.* XXXIII, ll.102-4). He believes that 'God and religious values are primary, and that true goodness is to be measured in terms of an ultimate finality, reasoned by man's natural intellect but fully possessed only on the basis of the Christian faith' (Hardon 1995, p.1). Aristotle asserts that mental power can make man happy, but for Dante (and for Aquinas), happiness is only possible when the human unites with the divine, the foundation of all joy. Throughout the *Comedy*, the poet insists on the soul's eternal unity with God; this can be achieved by exercising Christian virtues on Earth in order to attain complete blessing in the next life. In *Purgatorio*, Dante is symbolic of all the souls being purified as they seek this eternal union. His ascent becomes increasingly easier as he continues climbing the mount; this allegorically reflects his spiritual movement and understanding, as well as the search for something better that facilitates the pilgrim's inner life development (Fergusson 1953, p.10). The last stage of *Purgatorio* is the Earthly Paradise, the place on Earth closer to God. Situated at the mountain's top, it epitomizes men's condition of innocence and virtue before Adam's and Eve's fall. Here Virgil departs and Dante is reunited with Beatrice, for whose love he has faced the difficult journey. Dante, now free from sin, can ascend with Beatrice to the sky.

The *Paradiso* represents, in T. S. Eliot's words, 'the highest point that poetry has ever reached or ever can reach' (Eliot 1932a, p.251), as it is 'imbued with a "lyricism" reminiscent of mystical experience' (Iannucci 1997, p.xix). The canticle opens exalting God: 'The glory of the Spirit who moves all / Breathes through and through the universe' (*Par.* I, ll.1-2); and closes with the pilgrim's rapturous vision of God. The *Paradiso* is the space of hope fulfilled, of grace, and freedom. Throughout the luminous spheres, the souls express their love by singing, whirling, and glowing. As Anthony S. Kline suggests: the 'true freedom of *Paradise* is

everywhere a shared giving, an outpouring that enhances, reflects, blazes out and glorifies' (Kline 2002, p.7). Here Beatrice leads the pilgrim through the celestial spheres; the woman appears in the fullness of her biographical and symbolic reality. She is simultaneously the woman that Dante knew and loved on Earth: 'Awhile I stayed him, nought but with my looks; / Meeting him often with my girlish eyes' (*Purg.* XXX, ll.110-1), and also the blessed symbol of grace and truth. Her eyes, which 'show forth / Plane above plane the ocean depths of heaven' (*Par.* XXIII, ll.19-20), are both announcement and triumphal hosts 'of the Christ' (*Par.* XXIII, l.16); in them reflects God's bliss. With Beatrice as a guide, Dante feels his human faculties grow, until he can support directly God's splendour in the Empyrean (God's abode). The third canticle portrays a completely new Beatrice; from the intellectual meditations about philosophic love for the 'gentle woman', seen primarily in physical and worldly love terms (as in the *Vita Nuova*), she is now transformed to a fully spiritualized being. She no longer represents 'passion but charity and faith [...] and she is the symbol of all those means which God offers to man to open the road to salvation' (Marchese 1978, p.31). The journey enables Dante to revise and deepen the components of faith and love. In Beatrice, the poet can now see only divine beauty, truth, and love. Together they start ascending to Heaven, which, according to Ptolemaic cosmological representation, is circular in shape and moves spherically.

In the nine spheres or heavens, they meet the blessed and the Saints. In the Moon sphere, there are the Inconsistent, souls of pious men, who, forced by others' wilfulness, did not fulfil vows made in life, thus were deficient in fortitude. In the sky of Mercury are earthly glory's active spirits, those souls who during their life achieved a good reputation with their actions. Here, the pilgrim meets Emperor

Justinian (Canto VI), symbol of the perfect balance between Church and Empire, and begins the violent political critique against the secularized Church. He condemns the Church's greed for wealth and power as it contrasts with the gospel's commandment of poverty. His ideals are expressed in Canto XI through the figure of St. Thomas, who sings an extensive laud to St. Francis, exalting his virtues of poverty and humility:

“When a lad  
He strove against his father, for a bride  
To whom, like death, no man unlocks the door  
For pleasure. Then before his father's face,  
And in the bishop's court, he wedded her  
And loved her more from day to day.  
[...]  
Poverty and Francis”. (*Par.* XI, ll.48-53; 62)

While still very young, Francis renounced his father's inheritance, and married 'Poverty', symbolized by an allegorical female figure: a woman that everyone rejects as if she were death. As Erich Auerbach suggests, in Dante's image, 'both the particular and the universal meanings of the incident are at once brought more clearly into prominence' (Auerbach 1945, p.170). Dante's great achievement is that through a complex allegorical figural construction, he is able to highlight the paradigmatic universality that readers are encouraged to infer from the narration. The poet represents St. Francis as a model of sanctity, thus contradicting the Church's greed for richness and power. On the papal throne sits a usurper of St. Peter's office, who has filled Rome with 'Sewers of blood and foulness' (*Par.* XXVII, l.21). Dante asserts that the Church must not be used as an instrument to accumulate wealth, but rather as a means to achieve eternal salvation. Thus, the poet gives a message of religious and social renewal, and prophesizes the coming of a saviour, a guide

endowed with high redeemable power that would re-establish order and 'chase' the 'wolf', the greedy and corrupt clergy, 'from every city' (*Inf.* I, 1.94).

In *Paradiso's* last Cantos, Dante rises in the higher heavens closer to God. They move faster than the lower heavens, and are characterized by a progressively more intense luminosity, symbolizing the influence of divine love. Here the 'shades' become 'splendours' (Lambert 2012, p.3), and Dante's vision, hit by this light, acquires more power and insight which render him fit to see God. A first picture of the divine appears in the Primum Mobile (first moving sphere), the last sphere of the physical universe, moved directly by God, and which 'moves all else around it' (*Par.* XXVII, 1.95), namely, all the spheres it encloses. Here Dante sees a luminous point enveloped by nine circles of light, the 'eternal rose' (*Par.* XXX, 1.114) of God and his angels. Then, with Beatrice, he enters God's abode, the Empyrean, the spiritual region beyond time and space. Here Beatrice leaves her place as a guide to St. Bernard, who leads the pilgrim before God. From this moment onwards, Dante's word becomes inadequate to describe the magnificence of what he sees. He laments:

How poor  
Is what I say! how weak to what I think!  
Yet that, when set against the things I saw,  
Incomparably small, and powerless. (*Par.* XXXIII, ll.117-20)

The poet realizes the insufficiency of his linguistic tools in attempting to describe divine magnificence. Dante explores the limits of poetic language, the inexpressibility *topos*, which asserts that words can never suitably express ultimate meanings. In the divine light's deep substance, he sees three circles that seem reflected by one another. It is the mystery of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Dante looks more intensely at the second circle, and a human figure emerges

from the mystical vision. He cannot fathom this: 'I had no wings to cover such a flight' (*Par.* XXXIII, l.135). He invokes God's help to give him the capacity to put his experience into words for the sake of his fellow men:

O Light of heaven [...]  
[...]  
Give to my tongue but power enough to show  
Only one spark of thine o'erflowing glory,  
That I may leave it for the future folk. (*Par.* XXXIII, ll.63; 66-8)

Dante yearns to find that 'one spark' of inspirational light which will allow him to pass on to future generations the magnificence of his experience. Dante's mind is suddenly hit by a strong glow: 'on my mind there struck an awful splendour / of Glory' (*Par.* XXXIII, l.136-7); it is the last supreme enlightenment of divine grace, through which the desire to penetrate the mystery is satisfied: in 'which my wish was stilled' (*Par.* XXXIII, l.137). Before the pilgrim is revealed the mystery of Incarnation, the Word made flesh, and Christ's humanity is seen in his divine essence. The Dantean concept of human nature's continuation into divine nature sheds light on the fate that binds humans, limited and mortal beings, to the infinite and the eternal. This mystical rapture ends the supreme vision as the pilgrim sees God as a blessed angelic creature, in a pure relationship of love and bliss:

And as the tranquil turning of a wheel,  
My wish and will were moved by Him Who is  
The Love that moves the sun and all the stars. (*Par.* XXXIII,  
ll.138-41)

The poet's will now conforms to God's will; the human is united with the divine. The supreme poet has finally fulfilled his prophetic mission, and can now show humanity the way to salvation and freedom.

## **SECTION TWO: STYLISTIC INFLUENCES**

## Chapter 2: The Search for Poetic Language

Master mine thou art;  
My author too, from whom alone I learned  
To weave the words that, woven, bring me honour. (*Inf. I*, ll. 72-4)

Dante's proclamation of Virgil, in the first Canto of the *Divine Comedy*, as the poet *par excellence* from whom he drew his own creative style, illustrates Thomas Stearns Eliot's indebtedness to Dante, and his choice of him as the 'master' of his own poetics (Eliot 1932a, p.247). In his essay, "What Dante Means to Me", Eliot affirmed that the Florentine poet was one of those great authors 'to whom one slowly grows up', and who left the greatest and deepest influence on him (Eliot 1952, p.181). What he found in Dante was 'the recognition of a temperament akin to [his] own, and [...] the discovery of a form of expression which [gave him] a clue to the discovery of [his] own form', enabling him to define and consolidate his literary practice (Eliot 1952, p.179). Dante displayed great modern characteristics, which, in the twentieth century, attracted authors from all around Europe: from Eliot to Eugenio Montale; and from James Joyce to Seamus Heaney. Dante's experiments with language, his use of the vernacular, and the refinement of his own tongue, mirrored the Modernist philosophical dictum that the poet ought to 'search for a proper modern colloquial idiom' (Eliot 1957, p.38), and to abandon deceiving signs and ornamented words, which were seen as characteristic of Romantic poetry. Eliot in particular, believed that every 'revolution in poetry [...] is apt [...] to announce itself to be a return to common speech' (Eliot 1957, p.31). He sought a language that

was 'efficacious and true' (Iannucci 1997, p.170), and which would be able to express the most complex thought with the least amount of words. In Dante's 'common idiom' (Eliot 1952, p.183) the modern poet found a model to follow, which gave him a 'clue to the discovery' of 'the poetic possibilities of [his] own idiom of speech', achieving the Modernist ideal of linguistic simplicity (Eliot 1952, p.179).

The search for simplicity went along, in this period, with the revival of tradition, and with the implementation of mythological, historical, and literary allusions and techniques in contemporary literature, creating a 'continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity' (Eliot 1975, p.177). The incredible changes in society, brought by science, urban development, and by the tragedy of World War I, had created disillusionment with politics and society at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this climate of transformation and uncertainty, poets began to pursue new ideals and visions, seeking, in the words of Ezra Pound, to 'Make it New' (Pound 1934, p.1), thus reimagining literature and culture. For Eliot, the ruin and dissatisfaction of the modern era were not only brought about by the war, but also by the dissociation with the past. He proposed a new way of considering tradition as an affiliation with the 'whole literature of Europe', which was to be felt as having a 'simultaneous existence', and to be seen as composing a 'simultaneous order' (Eliot 1921, p.44). In his essay "Dante" (1929), the poet points out that the problem of discontent for cultures lay in the separation of 'nation from nation', a 'process of disintegration [which started] soon after Dante's time' (Eliot 1932a, p.240). Eliot believes that the medieval poet's era, 'with all its dissensions and dirtiness, was mentally more united than we can now conceive' (Eliot 1932a, p.240). In the dark beginning of the twentieth century, where European nations were

dividing and destroying each other, Dante represented for Eliot an abiding sense of the unification of a European tradition. He gave voice to an entire religious, cultural and philosophical civilization, which could give spiritual meaning to the present, and promote a strong sense of European unity founded upon a shared cultural past.

Dante's great 'historical sense' is displayed in his intimate knowledge and use of the literary works of his predecessors, such as Virgil, Ovid, Statius, and Lucan. Eliot perceives this method as the unification of 'a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together' (Eliot 1921, p.44). He believes that no 'poet, no artist, of any art, has his complete meaning alone' (Eliot 1921, p.44). Every author ought to situate his own work in relation to that of his predecessors, because his 'significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists' (Eliot 1921, p.44). In Eliot's poetry, episodes from the *Divine Comedy* are applied by an elaborate path that moves through several other works of literature, thereby creating an intertextual connection between past and present. This process gives a sense of fragmentation to his poems, reflecting Eliot's 'sensibility to a fragmentary world which surrounds him' (Spender 1948, p.271). However, the very idea of 'fragment implies the idea of a unified whole of which it is part'; in fact, the structure 'is intended to form a whole' (Bloom 2007, p.132). In this, the poem imitates the organization of the *Divine Comedy*, which for Eliot, represents the most complete manifestation of a 'system' ever attempted, and 'the most *ordered* presentation of emotions that has ever been made' (Eliot 1921, p.152). Dante 'does not analyze the emotion so much as he exhibits its relation to other emotions. You cannot, that is, understand the *Inferno* without the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*' (Eliot 1921, p.152). The intertextual mythological and historical figures found in the *Comedy*, which at first

may strike us as irrelevant, cohere when looking at the entire poem; they are, as Eliot observed, ‘transformed in the whole; for the real and the unreal are all representative of types of sin, suffering, fault, and merit, and all become of the same reality and contemporary’ (Eliot 1932a, p.248). The use of so many different sources in Eliot’s poetry attempts to do the same; namely to provide ‘a means for the reader to transcend jarring and incompatible worlds, to move to a higher viewpoint that both includes and transcends the contemporary world’ (Brooker and Bentley 1990, p.59). With Dante’s example, the modern poet is able to present a vision that is ‘nearly complete’ (Eliot 1921, p.154).

This process of unifying different points of view is defined by Eliot as ‘the mythical method’, a way of ‘controlling, of ordering’, which makes ‘the modern world possible for art, toward that order’ and unity that gives ‘shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’ (Eliot 1975, p.178). The methods of Dante and Eliot have much in common with the modern definition of intertextuality. Although, this term was first used in Julia Kristeva’s “Word, Dialogue and Novel” (1966) and in “The Bounded Text” (1966-67), culturally, intertextuality ‘is by no means a time-bound feature: the phenomenon, in some form, is at least as old as recorded human society’ (Worton and Still 1990, p.2). Intertextual allusions always have a specific function in the text. For example, Charles Bazerman claims that ‘intertextual references are used to either provide background and support or to contrast the author’s arguments’ (Bazerman 2004a, p.85). The most straightforward intertextual evaluation is one of ‘implied relevance’, namely, the idea that intertextual references are always relevant to the author’s communicative purpose. In fact, ‘the process of quoting is not a simple linking of text or parts of the texts but a purposeful act’ (Brinkmann, in Kornetzki

2011, p.102), which signifies an affinity at the level of the language or between the two authors. Eliot identified with Dante both at an artistic and at a personal level; thus, his borrowing is not only a conscious choice, but it is also inspired by feelings of empathy with the Italian poet. As he states in an unpublished lecture of 1932, “The Bible as Scripture and Literature”:

You cannot effectively “borrow” an image, unless you borrow also, or have spontaneously, something like the feeling which prompted the original image. An “image”, in itself, is like dream symbolism, is only vigorous in relation to the feelings out of which it issues, in the relation of word to flesh. You are entitled to take it for your own purposes in so far as your fundamental purposes are akin to those of the one who is, for you, the author of the phrase, the inventor of the image. (Eliot 1932b, p.12)

Eliot’s affiliation with Dante is fundamental to his search for images and symbols adequate to his predicament, and in his attempts to find an answer to his artistic questions.

However, Eliot’s borrowings in his poems are not mere reproductions of the original works. He combines both implicit and explicit references, as intertextuality is not just about the appropriation of direct references, but also of codes and modifications of the original text that authors adapt to their own connotative purpose. Thus, the poet can either use the reference in its original form, or modify it in order to achieve his artistic objective. In Eliot’s poems, ‘quotations and adaptations’ are combined in his artistic creations in ‘entirely new ways’ (Higgins 1970, pp.133; 4), and they are given new meanings in the poet’s endeavour to portray modern society. In fact, as the theory of intertextuality holds, ‘each time a literary phrase or a cultural motif is transposed into a new context [...] it is reinterpreted, its previous meaning becoming incorporated by distortion into a new

meaning suitable to a new use' (Menand 2007, p.89). This notion mirrors both Eliot's and Dante's idea of borrowing. In *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot stated:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn. (Eliot 1921, p.114)

Similarly, Dante's purpose in his work was not just to imitate his predecessors' works, but instead to make something better. He reinterpreted various classical and Christian traditions by 'manipulat[ing] arguments and time lines, and [...] forg[ing] imaginary links between the ancient world and his own "moderno uso"' (Hawkins 1999, p.3).

Eliot's intertextual references to Dante in his early poetry are taken from the first canticle of the *Comedy*, the *Inferno*, which depicts the spiritual loss and confusion of the pilgrim – who symbolizes all humanity – in the dark wood of the soul. Dante started to write the *Comedy* while in exile. This painful personal experience undoubtedly helped him to gain a different perspective on the moral situation of his society, which, in the view of the author, had lost its values, and was falling in an abyss of chaos and dissolution. As Ezra Pound writes:

Dante conceived the real Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise as states, and not places [and his] descriptions of the actions and conditions of the shades [are] descriptions of men's mental states in life [...], that is to say, men's inner selves stand visibly before the eyes of Dante's intellect. (Pound 1953, p.127)

The *Comedy* is an example of how 'poetry can engage with the living world of history by turning the reader's mind toward his or her own moral flaws' (Lummus 2011, p.69). Similarly, Eliot's perception of confusion, madness, and despair, not

only arose from the chaos that he saw in the modern world, but also from his personal struggles. In 1921, the poet had a nervous breakdown – what he called ‘an *aboulie* and emotional derangement which has been a lifelong affliction’ (Eliot 1971, p.xxii) – which was caused by the death of a French friend, and by his lasting problems with his wife Vivienne. This forced him, in the autumn of the same year, to spend three months in a sanatorium in Switzerland, where he finished writing “The Waste Land”. These tragic details of his experience shape and illuminate the poem, filling it with a vision of mortality and spiritual devastation. Dante’s and Eliot’s works explore the gloomy and sinful regions within the self and within all of humanity, and they articulate the poets’ more personal feelings of inadequacy in the face of their moral desolation and their forced exile. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, Eliot adapts infernal representations and discourses in order to portray the obscure reality of modern man and society. The poet depicts the beginning of an age characterized by decay and moral corruption. His employment of Dantean intertextual references in this poem mirrors his preoccupation with the chaotic atmosphere of the early twentieth century, which brought to the fore the sense of emptiness in modern humanity and the crisis of religious belief. As Michael D. Aeschliman points out, Eliot detected within the conditions and dynamics of modern life the agonizing meaninglessness of the *genti dolorose*, the ‘sorrowful people’ of Dante’s *Inferno* (Aeschliman 1988, p.7).

Eliot, like Dante, sought to portray the reality of what he saw around him in his poetry. Through infernal intertextual diction and representations, he attempts ‘to arouse in the reader’s mind the memory of some Dantesque scene, [in order to] establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life’ (Eliot 1965, p.128), thus exposing ‘the width and depth of the modern sense of absurdity’

(Aeschliman 1988, p.9). Like several other twentieth century poets, Eliot rejected the Romantic belief that poetry had to represent something pleasant (Bloom 2003, p.99). Modern artists maintained that ‘the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness, to see the boredom and the horror, and the glory’ (Eliot 1986, p.106). Dante for Eliot, ‘is always in a world of good and evil, and [his] aim and achievement is to keep the different planes of reality intersecting, finding voices for each’ (Schuchard 1999, p.128). However, the poet claims that ‘not all succeed as did Dante in expressing the complete scale from negative to positive. The negative is the more importunate’ (Eliot 1921, p.153). Eliot’s philosophy evolved throughout his career, and in his later poems, he enunciated both the negative and the positive scale of humanity (for example in “Ash Wednesday” and “Little Gidding”). However, as Thomas Hardy once stated: ‘if a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst’ (Hardy 1995, p.557). Like Dante, Eliot has to experience the ‘negative’ before achieving the ‘positive’ range of human experience. At the beginning of the *Inferno*, Virgil warns the pilgrim that the ascent must be preceded by a descent; he says: ‘another way / Will be appointed thine if thou dost wish / To flee this gloomy place’ (*Inf.* I, ll.77-9). The ultimate meaning of his words occurs in the last Canto, when the pilgrims reach the innermost recesses of Hell. While Virgil and Dante are moving down the legs of Lucifer, they literally must perform a reversal. Virgil stops and ‘moved / Round on himself, till head and feet changed place; / And seized the hair again, and climbed afresh’ (*Inf.* XXXIV, ll.67-9). Throughout the journey in the *Inferno*, the poets are constantly descending further into Hell; however, their descent is a preparation for their ascent. This reversal represents morally and spiritually a *conversio*, that is, a conversion of the heart, which suggests that human beings must

experience the mystery of evil in order to realize the necessity of divine redemption. Similarly, before moving toward the light, Eliot must face the dark and errant realms within his own soul, and within the souls of all human beings, because ‘man must first descend into humility before he can raise himself to salvation’ (Wadsworth Longfellow and Bondanella, in Dante 2003, p.154). It could be suggested that “The Waste Land” epitomizes the first step towards Eliot’s journey of recognition and revelation, and that it represents his own crossing from the darkest recesses of his soul, to spiritual awareness. He is attempting, in a Dantean manner, to persuade human beings of the degradation of society and the need for improvement.

### ***Crossing the ‘City of Grief’***

“The Waste Land”, as the title suggests, narrates the quester’s journey into a dry and sterile desert, symbolic of the pessimistic conditions of cities after the First World War, and of the spiritual aridity of modern men. In this infertile and morally corrupt environment, nothing grows, and consequently, ‘there is no flowering in the lives of the people’ (Tiwari 2001, p.84). Individuals are cut off from their past, living a present devoid of meaning, and with no hope for the future. They desperately desire spiritual renewal, but lack the cultural resources necessary for achieving it. Immediately, the similarity with the *Inferno* is paramount. The ‘dusky wood’ (*Inf.* I, l.2), in which Dante the pilgrim finds himself at the beginning of his journey, suggests the darkness of human souls in a state of sin. It is a desolate, fiery and icy landscape, characterized by ‘everlasting darkness, frost or fire’ (*Inf.* III, l.76). Peter James Lowe states that a ‘Dantean air permeates “The Waste Land”, as we wander through the streets of the Unreal City in a similar fashion to Dante’s journey through

Hell' (Lowe 2002, p.152). The inscription that Dante reads on entering Hell describes the gloomy and hopeless atmosphere in which the souls dwell:

“Through me is passage to the city of grief;  
Passage through me to everlasting sorrow;  
Passage among the people sunk in sin.  
[...]  
Let go hope, who enter here”. (*Inf.* III, ll.1-3; 8)

Dante depicts a world of ‘grief’; of ‘everlasting sorrow’; of lost people; a world without love and without hope, in which the self is always alone even among the crowd. In the first section of Eliot’s poem, “The Burial of the Dead”, the Dantean experience is offered as a ghostlike morning in London, characterized by ‘the brown fog of a winter dawn’ (Eliot 1963, p.55), and described as a city of sorrow, an ‘Unreal City’ (Eliot 1963, p.55), reminiscent of the archetype of the ‘city of grief’ (*Inf.* III, l.1). The landscape is represented through images of death and decay; of suffering and imprisonment; and through specific hellish sounds: ‘dead land’, ‘Dull roots’, ‘dried tubers’, ‘stony rubbish’, ‘dead tree’, ‘dry stone’, ‘handful of dust’, ‘drowned’ (Eliot 1963, p.54), ‘corpse’, ‘sighs’ (Eliot 1963, p.55), ‘rattle of [...] bones’ (Eliot 1963, p.60), ‘burning’ (Eliot 1963, p.64); weeping, ‘cold blast[s]’, ‘whispers’ (Eliot 1963, p.65); ‘frosty silence’, ‘shouting’ and cries of ‘agony’ (Eliot 1963, p.66), ‘lamentation[s]’ (Eliot 1963, p.67), ‘beat[ings of] wings’ (Eliot 1963, p.68), and sounds of ‘key[s]’ locking prisons (Eliot 1963, p.69). This distinctive semantic pattern gives a sense of the deadness and desperation of this landscape, which is reinforced by the lack of water:

Here is no water but only rock. (Eliot 1963, p.66)

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water. (Eliot 1963, p.53)

The absence of water suggests a lack of spiritual belief, and recalls the ‘natural thirst’ of which Dante speaks in *Purgatorio* XXI, namely, the thirst for knowledge that can be satisfied only by the truth revealed by God. It is also evocative of the wanderings of the children of Israel when Moses struck a rock and a stream of water flowed from it: ‘twice Moses lifted his hand, and smote the rock with his rod; whereupon water gushed out in abundance’ (*Numbers* 20, 11). However, the spiritual faith of the Israelites is missing in Eliot’s poem. As Harold Bloom declares, “The Waste Land” is ‘a waste land precisely because of the absence of the Divine spirit’ (Bloom 2007, p.47). The speaker seeks relief under the ‘shadow [of a] red rock’ (Eliot 1963, p.53), but that relief is soon distorted by a sense of trepidation and death which is underscored by the image of another biblical parable: ‘I will show you fear in a handful of dust’ (Eliot 1963, p.54). This assumption that man comes from dust, and will return to dust, highlights the precariousness of the human condition.

Dominic Manganiello points out that the modern dusty and empty landscape is symbolic of ‘the dry, fiery desert that Dante shows us in *Inferno* XIV’ (Manganiello 1989, p.94). In that Canto, a land which once ‘was glad / With water and with greenery’ (*Inf.* XIV, ll.90-1), is now ‘a desert like a worn-out thing’ (*Inf.* XIV, l.92). Dante juxtaposes the two images, evoking the past splendour of the Garden of Eden, a world where mankind ‘lived chastely’ before the Fall (*Inf.* XIV, l.89). However, what was once a fertile territory has now become a wasteland, deserted by both God and man. “The Waste Land” has suffered the same transformation. Where once there was life, now there is only decay, a decay which brings human beings to a state of no life. Dante’s and Eliot’s descriptions can be compared to Eugenio Montale’s view of the world in his poem “Sit the Noon Out,

Pale and Lost in Thought” (Montale 1998, p.41), where the aridity of nature – ‘blistering garden wall [...], thorns and brambles [...], cracked earth’ (Montale 1998, p.41) – is an emblem for ‘life and its torment’ (Montale 1998, p.41), and for an existential condition of captivity, loneliness and abandonment, which lacks any vital momentum. It is worth mentioning that Eliot and Montale were, in Patricia M. Gathercole’s words, ‘Two Kindred Spirits’, who display some ‘remarkable similarities in their personal traits and poetry’ (Gathercole 1955, p.170), and who also influenced each other. It is the aim of this research to identify, when appropriate, such influences and similarities between the two poets, as well as the parallels between them and Seamus Heaney.

Eliot was inspired to write his poem by utilising the myth of the Fisher King, a myth that he found in Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* and in George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. The legend tells of a King who was wounded and became impotent, thus causing the sterility of his land. Similarly, the desolation of “The Waste Land” is reflected in the lives of all human beings. Eliot displays the loneliness and lack of hope of individuals in the image of the ‘crowd flow[ing] over London Bridge’ (Eliot 1963, p.55), who are perceived as a multitude of living dead, denuded of any certainties of existence. They are paralleled with the shades from *Inferno* III in the lines: ‘I had not thought death had undone so many’ (Eliot 1963, p.55), and ‘sighs, short and infrequent were exhaled’ (Eliot 1963, p.55), intertextual debts which Eliot acknowledged in his notes. The association with the *Inferno* is emphasized through a line redolent of Dante when meeting one of the various souls: ‘There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying “Stetson!”’ (Eliot 1963, p.55). The soul is a former friend of the speaker, who was fighting with him in the First Punic War, and this allusion draws a parallel between the First Punic and the First World

Wars. The speaker inquires: ‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?’ (Eliot 1963, p.55), echoing the ‘anxiety about the possibility of life [and hope] amid decay and corruption’, that is one of Eliot’s main concerns throughout his poem (Cuda 2005, p.347). Eliot’s allusions are an example of implicit intertextuality; that is, his message ‘is transmitted through the intertextual voice’ (Kornetzki 2011, p.103). Such allusions are difficult to identify because the poet interweaves them into the structure of the poem without any change of format or style (as he does for example with explicit references, which are italicized and thus instantly recognizable). However, Eliot helps the reader by acknowledging these references in the notes of the poem, because he wishes, as he says:

to make the reader who recognized the allusion, know that I meant him  
to recognize it, and know that he would have missed the point if he did  
not recognize it. (Eliot 1965, p.128)

The parallel of his ‘crowd’ with the souls of Dante has a meaningful purpose. In quoting from *Inferno* III, Eliot refers particularly to the souls of the slothful, characterized by a lack of decision and hope. In life they ‘lived / Neither for good nor bad, praise nor blame’ (*Inf.* III, ll.30-1), as they lacked ‘the good, which is the goal of spirits’ (*Inf.* III, l.16), and did not choose between good and evil. Together with the rebellious angels, they are rejected by both Heaven and Hell, and are condemned to walk eternally in circles around a post, while being bitten by wasps. This harsh punishment can only be understood if one considers that freedom, especially freedom of choice, is the fundamental characteristic of the moral structure of the *Divine Comedy*. For Dante, life is a journey, a quest, during which human beings are tested, and during which they are called to choose between good and evil,

to exercise their moral responsibility. By refusing to choose, men reject the greatest gift that God gave them, namely, freedom, and this brings them to a form of human degradation. Similarly, the shades over London Bridge are unwilling to make any possible progress, and continue without end their daily routine characterized by inaction and paralysis. Like Dante, Eliot believes that there is more merit in sinful action than in utter inaction, and as he says in his essay on Baudelaire: 'so far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing; at least, we exist' (Eliot 1932a, p.391).

Eliot's souls are constrained in an existence of interminable office hours, dominated by 'a dead sound on the final stroke of nine' (Eliot 1963, p.55), illustrating the terminal effects of their daily routine and of their solitude. The urban landscape of the 'city of grief' highlights the sense of confinement of these individuals, exemplified in the lines:

I have heard the key  
Turn in the door and turn once only  
We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison. (Eliot 1963, p.69)

The impossibility of escape is paralleled, through an implicit intertextual reference, to Ugolino's imprisonment in the Tower of Hunger. This infernal figure, locked in a tower together with his four sons, and left starve to death, is an image of powerlessness, 'loneliness, [self-enclosure], or even solipsistic consciousness' (Lobb 2013, pp.175-6). The image of the key represents a thematic choice of intertextuality. As Anastasiya Kornetzki states:

intertextual references and authorial utterances [...] are connected first of all thematically. Every author does not simply insert an intertextual

quotation into the text, but carefully chooses what and how to include in the text so that it fulfils the purpose of sustaining the logico-thematic development of the text. (Kornetzki 2011, p.104)

Through the intertextual symbol of the 'key' Eliot displays the inescapability of modern individuals from a hellish state of human isolation. This is also true of the symbol of the wheel that Eliot adopts continually in the poem. The figure of the 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring' (Eliot 1963, p.54), seen by the 'famous clairvoyante' Madam Sosostriis (Eliot 1963, p.54) in "The Burial of the Dead" section, is illustrative of the lack of self-determination of modern individuals. In "The Waste Land", as in the *Inferno*, the circle, or the wheel, represents stasis and lack of purpose. The very structure of the *Inferno* is a circular spiral path through which 'Dante and Virgil must descend [...] in order to see sinners who are literally trapped in circles' (Lecuyer 2009, p.36). Dante's souls are punished for their sins by being condemned to 'rush aimlessly after the aimlessly whirling banner' (Sayers, in Dante 1950, p.89). Eliot's choice of this intertextual illustration is emblematic of the lack of direction, boredom and spiritual apathy he perceives in modern society, feelings that are reflected in their personal relationships as well.<sup>4</sup>

In "The Fire Sermon", Eliot portrays the sexual intercourse between the typist and the clerk as a brute action, lacking in feelings, and performed just for physical pleasure, leaving both individuals bored and empty. Their 'ennui' as Eliot says, borrowing an expression of Baudelaire, is 'a true form of *acedia*, arising from the unsuccessful struggle towards the spiritual life' (Eliot 1932a, p.385). Their

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<sup>4</sup> The metaphor of the wheel and the still point will become synonymous with transcendental vision in Eliot's later poems. In *Four Quartets*, it indicates the poet's view of divine illumination, echoing Dante's vision of God in *Paradiso*.

struggle is thus emotional and spiritual, which creates a state of death-in-life existence. They are empty bodies walking through the city; they ‘were [once] living [but] are now dying’ (Eliot 1963, p.66). As Nidhi Tiwari points out, in:

this state, man appears to be alive but he loses all interest in life. He prefers a passive mode of living where he refuses to participate actively in life. He is unable to surrender his ego in relationships and does not desire to take any pains to archetype anything. Though he expresses the need to die, yet, he lacks the courage to embrace death. Gradually he loses all colours and a state of stagnation begins. (Tiwari 2001, p.70)

Death-in-life and unfulfilled desire are emphasized by Eliot through the intertextual epigraph of the oracle Sibyl of Cumae from *Satyricon* by Petronius. The Sybil asks the god Apollo to grant her eternal life, but she forgets to ask for eternal youth. She becomes increasingly old, wrinkly, and miserable, confined in a cage and wishing to die (Eliot 1963, p.52). While the captivity of the Sybil reinforces the theme of entrapment and paralysis of the poem, her ‘desire [...] to die and get rid of worldly pain’ is also suggestive that ‘death is more attractive than life’ both for her and for the denizens of “The Waste Land” (Tiwari 2001, p.84). This scene recalls another image of the *Inferno* where the Dantean shades express the same wish for death. Before entering Hell proper, Virgil warns the pilgrim that he will see ‘the sorrowing spirits / Of long-past ages mourn their second death’ (*Inf.* I, ll.100-1). The ‘second death’, that of the soul, is invoked by the damned who wish to put an end to their suffering. However, as Virgil explains, the inhabitants of Hell ‘have no longer any hope of death’ (*Inf.* III, l.41). In contrast, for Eliot’s souls, there is at least the certainty that death will end all their pain.

Nevertheless, it is also true that while there is life there is hope, and that is the real message that Eliot seeks to convey in his poem. He achieves this scope

through the insertion of ancient myths and eastern religious beliefs, which were symptomatic of a strong spiritual attitude towards life and the world. Eliot was not alone in believing that the example of the past could be a referent for the present. At the Fourth Annual Human Rights Lecture, in Dublin (9 December 2009), Seamus Heaney was asked to participate in view of his role as one of ‘Ireland’s most distinguished poets and prominent advocates for human rights’ (Heaney 2009b, p.4). The poet read a Dantean passage from *Inferno* XXVI, where Dante champions ‘the privileges and elevated destiny of our species in the words he gives to Ulysses’ (Heaney 2009b, p.7):

“Consider your proud seed; ye are not beasts,  
But are to follow worth and understanding”. (*Inf.* XXVI, ll.114-5)

For Heaney, this passage is ‘representative of the capacity of our species to transcend the boundaries of pettiness and self-interest’ (Heaney 2009b, p.8). These, he says:

are the classic voices, all of them fundamental to the evolution and maintenance of a more equitable and civilized world. And in their wake, right down to the present, the work of writers has been crucial in keeping alive conscience and the spirit of freedom not only within the individual psyche but also in the collective mind of nations and peoples. (Heaney 2009b, pp.7-8)

Heaney, like Eliot, believes that only by keeping alive our literary and historical roots are we able to give meaning to the present. Through the ‘transmigration’ of representations from ancient to modern texts – which Onno Kusters calls ‘*intertextual metempsychosis*’ (from Greek, meaning literally, the transmigration of the soul) (Kusters 2009, p.58) – Eliot also seeks to put order in the chaotic modern world. He contrasts the senselessness of present existence with references to the

quest for the Holy Grail, religious, and fertility myths celebrating the rebirth of nature, emphasizing the theme of redemption through a spiritual quest.

In line with the theory of intertextuality, Eliot's mythical method proposes that the meaning of the poem is produced in part through its relation with the complex network of texts invoked in the reading process. These allusions, which on first reading may seem incoherent and unrelated, are expertly mingled into the poem to provide artistic unity. For example, the recurring allusions to love poems, such as "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell, or to romantic and tragic dramas, such as *Tristan and Isolde* by Richard Wagner, emphasize the poet's search for true feelings and human affection in a world without love. The references to fertility myth, and to the Fisher King legend, represent Eliot's call for restoration and renewal in modern civilization. However, as Eliot pointed out, the 'negative [range of human experience] is the more importunate' in modern poetry (Eliot 1921, p.153). Thus images of degradation, lust, and sterility persistently create a continuous thread of horror and disgust in the poem. Anxiety for love and reproduction is perceived in "A Game of Chess", and in "The Fire Sermon", through the figure of the 'rat' (Eliot 1963, p.60), which, as Alessandro Serpieri points out, is emblematic of 'carnality and female sexuality' (Serpieri 1973, p.57). However, the image evokes terror in the speaker, who sees the rat dragging 'its slimy belly on the bank' – an evocation of pregnancy (Serpieri 1973, p.188). The image of the rat appears continuously in Heaney's early poetry as well, evoking terror. In "An Advancement of Learning" (*Death of a Naturalist*), the poet sees:

a rat  
[which] Slimed out of the water and  
[his] throat sickened so quickly that  
[he] turned down the path in cold sweat. (Heaney 1966, p.18)

The image provokes a reaction of fear in the speaker. However, later he forces himself to face his trepidation, and this becomes significant in the renewal of his sense of self. In Eliot's poem, on the other hand, this fear becomes a nightmare in "What the Thunder Said", where rats are replaced by bats, and the image of the rats' pregnancy is displaced in the 'bats with baby faces' (Eliot 1963, p.68). As Anthony Johnson suggests, a 'reading based on *paradigmatic linkage* between the two passages allows us to detect a serial dynamic reworking of the paradigm of female fertility—first as an insidious threat of reproduction, then as its nightmare visual inscription in the bats "baby faces"' (Johnson 1985, pp.400-1). This sense of threat is developed once again in "A Game of Chess", where fear of reproduction leads the Cockney woman Lil to destroy her fecundity. Her body is exhausted by 'five' pregnancies, and she 'nearly died of young George' (Eliot 1963, p.58). However, the speaker clarifies that her ill, 'antique' (Eliot 1963, p.58), and ugly appearance is caused principally by her induced abortion: 'It's them pills I took, to bring it off', she says (Eliot 1963, p.58). Her consequent sterility is the primal source of her physical decline. Eliot describes a world where, although human beings are sexually fecund, they reject and destroy their fertility, bringing 'sickness, premature ageing [...], fear, poverty, emptiness [...] and finally death' (Muhiadeen 2012, p.267).

These souls are afraid of renewal; however, at the same time, they long for it. In their desire, they recall the inhabitants of Dante's Limbo, in *Inferno* IV, the dwelling-place of Virgil and the Virtuous Pagans. Being born before Christianity, they were never baptized, thus they do not deserve either Hell, Purgatory, or Paradise. Their punishment consists in the awareness that their desire for Heavenly beatitude will be never satisfied. As Virgil proclaims: 'we ever live in hopeless yearning' (*Inf.* IV, l.39). Similarly, the inhabitants of "The Waste Land" yearn for

rebirth, but they prefer to hide in the ‘covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / [their] little life with dried tubers’ (Eliot 1963, p.53). Even ‘April’ is cruel (Eliot 1963, p.53) because the regeneration of the world’s physical state involves a change of the human psychological state. However, the denizens of “The Waste Land” prefer to live in torpor, and to bury their painful memories and unfulfilled desires in winter’s ‘snow’, which is ‘symbolic of ‘the cold unconscious regions of the mind where man buries his desires and memories’ (Tiwari 2001, p.37). Their agony is not physical, but psychological. They experience unhappiness, because, like Virgil, they live in desire without hope (Manganiello 1989, p.109).

### ***‘I Should Have Been a Pair of Ragged Claws’***

The inhabitants of “The Waste Land” mirror the protagonist of the next poem under examination, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1910). Lack of hope, a sense of death, and meaninglessness in life are also the main themes in this poem. Set in the modern society of Boston, it describes how difficult it is for individuals to achieve a state of happiness. Intertextual Dantean lexicon and images are again adopted to portray the sense of a spiritual death, entrapment and paralysis, which Eliot perceived in modern individuals. The epigraph from *Inferno* XXVII depicts a man enclosed in a ‘flame’ which would ‘never’ cease to ‘stir’ (*Inf.* XXVII, l.54); an image of entrapment which sets the mood for the whole poem:

“If I believed my answer  
Given to one who would re-see the world,  
This flame should never stir; but since from hence  
No one has e’er gone back, if I hear true,  
I tell thee without fear of evil fame”. (*Inf.* XXVII, ll.52-6)

The speaker is Guido da Montefeltro, placed in the circle of the false counsellors. He is initially reluctant to reveal his identity to the pilgrim in order to prevent news of his damnation being reported to the world of the living. However, erroneously believing that Dante is one of the damned, he overcomes his hesitation and tells his story. Guido's recounting is arduous and painful, as he has 'to project his voice through the roaring flame in which he is wrapped, and his speech appears garbled and confused' (Manganiello 1989, p.18). As Chris J. Ackerley points out, the 'epigraph frames the action: one trapped in hell, willing to speak only because none will ever hear him' (Ackerley 2007, p.13). Like Guido in fact, Prufrock is also reluctant to expose himself, and to express his own deepest feelings throughout the poem. He is represented as a tormented soul in a modern Hell. This 'infernal model' recalls that in "The Waste Land", and enables Eliot 'to present in poetic form his own views about the pain of [living] of twentieth century man' (Lowe 2004, p.327). Eliot had originally chosen some lines from *Purgatorio* XXVI as the epigraph to the poem:

"Bethink thee of my sorrow." And he turned  
To the refiner's fire, which hid his form. (*Purg.* XXVI, ll.118-9)

This cry is pronounced by Arnaut Daniel, an Occitan *Troubadour* poet of the twelfth century, who Dante describes as the '*miglior fabbro*' (the best craftsman) (*Purg.* XXVI, l.117), a definition that Eliot inserted in "The Waste Land" as a dedication to Ezra Pound. Arnaut is in the circle of the lustful because of 'his legendary madness in love' (McAuley 2012, p.156). Although, like Guido, he is devoured by a flame, Arnaut's agony is accompanied by acceptance and hope, because *Purgatorio*'s cleansing fires will eventually purge his sins, allowing his ascension to Heaven. To read the poem in reference to 'Arnaut Daniel's Purgatorial refining, as opposed to

the punishment of Guido da Montefeltro, [...] provide[s] a different [view] on the nature of Prufrock's suffering' (McDougall, in Lowe 2004, p.327). As Eliot claims in his essay "Dante":

The souls in purgatory suffer because they *wish to suffer*, for purgation [...] and they suffer more actively and keenly, being souls preparing for blessedness, than Virgil suffers in eternal limbo. In their suffering is hope, in the anaesthesia of Virgil is hopelessness; that is the difference. (Eliot 1932a, p.256)

Prufrock, like Guido, and the inhabitants of "The Waste Land", is entrapped in his Hell, without hope of escaping. Guido is a concealed soul, as the only discernible thing about the shade is the flame in which it is enveloped. Likewise, Prufrock's plight is concealed; it is a plight of the spirit, imprisoned in a world where he cannot express his emotions and desires, 'reflecting the repressed and alienated state of the modern individual in a sterile society' (Schneider 1972, p.1104).

As a modernist poem, "Prufrock" 'manifests the breakdown of social norms and cultural strictures, the rejection of history [...] and the growing sense of alienation and isolation in a world wherein daily existence is synonymous with "living death"' (Ellis 2009, p.24). Eliot criticizes an individualistic view of the world that started soon after the industrial revolution, and the urbanization of cities. Societies were becoming self-centred, and the individual was becoming increasingly alone. Prufrock epitomizes the many 'lonely men' (Eliot 1963, p.5) of an increasingly individualistic society. The protagonist starts his speech by urging someone to follow him on his voyage: 'Let us go then you and I' (Eliot 1963, p.3), a phrase which echoes 'the many passages in which Virgil gently urges Dante on in their journey through the *Inferno*' (Bergonzi 1972, p.15). However, Prufrock's companion is only imaginary; he engages in an internal colloquy, which is identified

by Matthew Arnold as one of the ‘potentially debilitating characteristics of modern life’ (Arnold, in Farrell 1988, p.45), a suggestion of the split subjectivity of the conscious and the unconscious which has been recognized as concomitant with modernity and with contemporary urban society. Prufrock’s mental Hell is expressed in a stream of consciousness, through which he laments his physical and intellectual indolence, the missed opportunities in his life, as well as a lack of spiritual growth, and unattained love. In line with the tenets of Modernism, Eliot emphasizes the inner state of mind of the characters. This aspect of modernist poetry is also seen in Dante’s thinking. In fact, a characteristic of the *Divine Comedy* is the exploration and representation of the consciousness of the souls through the means of the soliloquies, which the poet adopts to display the intense emotions, and the psychic recesses, of the characters. Eliot was fascinated by the human portrayal of the medieval poet, and considered him the most ‘universal’ poet of all times. As he says in his essay “What Dante Means to Me”, the ‘*Divine Comedy* expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity’s despair and the beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing’ (Eliot 1969, p.134). Eliot learned from Dante’s craft; however, his technique differs from that of the Italian poet. His representation of the stream of consciousness relies heavily upon the principles of psychological free association, a Freudian term depicting a spontaneous ‘mental process by which one word or image may spontaneously suggest another without any necessary logical connection’ or conscious direction (*OED* 2014).

In Prufrock’s mind, thoughts come and go without any apparent order, reflecting the fragmentary nature of the modern man’s incompleteness and dissatisfaction. Conrad Aiken points out that:

the poem [consists of] a series of sharp, discrete, slightly related perceptions and feelings, dramatically and lyrically presented, and violently juxtaposed (for effect of dissonance), so as to give us the impression of an intensely modern, intensely literary consciousness which perceives itself not to be a unit but a chance correlation or conglomerate of mutually discolorative fragments. (Aiken 1966, p.201)

The fragmentariness of Prufrock's mind is shown through the disjointed images that he combines arbitrarily, creating, as in "The Waste Land", an effect of cinematic montage. The speaker depicts what he sees in terms of his own emotions, merging the external world with his inner experience. As Debadrita Chakraborty points out, 'similar to the emptiness and desolation of the external life, the mind of the individual also suffers a sense of despair and misery' (Chakraborty 2013, p.3). Prufrock, like Dante, finds himself at a 'dead end in the midst of life, [and experiences] a kind of spiritual death' (Harrison 2012, p.36). Since the first few lines, the poem instills in the reader a sense of purposelessness, as the speaker starts his journey through 'half deserted streets' (Eliot 1963, p.3) that 'follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent' (Eliot 1963, p.3), suggesting a sense of wandering around, without end and without aim. The isolation described recalls the desolation of the 'city of grief' that Dante experiences throughout his infernal journey. The 'insidious' 'streets' in Eliot's poem can be paralleled to the tortuous, winding path that Dante takes at the entrance of the *Inferno*, which allegorically symbolizes deviousness and confusion (*Inf.* I, ll.1-3); as opposed to a direct path, symbolic of illumination and safety (Griffiths 2009, p.115). However, while Dante eventually finds the true road to salvation, it is Prufrock's inability to find the 'right way' that contributes to his final perdition.

Prufrock's life circles around his constant 'indecisions' and 'revisions' (Eliot 1963, p.4). He tries to articulate an 'overwhelming question' (Eliot 1963, p.6) that is

so important to him; however, this desire is instantly repressed by the lines ‘Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’ (Eliot 1963, p.3). The external symbol of the fog in the second stanza highlights the endless circularity of Prufrock’s life: from action to inaction. The ‘yellow fog’ (Eliot 1963, p.3), which, like an animal ‘Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening’ (Eliot 1963, p.3), displays the speaker’s desire to act, encapsulated in verbs such as ‘rubs’, ‘Licked’, ‘Lingered’, ‘fall’, ‘Slipped’, ‘sudden leap’, and ‘Curled’ (Eliot 1963, p.3). The suggested movement is however stopped by the final image of the fog falling ‘asleep’ (Eliot 1963, p.3), which leads to the speaker’s consequent procrastination: ‘And indeed there will be time’ (Eliot 1963, p.4). Kristian Smidt claims that ‘in a modern world, no living entity proc[ceeds] by instinct toward an appointed goal but a worn out mechanism with parts stiffly toiling as without destination, it moves in epicyclic paths’ (Smidt 1961, p.141). Like the denizens of “The Waste Land”, and the slothful of *Inferno* III, Prufrock moves in a vicious circle of indecisiveness that paralyzes him. Indecision is depicted as a paralytic state by both Eliot and Dante. Prufrock’s mental paralysis is suggested from the outset of the poem in the simile of the ‘evening’, which is ‘spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table’ (Eliot 1963, p.3). The objectification of the evening as an inert and deadened body sets up a sense of bleakness in the poem, and suggests that, as Donald Childs argues, that ‘which is “spread out” and “etherised upon a table” is not just the evening, but also the self as object’ (Childs 1988, p.689). This representation enunciates the Modernist shift from the Romantics’ subjective perception of the world to a new objective realization of it. Eliot transfers the personae’s emotion to an external object; the paralyzed evening displays ‘the inability of the mind to know what the body feels by rendering it unfeeling’ (Mayer 2011, p.187). This technique springs from Eliot’s theory of

impersonality, and of the 'objective correlative' (which will be explained in detail in the final section of this chapter). What is important in poetry is not the feeling of the poet, but rather the thing being represented.

The theme of paralysis, introduced through the infernal image of the epigraph, and through the figure of the 'etherized patient', runs throughout the poem. Paralysis is one of the main traits of the protagonist, and it is an archetype of Hell. In the *Inferno*, it is the 'state in which the characters reside, [that is], the state of souls after death, a state which they merit because of their betrayal of values' (Warren 1965, p.214). Numerous sinners throughout the *Inferno* are damned to different types of immobility. In Canto XXX, Master Adamo is condemned to stillness by his swollen-belly caused by dropsy, a disease which deforms the parts of the body accumulating liquid in the abdomen. In Canto XXXI, the Giants are condemned 'in the moat around the cliff [to] stand / Up to their middle' (*Inf.* XXXI, ll.25-6). However, Dante's personal experience of paralysis occurs in the last Canto of the *Inferno*, when he and Virgil reach Cocytus, the eternally frozen lake of Hell. This is the dwelling of Satan, 'the freezing of all human conceptions' (Fowlie 1981, p.209), who is himself immobilized in ice up to his waist. Dante becomes 'faint and frozen' (*Inf.* XXXIV, l.21) as he faces Lucifer for the first time. He describes this intense experience with the words: 'I did not die, and yet I was not living' (*Inf.* XXXIV, l.24), highlighting his overwhelming feelings of paralysis as he looks at the horrendous figure. Likewise, Prufrock's inability to act stems from his fear in the face of overwhelming situations. He feels paralyzed or controlled by society and its expectations. He is in constant 'tension between how people perceive him [...] and the realization of the impossibility of his gaining his authentic self' (Griffiths 2009, pp.115-6). The poem's focus on women, suggests that Prufrock's struggle is mainly

towards finding love; clearly, he is afraid of being rejected and misunderstood. In *Knowledge and Experience*, Eliot quotes Bradley's famous affirmation that 'no experience can lie open to inspection from outside' (Eliot 1964, p.203). Anything Prufrock might say to the lady he loves will be answered by, 'That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all' (Eliot 1963, p.6). Prufrock's mission to ask the 'overwhelming question' fails, as its meaning is too deep to be comprehended by people who can only express themselves in 'formulated phrase[s]' (Eliot 1963, p.5), and who are concerned only with the taking of 'toast and tea' (Eliot 1963, p.4).

Eliot depicts a society careless of true human feelings, without any spiritual centre, and only anxious about appearances. Prufrock's physical features are in fact the main source of his anxiety as he approaches the room full of women 'Talking of Michelangelo' (Eliot 1963, p.4). He foreshadows what they will say of him. Surely they will notice that 'his hair is growing thin!', and 'how his arms and legs are thin!' (Eliot 1963, p.4). He had to 'measure [...] out [his] life with coffee spoons' (Eliot 1963, p.4), a line which evokes the sense of apprehension, fear and paralysis in any action he performs. He knows that these people can assign a prejudiced label on him and trap him: 'I have known [the] eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase' (Eliot 1963, p.5). Those eyes stab through Prufrock's persona and fix him to the wall where he metaphorically wriggles as they examine him. Prufrock is aware of the need to 'prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet' (Eliot 1963, p.4); he has to 'murder' his true self from society, and 'create' (Eliot 1963, p.4) a new, artificial one that better fits this environment. As Irving Babbitt states, in this society, human beings are 'cut off from immediate contact with anything abiding and therefore worthy to be called real, and condemned to live in an element of fiction or illusion' (Babbitt 1991, pp.ixxv-ixxvi). Like the inhabitants of "The Waste Land", who prefer to hide under

‘forgetful snow’ rather than facing their reality, Prufrock also retreats within himself, renouncing to the possibility of being his true self. He, like all the other outcasts of this society, is one of the ‘lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows’ (Eliot 1963, p.5), an image that suggests the solitude of the exiled, and of the dispossessed. Like Dante, Prufrock is an outcast, rejected from his own society. Eliot highlights the failure of modern individuals to live fully; they live a ‘buried life’, which is described by Matthew Arnold as a ‘failure to realize our emotional potential – essentially because the business of living supplants the cultivation of the inner life’ (Arnold, in Raine 2006, p.xx).

Prufrock’s insecurity in the face of social expectations is portrayed through his endless questions – ‘Do I dare?’ (Eliot 1963, p.7), or ‘Do I dare / Disturb the universe?’ (Eliot 1963, p.4), and ‘should I then presume? / And how should I begin?’ (Eliot 1963, p.5) – and through the continuous repetitions, suggestive of his unending circling back to the problem because ‘indeed there will be time’ for ‘decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse’ (Eliot 1963, p.4). Prufrock’s indecision is paralleled with the confusion of Hamlet. However, he is conscious that he lacks the courage of the Shakespearean tragic hero. And he admits:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord  
[...]  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool. (Eliot 1963, p.7)

He can only be a secondary character in the play of his life. He declares his unfitness to undertake a journey which he fears will prove irrational. He is not a hero, but, as Dominic Manganiello affirms, he is the ‘modern Hamletic antihero lost through devious weakness rather than through hubris’ (Manganiello 1989, p.20). The absence

of the first personal pronoun 'I' in the second line, suggest that his sense of self or ego is so weak that he cannot even assert himself as a person or as a subject. Prufrock's insecurities and hesitations recall Dante's crisis in *Inferno* II, before undertaking the difficult journey through Hell. The pilgrim's negation echoes that of the Eliotic figure:

"Aeneas I am not, nor am I Paul;  
Nor I, nor other could adjudge me worthy;  
And if I fail to attempt the way, it is  
Because I fear it might prove folly to me". (*Inf.* II, ll.32-5)

However, while Dante overcomes his fears and undertakes the journey, Prufrock is unable to achieve his destination (Manganiello 1989, p.21). Towards the end of the poem, the themes of perdition and utter desperation and fear are portrayed through various images of death and descent. The speaker envisions himself as a decapitated John the Baptist: 'I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter' (Eliot 1963, p.6), and a resurrected Lazarus, who 'come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all' (Eliot 1963, p.6). By portraying himself as one of the dead, Prufrock continues the infernal theme which was introduced through the Dantean epigraph, and recalls the theme of life in death that Eliot also explores in "The Waste Land". Prufrock's fear of growing 'old' (Eliot 1963, p.7) reinforces this statement, as it displays the preoccupation with aging and with mortality, symbolic of the fragility of the human condition. The suggestive image of 'the eternal Footman hold[ing his] coat, and snicker[ing]' (Eliot 1963, p.6), encapsulates his questioning of the worth of his life. In addition, the verb 'snickering' suggests that the protagonist's 'fear of mockery [...] haunts both the sexual and metaphysical levels of the poem, and that fear is his major reason for not beginning a serious metaphysical conversation under any circumstances' (Lobb

2013, p.175). The theme of Hell is continued by Prufrock's desire to live in a subterranean world. He feels that it is 'Time to turn back and descend the stair' (Eliot 1963, p.4); an image that is suggestive of Dante's *descensus* into Hell, though for Prufrock, it is the *descensus* into the Hell of his own mind. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker would like to be deprived of any self-consciousness, expressing his wish to be 'a pair of ragged claws' (Eliot 1963, p.5). Down in the 'silent seas' (Eliot 1963, p.5), in the depth of the abyss seems to be a better environment for him. Prufrock's journey does not lead into a world of love such as Dante's world; he fails to find order among fragmentation and chaos. His descent into the silence of the 'chambers of the sea' (Eliot 1963, p.7) is a descent into his own underworld, and possibly also into the self. His physical crossing, like Dante's journey, symbolizes a spiritual one, namely, the descent into the darkness of his own unconscious; however, while Dante's quest ends into the light of Paradise, Prufrock's journey ends in utter alienation, isolation, and despair.

### ***The Impossibility to Say***

Human disillusioned desires and modern dissatisfaction are further emphasized by Eliot through the depiction of a failure of speech that characterizes the central figures of both "The Waste Land", and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". This failure encapsulates Eliot's preoccupation with the inexpressibility of language. His poetry in fact, constantly borders on the inexpressible, and the ineffable, 'both in terms of what is left unsaid and in terms of what remains inexplicable' (Brook 2002, p.10). The inability of Prufrock to verbally express his feelings to the world: 'It is impossible to say just what I mean' (Eliot 1963, p.6), and the similar difficulty found in "The Waste Land": 'I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living

nor dead' (Eliot 1963, p.54), is the result of the central figures' experience of overwhelming emotions which they cannot express, a silence which mirrors the sense of loss of the human condition. Dante lives a similar experience in *Paradiso*, where he realizes the inadequacy of language to express the ineffable beauty and goodness of God and his blessed souls. Most of what Dante encounters cannot be adequately described in words. It could be stated that both Eliot and Dante explored the limits of poetic language, the inexpressibility *topos*, which proclaims that words can never satisfactorily articulate ultimate meanings.

Some of the first uses of inexpressibility are found in the *Bible*, for example, in *Corinthians 2*, where St. Paul narrates that in his mystical experience he heard 'mysteries which man is not allowed to utter' (*Corinthians 2*, 12, 4). The poets of the Middle Ages, appropriated the mystical nature of the *topos* to depict the inadequateness of words 'to express an effectively unnameable subject [especially] a high subject of praise such as God' (Richards 2010, p.10). In the twentieth century, the inexpressibility *topos* was revived by modernist poets, who started to perceive the inadequateness of language to depict the tragic events of contemporaneity. As Clodagh J. Brook affirms:

the problematic of inexpressibility can be traced back along a vertical axis to uncertainties expressed by Dante in the 1300s, and along a horizontal axis to developments in literary Modernism, where the issue was retheorized with regard to the new social and intellectual climate. (Brook 2002, p.1)

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante's most numerous expressions of inexpressibility are found in the *Paradiso*. In fact, the third canticle is fundamental in order to comprehend 'the first flowering of the inexpressibility *topos* in Italian literature' (Brook 2002, p.2), because it is here that Dante constantly emphasizes the

insufficiency of his words in communicating the sublimity of the divine. In his epistle to Cangrande, Dante describes the linguistically difficult evocation of his mystical experience. Here he echoes St. Paul by stating that ‘he saw certain things which he who descends there from is powerless to relate [as] “the intellect plunges itself to such depth” in its very longing, which is for God, “that the memory cannot follow”’ (*Epistle XIII*, 77). Throughout the third canticle, the pilgrim warns the readers about the challenging task that he is undertaking, and that this journey will embrace realms of experience that are hard to understand, and impossible to represent. In Canto II, the poet states:

Ye who have followed in your fragile boats  
My hardy craft that, singing, sails her course;  
Anxious to listen; turn ye back again  
And seek the safety of the shores ye left;  
If ye should venture the high seas, ye might  
Lose track of me, and so yourselves be lost. (*Par.* II, ll.1-6)

Similarly, in *Paradiso* I, the poet had claimed that his ascent from the Garden of Eden to the celestial realm of God could not be expressed adequately in words. Here the poet uses a neologism, *transumanar*, which Edith Mary Shaw translates: ‘I became within / Myself’ (*Par.* I, ll.65-6), to describe his transhumanization, his going beyond of the bounds of the human, because to express it ‘in words’ it is impossible (*Par.* I, l.69).

Dante uses an intertextual allusion to Glaucus, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* XIII, Fable viii, in order to help the reader grasp the significance of the term. Having witnessed some dead fish resuscitating and jumping into the sea again after eating some grass, the Ovidian protagonist tries the effect of the grass on himself. As soon as he eats it, he becomes delirious, jumps into the water, and is transmuted into a sea

God (*Met.* XIII, viii, ll.917-56). Glaucus, like Dante, stresses the ineffability of his experience: ‘he leaves the earth, is purged by the waters, undergoes an amazing transformation — and is unable to describe it to others’ (Botterill 1988, p.334). In the last Canto of the *Paradiso*, the pilgrim reaches the destination of his journey, and finds himself face to face with God. He is so overwhelmed by what he sees that his speech resembles the babbling of a child. As he says:

My speech of that  
I can remember will be insufficient  
As babble of a sucking child. (*Par.* XXXIII, ll.104-6)

As George Steiner writes: ‘at its furthest reach, where it borders on light, the language of men becomes inarticulate as is that of the infant before he masters words’ (Steiner 1967, p.41). This image refers literally to the inability of the word to tell the experience. In the Italian version of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante refers to the child bathing its mouth to the mother’s breast (an image that is missing in Shaw’s translation). The sweetness of the remembrance of the mother’s womb evokes a sense of surrender, of pleasure, and of regression. It is also a reference to the mother tongue. At the moment in which the poetic language reaches its climax, it goes backwards to the maternal language root, encapsulating Dante’s idea that simplicity is the greatest piece of art.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, modern authors started to use the *topos* of inexpressibility ‘in the context of forces considered to be at the very edge of representation, [including] God and transcendence, but also suffering, evil, and the self’ (Richards 2009, p.1). In fact, although some similarities can be discerned between the original use of inexpressibility and its modern usage, some ‘transformations in both interpretations and use have arisen’ (Brook 2002, p.6). In the post-war climate, modern individuals found themselves in a completely changed

world; a world that they felt had deserted them. In this period, inexpressibility began to be deeply concerned with uncertainty and loss, and these included uncertainties about the future, and about the loss of religious faith (after Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God), both in a societal order, and in a reliable universe (Richards 2009, p.5). In several literary works, writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Eugenio Montale, started to wonder about the limits of language to express something of reality. In her novel, *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf asks, 'how could one express in words these emotions of the body?' (Woolf 2008, p.169). In his novels *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce tried to overcome the limitations of language by creating his own words and sentence patterns. In his collection of poems *The Occasions*, Montale's struggle to describe the absent woman inevitably fails, because as he says:

Lightning in vain  
Can change you into something  
Rich and strange. Your kind was different. (Montale 1998, p.200)

Similarly, Eliot's speakers in both "The Waste Land" and "Prufrock", articulate an analogous failure in language when confronted with overwhelming emotions.

The first features of inexpressibility in "The Waste Land" occur in the 'hyacinth girl' episode, where the protagonist recalls the spring time of 'a year ago' (Eliot 1963, p.54), a time of 'rain' and 'sunlight' (Eliot 1963, p.53), when:

You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;  
They called me the hyacinth girl  
[...] when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet. (Eliot 1963, p.54)

This image counterpoises the general sterility and dryness of the first lines of the poem because, as Philip Sicker suggests, 'with her hair wet and her arms full of

flowers', the hyacinth girl symbolizes sexuality and fecundity (Sicker 1984, p.421). However, more than sexuality, it could be stated that the girl embodies divinity; she represents the light which penetrates the darkness of the land; a radiant experience that the speaker cherishes even among the living dead. Looking into the girl's eyes, the poet sees 'the heart of light' (Eliot 1963, p.54), and for 'an instant [he] *communes* with the Divine' (Blistein 2008, p.xvii). This scene could be compared to Dante's vision of the eternal light of the Trinity in the last Canto of the *Paradiso*. The sense of hope and rejuvenation that the girl inspires in the speaker recalls another scene of the *Comedy*, namely, the reunion of Dante and Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise in *Purgatorio XXXIII*, especially because of the ambiguous boundary between Earth and Heaven, and life and death that the garden represents (Manganiello 1989, p.86). As Manganiello asserts, the 'flowers, the garden [...], the sunlight [...], are images which suggest that in his imagination the poet casts the girl in the role of Dante's Beatrice' (Manganiello 1989, p.86). However, while Dante's meeting with his beloved is the beginning of his elevation towards Heaven, Eliot's memory of love is distorted and destroyed in the wasteland of the present. Looking into the heart of light, the speaker experiences a moment of emotional blockage that overwhelms him: 'I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead' (Eliot 1963, p.54); emotions which originate a frozen 'silence' (Eliot 1963, p.54). Manganiello again points out that 'speechlessness is a reminder that words are incomplete or limited because they cannot hold the object of desire' (Manganiello 1989, p.54). The power of the speaker's emotions is such that he cannot find effective words to describe what he sees, and he is left to 'declare himself silenced by the great force of the inexpressible' (Tebben 2005, p.522).

The failure to speak encapsulates the sense of fear and paralysis intrinsic in every inhabitant of “The Waste Land”. All the characters seem to reach an impasse in language, which renders them unable to speak. From the outset of the poem, the speaker declares: ‘You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images’ (Eliot 1963, p.53). Confronted by the practices of a crumbling culture and images devoid of meaning, individuals lack the capacity to communicate with others, and are unable to guess the meaning of life, which is disorganized and chaotic. There is fear about living being expressed in the lines: ‘I was neither / Living nor dead’ (Eliot 1963, p.54), as this is a direct intertextual translation of Dante’s lines ‘I did not die, and yet I was not living’ (*Inf.* XXXIV, l.24), which the pilgrim pronounces when, reaching the deepest and darkest point of Hell, he sees Lucifer. Here, contrary to the *Paradiso*, it is the horror of the vision that originates a paralysis and weakness of the senses in the protagonist: ‘How I became both faint and frozen’ (*Inf.* XXXIV, l.21). Dante depicts a ‘total breakdown in communication because the source of language, reason, has cut itself off from God, the “good of the intellect”, and cannot therefore function properly’ (Ferrante 1984, p.368). Dante’s inability to express his feelings is followed by a request to the reader: ‘Ask me not, reader, for I cannot write’ (*Inf.* XXXIV, l.22). This passage recalls Prufrock’s demand to his companion: ‘Oh, do not ask, What is it?’ (Eliot 1963, p.3). Similarly, in his collection *Cuttlefish Bones*, Montale tells his reader: ‘Don’t Ask Us for the Word’ (Montale 1998, p.39). All these representations of inexpressibility designate the absence of words in the face of overwhelming experiences, brought about by human isolation and lack of spiritual beliefs, which lead to an ‘emotional substratum of terror and paralysis’ (Schuchard 1999, p.121).

In “The Waste Land”, the lack of spirituality brings individuals to distance themselves from one another and from God, leading to their unhappiness. For this reason, the poem is depicted by Edward Morgan Foster as ‘a poem of horror [...]. And the horror is so intense that the poet has an inhibition and is unable to state it openly’ (Foster 1966, p.94). This horror is hinted at in the section “The Fire Sermon”, where the speaker is overwhelmed by his fears, as it is evident in his elusive, demonic babbling:

Twit twit twit  
Jug jug jug jug jug jug  
So rudely forc’d  
Tereu. (Eliot 1963, p.61)

These lines refer to the myth of Philomela, recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, ‘probably one of the earliest literary renditions of a traumatized mind’ (Codde 2007, p.246). Philomela is brutally raped by her sister’s husband, Tereus, who cuts her tongue to prevent her from telling of this barbarity, and then locks her in a cabin. Through the weaving of a tapestry, she manages to tell the traumatic event to her sister, who, in revenge, murders Tereus’ son, and serves him to the unsuspecting father for dinner. The two sisters then are transformed into birds by a divine intervention – ‘Procne becomes a swallow and Philomela a nightingale, forever doomed to twittering’ (Codde 2007, p.249). Philomela’s story is symbolic of the incapability to testify about painful events. As in Ovid’s tale, Eliot’s characters are verbally silenced with respect to the distressing events that have affected their lives. They try to communicate, but to no avail, and are doomed to babbling:

O O O O (Eliot 1963, p.57)

Ta Ta (Eliot 1963, p.59)

Weialala leia

Wallala leialala (Eliot 1963, p.64)

Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop (Eliot 1963, p.67)

Co co rico co co rico (Eliot 1963, p.68)

As Ronald Schuchard suggests, when ‘the mind is overwhelmed by images of horror and of the sordid, it is prevented from realizing the notion of some infinitely gentle / [...] thing’ (Schuchard 1999, p.121). Indeed, in this unstable and constricting universe, even love and relationships are doomed to fail. In the section “A Game of Chess”, lack of affection and insensitivity are displayed in the reaction of a male individual towards his female counterpart, when she asks him: ‘Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak?’ (Eliot 1963, p.57). His answer, ‘I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones’ (Eliot 1963, p.57), denotes his lack of understanding of her malaise and frustration, and his inability to listen to another’s desires. This crisis of communication and comprehension leads to an existence where feelings, intellects, tongue, judgment, all fail to some degree. Sitting on the dry shores of ‘Margate Sands’, the speaker ‘can connect / Nothing with nothing’ (Eliot 1963, p.64). Interestingly, Heaney has an intertextual parallel of this proclamation in a poem called “Vitruviana”, in *Electric Light*, where he says:

On Sandymount Strand I can connect  
Some bits and pieces. My seaside whirligig.  
The cardinal points. The grey matter of sand  
And sky. And a light that is down to earth  
Beginning to fan out and open up. (Heaney 2001b, p.53)

Heaney counters Eliot’s statement here, displaying some moral confidence that associations and transformations are possible in the world around him. On the contrary, the speaker in Eliot’s poem experiences a breakdown of thought, which

reflects ‘a pervasive modern sense of bafflement and paralysis’ which we recognize in Prufrock as well (Lobb 2013, p.178).

Prufrock feels inadequate, bewildered and uncertain. He lacks confidence in his own judgment, thus he cannot think and speak freely. He casts himself as Lazarus, promising to ‘come back from the dead, / Come back to tell you all’ (Eliot 1963, p.6). However, Prufrock will not ‘tell all’ because, although ‘no visible tongue of flame obstructs [his] speech, he experiences a split between words and their meaning (“It is impossible to say just what I mean”) that leaves him just as tongue-tied as Guido’ (Manganiello 1989, p.19). This is highlighted by Eliot, not only through poetic diction, but also through form. The protagonist sees the streets as having an ‘insidious intent’ (Eliot 1963, p.6), which leads to an ‘overwhelming question...’ (Eliot 1963, p.3). The abrupt break after the mention of the question, suggested by the insertion of the ellipsis, highlights Prufrock’s emotional block, and his ongoing refusal to formulate an answer to his question, which will remain locked in his consciousness forever, a further symbol of connection with Dante’s frozen psychological state in the *Inferno*.

### ***Overcoming Inexpressibility***

Dante and Eliot use inexpressibility to face the limits of words. However, both poets are considered masters of words; thus in their poetry, they work against those limits. In his play *The Elder Statesman*, Eliot proclaims:

It’s strange that words are so inadequate.  
Yet, like the asthmatic struggling for breath,  
so the lover must struggle for words. (Eliot 1969, p.583)

The struggle of the poet is the same. For Eliot the poet has 'to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly ever feel, because they have no words for them' (Eliot, in Lu 1966, p.134). The same can be said of Dante. Indeed, the *Divine Comedy* is 'a constant reminder to the poet, of the obligation to explore', and of the obligation to find words to express 'feelings' (Eliot 1969, p.134). Both poets overcome inexpressibility through the use of graphic imagery and other technical skills, such as symbols, similes, juxtapositions, and sound-play, all cooperating to create a picture that is coherent and complete. Eliot always expressed his admiration for Dante's ability to display his poetic message through the use of 'clear visual images' (Eliot 1932a, p.242). In his reading of the *Inferno*, the poet emphasizes the impressing 'visual imagination' with which Dante depicts Hell (Eliot 1932a, p.243). To convey the savage nature of the dark place, the medieval poet parallels it to the real world's uttermost wilderness: steep hills, desolate woods, roaring falls, empty rivers, and burning sands. As James Applewhite points out, for Dante, figurative language functions, not as a 'form of ornamentation, but rather as a means of expressing the truth, of making [...] intelligible the unintelligible' (Applewhite 1964, p.296). The remarkable nature of his similes arises from Dante's commitment to 'presenting divine and spiritual truths through comparisons with material objects, for [God's] truths are best conveyed to mankind by means of tangible things' (Madison 1983, p.169). This was the central tenet of Eliot's entire career as well; to find lucid 'sensory images', which translate thought into feeling (Eliot 1932a, p.250). He believed that the 'only way of expressing emotion in the form of art', is by finding an:

objective correlative, that is, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that

when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot 1932a, p.145)

In Eliot's poetry, the image produced is the 'objective correlative' of the speakers' feelings. The most important function of imagery is that of increasing the potentiality of language, of producing new significances through affinities, both cultural and intertextual. By overcoming the limits of language, Eliot replicates Dante's ability to convey directly any image or atmosphere in his poems.

In the *Paradiso*, all that Dante cannot verbally convey is expressed through the faculty of vision. The ability to speak is replaced by the ability to see. Jerry C. Nash says that Dante sets out to perform in his poetry the technique of "seeing" and "showing" – as opposed to "telling", that is, as opposed to describing and explaining – the poetic ineffable' (Nash 1991, p.50). In the final Canto of the *Paradiso*, one of the most powerful moments of the *Comedy* occurs, that is when, having risen through the nine spheres of Heaven to the Empyrean, the pilgrim finally sees God. He expresses his feelings at the sight of the vision in the following terms:

From this time forth the vision was beyond  
Our mode of speech, which fails at such a sight;  
And memory fails at such exceeding fullness.  
As he is, who is dreaming sees, and then  
After the dream is fled, the passion felt  
Alone remains; in such sort am I left.  
My vision as if ended, yet distilling.  
Into my heart the sweetness that it brought;  
So does the snow melt softly in the sun;  
So is the sentence of the Sybil lost  
In leaves which lightly fleet before the wind. (*Par.* XXXIII, ll.52-62)

The three similes that Dante offers here express the inexpressible, because the poet uses tangible images of our physical world to illustrate his emotions; he describes the

indescribable and the sublime through comparison with experiences that we can understand. As the dreamer after he awakens, as the 'sun' when melting an imprint in the 'snow', and as weightless 'leaves' which are lifted by the 'wind', so the memory of the pilgrim is swept away, although still retaining the 'sweetness' of that vision. It is almost impossible not to feel the power of these representations because Dante uses real, concrete objects, which arise out of our worldly experience, and in this manner, inexpressibility is obliquely represented through vision. Moreover, inexpressibility is also rejected through sound to describe the magnificence of Heaven. In Canto VI:

Numberless ranks make music of the spheres  
In harmony complete. (*Par.* VI, ll.101-2)

The music in *Paradiso* 'is in complete harmony with its surroundings, and expresses a wonderful mystic joy, a sense of perfect fulfilment and fruition' (*The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 1895, p.447). This surpasses and contradicts the fear of being unable to speak, because the effect of the music on the souls, and on the pilgrim, is a powerful form of communication with the divine. Sound or 'sound-images [...] literally chase away the expected silence of the ineffable' (Tebben 2005, p.527).

In Eliot's poetry, although inexpressibility is linked with failed vision – as it is seen in several passages where the characters' failure to see suggests their lack of spiritual belief – nevertheless, the poet's intertextual reference to Tiresias, who can see all, suggests that only through visionary power the unutterable reality of modernity can be transcended. Tiresias, like Dante, can see into another world, and, as Eliot states, he can see 'the substance of the poem' (Eliot 1963, p.72). In his work, the reader is summoned to do the same. Although, the structural architecture of "The

Waste Land” renders the poem difficult to understand, the series of images and symbols that the poet employs are vehicles ‘for communicating through [...] imaginative experience which cannot easily be conveyed directly’ (Singh 2001, p.326). In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets”, Eliot states:

It appears likely that poets in our civilization [...] must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into its meaning. (Eliot 1932a, p.289)

The poet must be indirect; he must not tell but show; he must oppose the mimetic to the diagetic. In “The Waste Land”, Eliot adopts symbols and juxtapositions to deliver his message. The ‘mind is presented with [various] images and is left to provide a connection between them – not a logical connection, but a connection that emerges from the natural symbolic language of the psyche, much as in a dream’ (Goodman 2007, np). Eliot’s articulation of emotion occurs through the depiction of the landscape rather than through any attributes of the characters. Empty ‘cisterns and exhausted wells’, ‘decayed hole[s]’, ‘bats with baby faces’, which ‘crawled head downward down a blackened wall’ (Eliot 1963, p.68), are objective correlatives of, in Carol Christ’s words, ‘the collapse of civilization as an engulfment within an exhausted and blackened vagina’ (Christ 1990, p.34). The use of these symbolic images enables Eliot to express the obscure and abstract through the physical and the concrete. In addition, these symbols help the poet to assign ‘the authority of enunciation to the landscape’, allowing him to ‘resolve [the] sexual conflict [through] a figuration that places [him] beyond it’ (Christ 1990, p.34). In fact, Eliot proposed that in order:

to be the voice of truth, the poet has to exercise the impersonal expression of his conscience. Although the personal feelings and passions of the poet inspired him and rendered ingenious his imagination, they do not penetrate the representation; what is felt is the belief, the good faith of the poet, the open and impersonal aspect of his anger; and the flow of so much magnificence of images and concepts. (De Sanctis 2013, p.211)

Through clear visual images, Eliot creates a whole set of associated emotions which make the poem universally intelligible. This affirms his belief that ‘genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood’ (Eliot 1932a, p.238), suggesting that poetic language has some form of access to our unconscious which can register pleasure before something is fully rationally comprehended.

In “Prufrock”, Eliot adopts the Dantean technique of the similes to express the feelings of the character. When the protagonist says, ‘It is impossible to say just what I mean! / But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen’ (Eliot 1963, p.6), the reader is able to feel his anxiety – suggested in the word ‘nerves’. In addition, the image of the ‘screen’ elucidates Prufrock’s fear of having his feelings on display as if under a microscope. Such similes make vivid ‘a tendency of [...] inexpressibilities [encouraging] the swift capture of images, as if the sudden grasp of something tangible [...] though the referent be worded, can offer a way out of failing speech to the adequate physical world’ (Watts 1984, p.28). Moreover, like Dante, Eliot uses sound to cast off silence; ‘even when [the poet] fails to create an explicit sight presence, [through] sound he effectively conquers inexpressibility’ (Tebben 2005, p.531). In “Prufrock”, sound replaces speech when the speaker hears ‘voices dying’ (Eliot 1963, p.5), or fading away, and when music starts to play in a ‘farther room’ (Eliot 1963, p.5). In “The Waste Land”, what human voices cannot express is expressed by various sounds, the most poignant of them

being that of the thunder, which, with its promise of rain and redemption, conquers all the inexpressibility, and brings the aridity of the land to an end. However, the significance of this object-sound relationship is not to be interpreted as a total rejection of words on the part of Dante and Eliot. In fact, it could be stated that the 'seen' is a product of the 'telling'. As Terence Cave notes, the 'res-verba opposition' 'should not be taken as a devaluation of words in favor of things, but as a plea for their reunification' (Cave 1979, p.65). The poets' 'words are at once "seeing" and "telling": the two are interrelated, not opposed, and both work against inexpressibility' (Tebben 2005, p.527).

The 'language of poetry was for Dante [as it was for Eliot] the supremely demanding and supremely rewarding form of eloquence' (Iannucci 1997, p.170). What preoccupied him was the attempt to find a form of expression 'that shall be both efficacious and true' (Iannucci 1997, p.170). Dante was aware of the mutability of human speech and of the nature of linguistic change (*Conv.* I, v, 9), and he proposed perfection of the vernacular to achieve excellence in poetic expression. He asserted that the vernacular would be more useful and intelligible to the greater number of people (*Conv.* I, viii-ix), because it was the natural and universal medium in everyday speech (*DVE* I, i, 4). Dante's experiments with language stemmed from his desire to vindicate the vernacular against the dominant presentations of a hegemonic pan-European Latin language. The poet sought simplicity in language, and refused to use artificial and ornate words in his poetry. By refining and stabilizing his own mother tongue, Dante consecrated its use in poetry. The poet knew that 'language can be used to explain and to teach, to control or correct, to encourage towards good, to amuse and comfort, but it can also be used to seduce and deceive, to lead astray and destroy' (Ferrante 1984, p.327). In *Inferno* XXVI, Dante

describes how dangerous flourishing language is through the voice of Ulysses, who ‘gives a heroic tone to his last voyage, but his words betray [...] his people [and show a] persuasive rhetoric in an irresponsible leader’ (Ferrante 1984, p.334):

“Brothers [...], who through a hundred thousand  
Perils are come at last into the West,  
From this so little vigil that is left you  
Of your short life, Oh, take not the great knowledge  
Of the unpeopled world beyond the sun.  
Consider your proud seed; ye are not beasts,  
But are to follow worth and understanding.”  
And with this little speech I pricked them so,  
My comrades, to the road, that scarcely now  
I could have held them back. We turned the poop  
Back to the morning, made our oars as wings  
In a mad flight. (*Inf.* XXVI, ll.109-20)

Ulysses betrays his companions through the lying false rhetoric of his ‘little speech’. He recounts his last voyage in such courageous tones as to mask his own immoral transgression, thus inducing his crew to follow him in his ‘mad flight’. The representation of this episode displays Dante’s willingness to mistrust the rhetoric of such dialectic. His desire to represent the truth in his poetry requires a simple and unpretentious language. In the *Inferno*, the idiom that the poet adopts is clumsy and ugly because it is devoted more to the truth of the experience of this environment than to the decorated verses. Moreover, as Teodolinda Barolini suggests, the mark of a ‘*comedia*’ is its telling of ‘the truth [and] its freedom from stylistic restrictions, [contrary] to Virgil’s text [...], defined precisely in terms of its stylistic restrictions, as an *alta tragedia*, [...] written exclusively in the high style’ (Barolini 1989, p.48).

Eliot’s insatiable search for a poetic language that was able to express the most complex thought with the least amount of words, found in Dante’s ‘common

language' a model which could be emulated. The poet's desire for a new form of poetic expression stemmed from his conviction that the idiom of the previous era was no longer suitable for modernity, and that language had to return to its absolute essence. The project to 'Make' language 'New' (Pound 1934, p.1) consisted in the rejection of the artificiality and over-elaborated style of the Victorian and Romantic ages, and instead, embracing linguistic and representational simplicity and clarity. The flourishing language of the Romantic period was unfit to describe the crude modern reality of the twentieth century. The existing mode of language was 'out of key with its time' (Pound 1968, p.206); it was inadequate to express the horror of World War I, and it was unable to keep up with social, technological, and political changes. Modern poets sought a new poetic form, which included 'simple words', 'natural' 'syntax', and 'language austere rather than adorned' (Eliot 1921, p.100). Poetic language became closer to the language of people, a project which mirrored Dante's espousal of the vernacular in his own time. In 1945, Eliot wrote: 'a poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him'. His 'duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve' (Eliot 1957, p.22). In "Dante", the poet expresses his admiration for the medieval master, who 'not only thought in a way in which every man of his culture in the whole of Europe then thought, but he employed a method which was common and commonly understood throughout Europe' (Eliot 1932a, p.242). Besides allegory (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter), Dante adopted a parallel simple, universal style, 'characterized by its economy and austerity. These values, representing a participation in an order that stands outside the individual' (Ellis 1983, p.236), are clearly apparent in "The Waste Land" and in "Prufrock", where Eliot's dialectic of

alienation and hopelessness encapsulates his desire to give a true portrayal of the displacement of man in modern civilization.

Eliot's intertextual references to Dante's *Inferno* in his poems are evocative of the poet's negative view of the world at the outset of the twentieth century. Particularly, the infernal diction of dark phraseology and imagery that the modern poet appropriates for his own verse, displays the desolate and constricting situation of humanity as he saw it in modern society. His insatiable search for a natural poetic language found in Dante's 'common language', a model to follow. By including the resonances of the local and familiar in his earlier works, Eliot achieves the Modernist ideal of poetry as a testimony of reality. By using Dantean intertextual allusions, he obtains a different perspective in his poetry, which assumes historical significance because it portrays human life across all boundaries of time and place.

### Chapter 3: Montale's Allegorical Language

If Eliot was the voice of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world, in Italy, it was Eugenio Montale who, more than any other poet of the period, gave a complete picture of the previous century. The centrality of Montale's poetic experience could be seen to determine the characteristics of Italian lyric poetry, differentiating it from German and French lyrics, and making it more similar to the English verse. In this, as Romano Luperini states, the binomial Montale-Eliot relationship played a central role (Luperini 2012, p.56). Montale was born in Genoa in 1896. Like Eliot, he lived through the two World Wars, serving as an infantry officer at the front during the First World War. His experience of the advent of Fascism in 1922, and of the Second World War, shaped his poetic production, which is characterized by human despair and desolation, mirroring Eliot's early verse. As Mario Praz pointed out, there is a great similarity between Montale's 'evil of living' and Eliot's 'waste land' (Praz 1948, p.244). Eliot himself, who in 1928, published Montale's poem "Arsenio" in his literary journal, *The Criterion*, declared that he could recognize in the Italian poet's style a 'kindred inspiration' with his own poetry (Eliot, in Betocchi 1994, p.323). This sense of kindred is discernible in both their poetical and their critical writings, and particularly in the ways in which the two poets perceive the importance of literary tradition in their works.

In Montale's "*Stile e Tradizione*" ("Style and Tradition"), an essay that has affinities with Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent", the poet expresses the importance of 'the relationship between the individual's desire for expression and

the body of literature that has preceded him or her' (Montale 1981b, p.763). Montale believes that the reader needs to be familiar with the tradition from which a literary work originates, asserting that the 'romantic assumption that art is born from life rather than from existing art, finds few confirmations in history' (Montale 1972, p.51). The author is aware that 'at all times, poets have spoken to poets' (Montale 1982, p.139), and that knowledge of one's own literary heritage is fundamental in order to understand the present. He turns to a 're-evaluation of tradition in [his] search for an authentic means of giving voice to the existential anxiousness of twentieth-century man' (Galassi, in Montale 1982, p.xxvi). Montale's works contain a network of intertextual references to contemporary Italian and European authors, such as Giacomo Leopardi, Giovanni Pascoli, T. S. Eliot, and Charles Baudelaire. However, at a certain point of his life, he needed to move beyond his 'more recent predecessors in favor of classical writers [and to make] a radical return to the deepest roots of the Italian poetic tradition' (Montale 1981b, p.763). A return 'to his roots meant [...] a return to Dante' (Galassi, in Montale 1982, p.xxi), who was for him 'the fundamental referent of Italian poetic and linguistic tradition, and [...] the representative of an immense heritage of morals and civil values' (Ioli 2002, p.100).

By embracing a Dantean style in his poetry, Montale contributed to the promotion of the change of the Italian lyrics, becoming one of the most influential voices of contemporary poetry. As Rebecca West asserts:

Dante and Montale stand as bookends, so to speak, for the vast library of volumes that make up the Italian lyric tradition of the last seven hundred years. Nor is their pairing merely out of convenience – Dante as the greatest "father of Italian poetry" and Montale as the greatest "voice of modern Italian poetry". (West 2011, p.201)

Dante's innovations and experiments with language: his rejection of the flourishing literary style of his time, the use of a harsher and 'stony' language, the employment of *stilnovism*, and of allegory, were among the stylistic traits that Montale adopted in his own poetry. Like his predecessor, the modern poet needed to break away from 'the legacy of the rich cultural heritage' of his time, and, particularly, from 'the influence of the [...] Italian poet [...] Gabriele D'Annunzio, whose highly embellished style seemed to have become the only legitimate mode of writing available' to poets (Galassi, in Montale 1985, p.xxi). In fact, as William Franke points out, with the beginning of the twentieth century, modern authors had become particularly:

sensitive to the incalculable ways in which language distorts, displaces, and dissembles [reality]. Specifically, poetic language was shown to be misleading if not mendacious in its insistent attempts to represent presences when [reality displayed] not plenitude but absences and inadequacies. (Franke 1994, pp.380-1)

Montale's assimilation of this sense of deficiency of language mirrors Eliot's belief that poetry had to depict something real, 'closer' to human experience, and in order to achieve this, authors had to go back to the use of a more natural language.

In his essay "*Intenzioni (Intervista Immaginaria)*" ("Intentions (Imaginary Interview)"), Montale asserts:

I wanted my words to come closer than those of the other poets I'd read. Closer to what? I seemed to be living under a bell jar, and yet I felt I was close to something essential. A subtle veil, a thread, barely separated me from the definitive *quid*.<sup>5</sup> Absolute expression would have meant breaking that veil, that thread: an explosion, the end of the illusion of the world as representation. But this remained an unreachable goal. And my wish to come close remained musical,

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<sup>5</sup> The inherent nature of something.

instinctive, unprogrammatic. I wanted to wring the neck of the eloquence of our old aulic language, even at the risk of a counter-eloquence. (Montale 1982, p.300)

Dante's strident, vigorous, and stony language became the means through which Montale accomplished his project to come closer to the 'essence of human experience'. The stony style is characteristic of Dante's *Rime Petrose* (*Stony Rhymes*), poems that he wrote for a cruel and harsh lady, named Pietra, which literally means 'stone'. This image is not only an allegory of the hardness of the woman, but also of the petrifying effect that her rigidity has on the man, and of the devastating impact of this tormented love. This passionate love is associated with a rugged expressive style that Dante, in turn, takes from Arnaut Daniel (who also appears in Eliot's poetry), a Provençal poet and scholar of the *trobar clus*, a complex and dark poetry that expresses the anguish of love. Lexically, this poetry is characterized by harsh pluri-consonant rhymes (*spro, etra, ezza, cru*):

*Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro*  
*com'è ne li atti questa bella petra,*  
*la quale ognora impetra*  
*maggior durezza e più natura cruda* (Dante 1955b, pp.54-5)

(I wish my speech to be as harsh  
as this fair stone is in her actions,  
she who is forever growing  
harder and crueller in nature.) (Dante 2008)

This style describes the poet's psychological reactions towards the woman's austerity. In addition, it is highly figurative, with the presence of objects and actions, such as the stone or the neglecting behaviour of the woman, that serve as metaphors to express the poet's mental obsession.

Similarly, in his poetry Montale created a 'rugged and essential' language, characterized by harsh syllables such as *tra, stro, zza, orgo, rto, cci, arsi, stra*, which would 'mirror modern humanity's sense of solitude and the fragmentation of old faiths' (Franke 1994, p.371):

*Spesso il male di vivere ho incontrato:  
era il rivo strozzato che gorgoglia,  
era l'incartocciarsi della Foglia  
riarsa, era il cavallo stramazzaato.* (Montale 1998, p.46)

(Often I've encountered evil:  
it was the stream that chokes and roars,  
the shriveling of the scorched leaf,  
the fallen horse.) (Montale 1998, p.47)

In his first collection of poems, *Cuttlefish Bones*, this style is used to describe the rocky and deserted landscape of the region of Liguria. The harshness of the landscape is mirrored in the language, and becomes allegorical of the poet's existential 'evil of living' (Montale 2004, p.45). Like Dante, Montale adopts images and figures that are endowed with an existential significance. These 'object-emblems, or conceptual images', as Luperini defines them, have a similar function to Eliot's theory of the 'objective correlative', and exemplify the poet's 'visual and sensitive imagination which is always necessary in allegorical representations' (Luperini 2012, p.155). In fact, it could be stated that Montale's intertextual relationship with Dante occurred mostly through the use of allegory. Like Eliot, the Italian poet praises the 'concreteness' of his predecessor's 'imagination' (Montale 1982, p.149). He admires the 'essential humanity of Dante's adventure' in the *Divine Comedy*, and his representation of the 'multiplicity' of human experience, which, through the use of allegory, the poet places 'side to side with the divine experience'

(Montale 1982, p.147). In Montale's words, this is the 'miracle' of Dante's vision (Montale 1982, p.147), specifically his capacity to make the abstract sensible, to make even the immaterial corporeal (Montale 1982, p.146). In his essay "*Dante, Ieri e Oggi*" ("Dante, Yesterday and Today"), Montale approves of Eliot's view that:

the allegorical process creates the necessary condition for the growth of that sensuous, bodily imagination which is peculiar to Dante. In short the metaphorical meanings demand an extremely concrete literal meaning. Thus, from the still-massive figures of the *Inferno* [...] to the more modelled figures of the *Purgatorio*, to the luminous, immaterial apparitions of the *Paradiso*, the evidence of the images may change in its colors and forms but remains forever accessible to our senses. (Montale 1982, p.149)

Thus, for both Montale and Eliot, the allegorical procedure of the *Comedy* creates a prerequisite to increasing the full-bodied, sensitive imagination typical of Dante (Montale 1996, p.2684).

### ***Separation from the Absolute***

Montale's decision to adopt an allegorical mode of representation in his poetry was highly experimental for his time. In fact, while in the Middle Ages the allegorical method was an established practice, in the last centuries, until the Romantic period, authors had always privileged symbol over allegory. Moreover, Benedetto Croce's assertion that allegory is only a device to use in philosophy, and that it 'is almost always external to the poetry' (Croce 1925, p.411) had almost banned the use of this exegetic method in poetry all together. However, as Craig Owens suggests, the 'suppression of allegory from the part of criticism is a remnant of romantic art and was inherited uncritically by modernism' (Owens 1984, p.278). Contemporary

writers recognized the importance of allegory as a trope of representation. Modern allegory however is significantly different from its medieval counterpart, whose purpose was to give a moral lesson, narrated in the form of a tale, which usually had a religious theme. Dante shared with his readers a collection of beliefs, dogmas, and values, which constituted the concrete sense of an objective truth and of a common knowledge (Luperini 2012, p.145). Their belief in God's power was unquestioning. In his letter to Cangrande – where the poet elucidates the meaning of the *Divine Comedy* – Dante presents allegory as the means through which the pilgrim achieves salvation. He explains:

And for the better illustration of this method of exposition we may apply it to the following verses: “When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion.” For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption through Christ is signified; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified. (*Epistle XIII*, 21)

This reference to Israel leaving Egypt refers both to the redemption of Christ and to the intention ‘to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness’ (*Epistle XIII*, 39). For Dante, allegory represents the Christian view of the world, a view that was shared by his contemporaries, and which embraced all aspects of reality.

Conversely, in modern culture, the ‘connective tissue between intellectuals and society’ is missing, and this results in the poet’s ‘existential and social isolation’.

Luperini asserts that Montale's allegory 'expresses an increasingly precarious meaning, an elusive and individual truth' (Luperini 2012, pp.145; 6). In addition, it conveys the 'extreme gnoseologic attempt of a depowered and distressed subject, who is also losing confidence in the analogical correspondences between signifier and signified, and between the self and the world' (Luperini 1992, pp.33-4). In *Cuttlefish Bones*, the poet expresses his conception of the world as a prison. Published in a crucial moment of political history in Italy – Fascism had become the regime, and the poet was witnessing the social turmoil and transformation surrounding the First World War – it is not surprising that the collection portrays the lack of hope, the spiritual uncertainties, and the confusion of modern society. It is centred on the figure of the sea and on the ambiguous relationship of attraction/repulsion that the poet has with it. The title indeed alludes to the skeletons of the marine animals that float on the waves and are dragged ashore as useless debris, an image with which the poet identifies:

Oh, tumbled then  
like the cuttlefish bone by the waves,  
to vanish bit by bit. (Montale 1998, p.143)

The sea for Montale is the symbol of childhood and oblivion; however, he recognizes that his affinity with the natural world has ended. He is now compelled to abandon it and to choose the land as a symbol of maturity and sacrifice, even if the outcome is a painful and alienating condition:

My life is this dry slope,  
a means not an end, a way  
open to runoff from gutters and slow erosion. (Montale 1998, p.71)

Montale's exploration of the theme of time – the time of life – is reduced to a symbol of alienation and evil in a universe that is increasingly separated from human life. While for Dante, allegory holds a religious connotation and indicates a form of temporal preservation or resurrection, there is no escape from temporality in Montale's poetry.

This separation from nature, the reflection on time and the past, and the alienation from life are in line with Walter Benjamin's and Paul De Man's theories on allegory, which propose that allegory envisions history and time in terms of an irreversible loss, and also envisions nature as distant from the significance that would grant security to humanity's connection with the world. While the symbol blends the concrete meaning of the particular object it describes with a more universal and abstract meaning, allegory functions through the precise separation of signified and signifier. Jeffrey N. Peters states that the symbolic:

synthesis of sign and meaning within language [...] doubles a conception of reality in which human beings find themselves fused with the infinite [...]. Allegory [on the other hand] represents humanity's real relation to its temporal plight, its helplessness before the devastation of time and failed communion with nature. Allegory is thus the textual manifestation of a temporal distance in signification that disallows the human subject's illusory fusion with the world. (Peters 2004, pp.132-3)

In De Man's words:

allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognised as a non-self. (De Man 1986, p.207)

The recognition of this gap between self and non-self, and between past and present is explored in Montale's poems "*Fine dell'Infanzia*" ("End of Childhood") and "*Mediterraneo*" ("Mediterranean"). They outline the conflict between the memories of childhood (and the sense of identity that the poet had in his union with the sea), and the reality of adulthood (the land, site of ethics and sacrifice) (Luperini 2012, p.15), that is, the transition from a state of limited awareness, to a broader consciousness of bitterness and fatigue. The poet remembers when the sea:

quickly met each motion of the soul,  
things were dressed in names,  
our world had a center. (Montale 1998, p.85)

Similarly, in "*Mediterraneo*" the poet sings the sea as a 'dreamed-of homeland', and an 'uncorrupted country', the location of origins and natural happiness:

The dreamed-of homeland rose from the flood.  
Out of the uproar came the evidence.  
The exile returned to his uncorrupted country. (Montale 1998, p.71)

However, the end of childhood reveals the illusion: 'The game was up' (Montale 1998, p.87), and puts an end to that age, and to the vital syntony between the individual and nature.

With maturity come the discovery of consciousness and of the evil of living; life must continue on a wasteland, on an unstable 'dry slope' (Montale 1998, p.73) in a disjointed universe. The poet is now reduced to 'shapeless wreckage' (Montale 1998, p.71), just like the cuttlefish, and has been expelled from the natural world of the sea (Luperini 2012, p.17). If we read the letter alone (as Dante says), we read the poet's attachment to the sea and his distress at his separation from it. The allegorical reading, however, uncovers that the end of the relationship with the sea means the

end of the relationship with the absolute, and the failed unification with a cosmic rhythm. This makes clear the limits of the human condition: the inability to live of the poet, against the strength and dark vitality of the sea. As De Man asserts, allegory 'corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny. This unveiling takes place in a subject that has sought refuge against the impact of time in a natural world to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance' (De Man 1986, p.204). This idea contrasts with the Dantean philosophical and theological principle of the unity of the universe and of all human beings, which the poet calls the 'great sea of being' (*Par.* I, l.106), where every creature follows the divine order, and where each nature has a different fate: Angels and men are closer to God (to their principle), while animals remain a bit further away, but all moving in the great sea of being. The allegorical structure of the *Comedy* works in this direction, to display that the human soul's greatest desire is to be united with the infinite, with God. This notion is completely transformed in Montale. His conviction of a universal precariousness, of the absence of immutable rules that govern man and nature, create the poet's distrust towards any spiritual unity or religious faith.

These differing elements in the allegorical structure of the two poets' works demonstrate Montale's craft in appropriating Dante's ideas and symbols and using them for his own artistic purpose. To Dante's intertextual allusions Montale performs what Benjamin calls a 'substitution'. The German critic affirms that, when appropriating an image, 'the artist always adds another meaning to the original one [...]. The allegorist is not interested in recuperating the original meaning, but only in creating a new one. During this process of substitution, the original image is deprived of meaning; the melancholic gaze of the allegorist causes life to flow out of it' (Benjamin 1998, p.183). The image is unconditionally in his power, and he is able

to apply to it any new signification which he desires. Dante's illustration of a universal harmony, in Montale's writing becomes a lack of unity, as his agnostic and pessimistic view of the world rejects any reconciliation of the human with the divine. His allegory displays his 'metaphysical despair' and explores 'the absurdity of the world' (Chevalier 1997, p.572). As György Lukács suggests, Montale's allegory could be explained as that 'aesthetic genre which leads itself par excellence to a description of man's alienation from objective reality' (Lukács 2006, p.407). For Montale, man is alone, alienated and dehumanized, living a life of obstacles, suffering and loss, what he calls: 'the evil of living', an emblem of decay of modern civilization.

### ***Among Ruins***

Montale's metaphysical anguish and the irrationality of the world are not only explored through the seascapes of his native Liguria, but also and mostly through its arid landscapes. In "*Merigiare Pallido e Assorto*" ("Sit the Noon out, Pale and Lost in Thought"), the poet introduces the theme of the whole collection, that is, the scorching summer which renders everything arid and dry. The aridity of nature – 'thorns and brambles', 'snakes', and 'crack earth' (Montale 1998, p.41) – is an allegory for the sense of barrenness of 'life and its torment' (Montale 1998, p.41), the 'interior state' (Galassi, in Montale 1998, p.422) of an existential condition of captivity, loneliness and abandonment, and the absence of any vital momentum. Several Dantean intertextual borrowings become 'objective correlatives' to which the poet applies a 'substitution', in order to give his own allegorical signification to his poems. Intertextual appropriations are important for an allegorical reading. De Man considers the notion of intertextuality extremely important in the use of

allegory, because it implies 'a process of signification mediated through a diachronic, or temporal, relation between texts' (De Man 1979, p.65). Similarly, for Benjamin, the 'intertextual approach to art is typical of allegory, as practiced by Baroque writers, for whom [...] the legacy of antiquity constitutes, item for item, the elements from which the new whole is mixed. Or rather constructed' (Benjamin 1998, p.178). The modern, in Benjamin's and De Man's words, is constructed on the elements of the old. The 'legacy of antiquity' in Montale's poetry is visible in his appropriations of Dante's intertextual allusions. The poet's 'diachronic' correlation with the ancient master's texts has occurred as he needed a 'process of signification' for his verse; thus Dante became the 'centre of resonance' (Montale 1982, p.5) which allowed him to portray the modern world through the lens of his medieval forebear. He draws on Dante's exegetical method of allegory, in order to describe the spiritual through the physical. In "*Meriggiare*", aridity and ruins become emblems of the human condition, the lack of religious beliefs, and are indices of a process of unarresting disintegration.

The poem begins with a description of the aridity of the Ligurian landscape:

Sit the noon out, pale and lost in thought  
beside a blistering garden wall,  
hear, among the thorns and brambles,  
snakes rustle, blackbirds catcall. (Montale 1998, p.41)

The image of the 'thorns and brambles' ('*pruni sterpi*'), in the first stanza, derives from *Inferno* XIII, where Dante describes the horrid condition of the men-plants in the forest of suicides: 'And broke a twig from a great *briar*' (*pruno*) (*Inf.* XIII, 1.29), and 'We once were men, and now are turned to *trees*' (*sterpi*) (*Inf.* XIII, 1.33) [*my italics*]. These words are pronounced by Pier delle Vigne, who explains to Dante that since they deprived themselves of their lives, of the unity of soul and body, the souls

in this part of Hell are condemned by divine justice to suffer an unnatural unity (man and plant together). Dante had borrowed this image from 'Virgil's *Aeneid* III (1.26), where Aeneas plugs a branch from a tree, and suddenly hears the voice of Polydorus (who, after his death, had been transformed into a plant), coming out of it. However, the Dantean episode has an intensity that is absent in the Virgilian scene. The mysterious atmosphere and the cries of the damned in *Inferno* XIII instil contrasting feelings in the poet: sentiments of loss and uncertainty as in the presence of worlds and realities that are antithetical to what we are accustomed. Montale's intertextual appropriation of this scene is symbolic of the inert and almost vegetable state to which modern individuals are condemned, and becomes an allegory for the sense of confusion and insecurity of contemporary society.

This is emphasized by the image of the 'red ants' files / now breaking up, now meeting / on top of little piles' (Montale 1998, p.41) that the poet watches, and which refers to *Purgatorio* XXVI. In that Canto, Dante depicts the encounter between two arrays of lustful souls, who he describes as 'tiny troops of dusky ants [which] / Salute with little feelers, as they meet' (*Purg.* XXVI, ll.27-8). However, in Dante's scene, there is a joyful atmosphere where sentiments of affection and tenderness are expressed by the poet, who follows affectionately the movement of the ants in their interchange of greetings. The medieval poet highlights the humble grace of the small insects, which are compared to the lustful souls, rendered meek and modest by repentance. In line with Benjamin's notion of 'substitution', in a process of deferral of signification, Montale takes this image and adds another meaning to it. Dante's 'ants' in "*Meriggiare*" become allegorical of the absurdity of the human condition; their tireless, chaotic and senseless work 'on top of little piles' (Montale 1998, p.41) in such unfavourable conditions seems to be mirroring the

monotonous daily 'torment' (Montale 1998, p.41), the futile yearning of man in society, where there is no possibility of a miraculous salvation. As the poet wrote in a letter to Paola Nicoli (1924): 'It's a little difficult for me to manage to work at the moment; my kind is all *a waiting for the miracle*, and miracles in these times without religion are rather rarely seen' (Montale 1980, p.862). These words encapsulate the essence of Montale's poetics. They express the sense of waiting, the search for a crack in the 'wall' (Montale 1998, p.41) of existence that would allow for the capturing of fragments of truth. Miracles are linked to unexpected and unimaginable events that happen in ordinary life, at any time, and they stem from insignificant things: 'the miraculous may always be lying in wait at our doorstep', says the poet, 'and our very existence is a miracle' (Montale 1982, p.141). Although it is a rare occurrence, Montale believes that sometimes miracles may happen (though, they are secular miracles), and that some shreds of reality may flash out unexpectedly, as in "*Merigiare*", in which the 'throb of sea scales' that the poet observes 'between branches' (Montale 1998, p.41) objectively represents the metaphysical essence of things. Nevertheless, they are 'far-off' (Montale 1998, p.41), and lie beyond the obstacle. As Montale says in another poem ("*Gloria del Disteso Mezzogiorno*" – "Glory of Expanded Noon"), 'over the [...] wall is the finest hour' (Montale 1998, p.53), but the wall has 'broken bottle shards imbedded in the top' (Montale 1998, p.41) that make escape impossible, highlighting the limitation and the contingency of the human condition.

The idea of the miracle which is out of the ordinary, recalls the later poetry of Seamus Heaney, who also believed that the ordinary could open a passage to the extraordinary, as he displays in his collection of poems *Seeing Things*. The Irish poet associates the most ordinary of experiences with the epiphanic and the ineffable.

Like Montale's poems, Heaney's verses continuously describe thresholds and boundaries that the poet tries to transcend in an attempt to see their particularities in a new light. However, while Heaney succeeds in his effort to offer a resistance to 'the void [and] the absurd' (Fumagalli 2001, p.237), transcending the 'ordinary' and the 'concrete', and replacing the 'old self' by a new poetic identity, eager to trust the power of poetry to transfigure vision (Guite 2010, p.201), Montale's glimpses of miracles do not last, and the poet remains bound to Earth in its fractured reality. In "*I Limoni*" ("The Lemons"), the solarly of the Mediterranean fruit seems to give a moment of enlightenment to the poet. The speaker moves among ordinary plants, in contrast to the 'poets laureate' of the previous period, who sang only of 'plants / with rare names: boxwood, privet and acanthus' (Montale 1998, p.9). Montale's humble poetry explores a more common reality, consisting of a poor and rough landscape: the streets that 'run along' 'grassy / ditches', the 'paths' which cross the 'tufted canes' and enter in the 'orchards' (Montale 1998, p.9). In this simple and rugged reality, the 'fragrance of the lemons' is able to donate, even to the 'poor' (Montale 1998, p.9), a little peace and happiness ('our share of riches'); the earthly smell gives the heart 'a restless sweetness' (Montale 1998, p.9), that takes away for a moment from the passions of the troubled world. It is here, among poverty, war and sadness, that the 'yellow of the lemons' (Montale 1998, p.11) can have a meaning, and can bring an 'epiphanic enlightenment' to the poet; a 'symbolic solarly that illuminates [...] his own being' (Franke 1994, p.379). However, 'the illusion fails' (Montale 1998, p.11), and Montale's desire to 'uncover an error in Nature, / the still point of the world, the link that won't hold' (Montale 1998, p.9), remains just an ideal. 'Montale's epiphany [is] only a negative vision' (Franke 1994, p.380); he cannot transcend, as Dante and Heaney do, the ordinary and the concrete, nor can he trust

the power of poetry to transfigure vision. While for Dante, poetry can lead towards a higher truth, Montale asserts 'the impotence of poetry to indicate a direction towards that truth. For this [...] his message can only be negative' (Luperini 2012, p.17).

The impossibility of establishing a symbolic relationship of correspondence with reality makes it difficult to lyrically sing that reality. The modern poet can no longer reveal any full sense of truth, but only describe the fragmentation of a desolate world (Luperini 2012, p.17). In "*Non Chiederci la Parola*" ("Don't Ask us for the Word"), the poet tells the reader:

Don't ask us for the phrase that can open worlds,  
just a few gnarled syllables, dry like a branch.  
This, today, is all that we can tell you:  
what we are *not*, what we do *not* want. (Montale 1998, p.39)

The presence of the negatives creates a poetic of negation (Ott 2006, p.87). For Montale, words are not loaded with the meaning of human experience, as his contemporary poet Giuseppe Ungaretti believed. In his poem "*Mattina*" ("Morning"), Ungaretti had described in two words: '*M'illumino d'immenso*' ('I'm enlightened with immensity') (Ungaretti 2000) how, in the light of the morning sky, he was able to see and grasp the immensity of the infinite. On the contrary, in the morning, Montale can only see the 'void'; in "*Forse un Mattino*" ("Maybe one Morning"), the poet affirms:

Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glassy air,  
I'll turn, and see the miracle occur:  
nothing at my back, the void. (Montale 1998, p.55)

As Franke suggests, 'the miraculous ("*il miracolo*") is identified outright with the null and void' in Montale's writing. His vision is 'an antimetaphysical *nulla*' (Franke 1994, p.381). Montale's poetry cannot provide 'the phrase that can open worlds', but

rather 'just a few gnarled syllables, dry like a branch' (Montale 1998, p.39). Language can only give 'a twisted view of things, and while the image of the branch suggests that meanings do indeed ramify, its dryness negates functional organicity, transmuting life to an ossified structure' (Franke 1994, p.382).

This concept is also important in order to understand Montale's choice of allegory in his work. Allegory avoids depictions of 'life, beauty, harmony' (Kaup 2012, ch.1) that are prominent for example in a more symbolic poetry, because:

organicism is auratic, uncritical, illusive, deceptive. Only in a discarded, dismembered, degraded, ruined state does the real, material world enter allegory, for it is only when things have become broken or worthless, isolated from the organic lifeworld where they thrive, that the authentic structure of this lifeworld becomes visible for analysis.  
(Kaup 2012, ch.1)

The presence of lifeless, dry, ossified objects in Montale's poetry is representative of modern self-consciousness, and contributes to the allegorical demystification of the world, of the relationship between artist and reality, and of artist and landscape that appears as fragment and ruin (Benjamin 1998, p.178). As Benjamin asserts, ruins are an important *topos* in modern allegory, as they are an emblem of the human condition and of the lack of religious beliefs, and are indices of a process of irresistible decay. Montale has a 'disenchanted look at fragmentary and disintegrated reality [which, in his verse, becomes] 'inert, sick, decomposed [...]; the vital fullness of nature dies continually into deafness, indifference, and menacing decay, and [everything] necessarily becomes *arsura* and *squallore*' (Mengaldo 1980, pp.82-5). Fragmentary, incomplete objects, insurmountable 'peeling wall[s]', 'dusty field' (Montale 1998, p.39), 'reliquar[ies]' (Montale 1998, p.5), 'ruined gate[s]' (Montale 1998, p.347), all function as a reminder of the precariousness of any human

endeavour. They are emblems of what Benjamin calls, 'the *facies hippocratica* of history', a 'petrified, primordial landscape' (Benjamin 1998, p.166), a vision of the world that mirrors that of Eliot, who in "The Waste Land" described the devastation of the war as the 'fragments I have shored against my ruins' (Eliot 1963, p.69). Among ruins, man's destiny is to become consumption and ash, as Montale envisions himself: 'burning, nothing else, is what I mean' (Montale 1998, p.79).

In the poem "Arsenio", indeed the very title denotes aridity and burning. The name could have its lexical roots in *Inferno* XIII and XIV, where there is a prominence of words denoting drought – 'arida' ('dry') (*Inf.* XIV, 1.13), 'arsura' ('flames') (*Inf.* XIV, 1.37), 'arsiccia' ('hot') (*Inf.* XIV, 1.73), 'arso' ('burnt') (*Inf.* XIII, 1.36). These terms are all prominently present, not only in "Arsenio", but also in Montale's other poems, and are symbolic of the aridity of the protagonist's existence (Ioli 2002, p.215). A series of Dantean images renders the theme of hopelessness of the poem:

Lost thus among wicker and waterlogged  
matting, reed that drags your roots behind you,  
slimy, never sleek, you shake with life  
and reach out to an emptiness  
that echoes muffled cries, the crest  
of the old wave that rolls you  
swallows you again. (Montale 1998, p.113)

The vegetal image of the 'reed' represents the recurrent theme in Montale's poetry of the human plant, present in the wood of the suicides in *Inferno* XIII, and which indicates the unnatural rupture of the 'link that binds man to himself', and man to nature (Sapegno, in Dante 1968, p.143). The 'old wave' is a reference to the 'ageless foam' of the Stygian of *Inferno* IX (1.61) in the dwelling place of the slothful, a condition through which Eliot had represented the inhabitants of "The Waste Land".

In fact, like Eliot, Montale perceived that modern individuals were 'expung[ing] every trace of personal feeling from themselves and [were living] like objects' (Montale 1982, pp.34-5). This idea is affirmed through the image of the 'gelid gathering of the dead' (Montale 1998, p.113), the traitors condemned for eternity to an incomplete life in the frost of Cocytus in *Inferno XXXII*.

Montale describes the sudden break of a summer storm, which becomes a descent into a hellish city, a modern Dite, place of inner non-identity and loss. Arsenio is encouraged to descend towards the sea: 'Down [...] you come', 'Descend to the horizon' (Montale 1998, p.111), 'go down into the falling dark' (Montale 1998, p.113). Rebecca West suggests that this 'descent is clearly not simply physical but the same metaphysical plunge into self urged by [...] Dante' (West 1981, p.173). The external journey is allegorical of an internal one; thus, the pilgrim's descent into Hell is also a plunge into the self, and into the potential for evil that can exist in all human beings. Dante's allegorical level of meaning has to be read alongside the literal and figural levels of meaning. Similarly, Montale's adoption of this exegetical method, allows us to interpret his poems through this double reading. In "Arsenio", to 'descend' indicates a movement that is 'physical', but it is also a 'spiritual' (West 1981, p.173) search for a moment 'out of time' (Montale 1998, p.75), what Dante calls the 'divine' (*Par. XXXII*, 1.32).

In the summer storm, which causes the other villagers to seek shelter in the hotels, Arsenio sees a passage, the possibility of escape; it is 'the sign of another orbit' (Montale 1998, p.111), represented by a woman, Arletta, who is endowed with a transcendental meaning, and becomes an allegory of salvation from the inexorable laws of time and nature. Only by following this sign, would it be possible to break 'the repetitious, / interwoven hours' of existence (Montale 1998, p.111). The woman

calls him; however, he cannot reach her as she is in another dimension, and he remains frozen among the 'gelid gathering of the dead' on Earth, impotent and unable to escape the empirical confines of reality.

In "*Incontro*" ("Encounter"), the figure of Arletta returns and the poet seeks to retain the memory of his beloved:

My sadness, don't desert me  
on this street  
lashed by the offshore wind's  
hot eddies till it dies; beloved  
sadness in the gust that fades. (Montale 1998, p.137)

In a stilnovistic fashion, the woman brings at the same time happiness and sadness to him. Similarly, Cavalcanti, Dante, and Guinizzelli (the creators of the *Stil Novo*) depicted their ladies as those who 'brought peace and torment to their worshipers' (Cambon 1967, p.473). Against the backdrop of a city frozen in a deadly fixedness, the poet imagines the miraculous encounter with a plant that turns between his fingers in the hair of the woman. Montale here inverts the myth of Daphne, from Greek mythology, the woman who was transformed into a laurel tree:

in the glancing light a movement leads me  
to a sad bough craning from a jar  
by a tavern door.  
I reach for it, and feel  
another life becoming mine, encumbered  
with a form that was taken from me;  
and it's hair, not leaves, that winds  
round my fingers like rings. (Montale 1998, p.139)

Although the contact lasts only for a moment, the woman remains the custodian of moral strength, with whom the poet pleads in order to descend 'without cowardice' 'in the brown air, ahead of the press / of the living' (Montale 1998, p.139). As

Angelo Marchese puts it, she becomes 'the unknowing Beatrice of the purgatorial and salvific journey of the poet, here envisioned as a Dantesque travelling through a purgatorial life-in-death' (Marchese, in Montale 1991, p.67).

However, unlike Beatrice, the Montalian muse does not represent a religious salvation. In modern allegory, redemption disappears, as modern 'time is secularized, occurring without transcendence' (Buci-Glucksmann 1987, p.228). While in the *Comedy*, there is a unity of vision which mirrors a coherent conception of God's universal order that was fundamental in the Middle Ages; in the modern world on the contrary, such unity has become impossible, as the historical conditions have changed. Modernity is characterized by fragmentation and pluralism, and individuals cannot find a global truth or meaning beyond reality. This view of the world, and the agnostic nature of the poet, do not allow for a complete Dantean figuration of the woman as Christianity. Allegory, in Montale's poetry, can only stand 'for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century' (Benjamin, in Osborne 2005, p.87). The poet has to look 'for a specific, not a general, truth' (Montale 1982, p.299), as he cannot avail himself of a total mythic system which might make the woman a simple symbol, rather than a mutable function, in his poetry (Huffman 1983, p.78).

### ***Allegory: From Clizia to "The Eel"***

In the second collection under examination, *The Occasions*, the woman has both a spiritual and a secular role. It is dedicated to Irma Brandeis, the Clizia of the poems, who Montale met in 1933. Irma was an American of Austrian origins, she was Jewish but converted to Christianity. In that year, she had travelled to Florence to study the Fathers of the Church and Dante, as she had to prepare her thesis on this

topic (Gioanola 1999, p.6). Their meeting is decisive for Montale. In those years, the poet was living with Drusilla Tanzi. She was older than him and had a strong personality, and, some critics suggest that, to some extent, Montale was somewhat dominated by this woman (Gioanola 1999, p.6). For the poet, his meeting with Clizia starts a new season, not just at a sentimental level, but also at an intellectual one. The woman becomes a fundamental reference point for his poetry, as she takes different allegorical aspects: humanistic, amorous, unorthodox Christian, and vitalistic-immanentistic (Luperini 2012, p.156).

In the opening poem of the collection, "*Il Balcone*" ("The Balcony"), the woman is the one who can help the poet to find poetic inspiration; thus, she assumes a humanistic allegorical function. The speaker remembers when:

It seemed simple to make nothing from  
the space that had opened for me,  
to forge uncertain tedium  
from your sure fire. (Montale 1998, p.149)

He looks at the world outside from a window, but his imagination has no longer the power to go beyond mere reality. Before, it was simple for him to turn an 'open' 'space' into 'nothing'; to be able to cancel reality only with his thought, as in the poem "*Quasi una Fantasia*" ("Like a Fantasia"), where the poet looked at a city from the window and cancelled it with the power of his imagination: 'Now I'll show myself / and subjugate high houses, empty avenues' (Montale 1998, p.25). However, today it is difficult to accept a reality where everything is 'uncertain tedium' (Montale 1998, p.149), and where the syntony between humanity and the natural world is broken:

Now to that emptiness I bring  
my every belated motive.  
The sheer void stirs with the anguish

of awaiting you while I live. (Montale 1998, p.149)

The only possibility is the waiting for an epiphanic miracle, represented by the woman, the 'you' of the poem. Christine Ott states that the waiting for the 'you' means waiting for inspiration (Ott 2006, p.145). In fact, the woman is endowed with an insight for inner life and its subtle manifestations from which the poet is banned:

The life that glimmers is  
the one only you see.  
You lean toward it  
from this unlighted window. (Montale 1998, p.149)

Only the woman can see the 'glimmers' released from life (Montale 1998, p.149). In lyrical terms, she represents a particular poetic perception, able to draw glimpses from the darkness of the unconscious, represented by the 'unlighted window' (Ott 2006, p.144).

Clizia's vision and her eyes are an important theme in Montale's poetic that he has taken from Dante. The shining eyes are the principal characteristic of Beatrice, and assume the function of theological mirror of the truth, through which the pilgrim can find religious salvation. Clizia's eyes, on the other hand, are the lights through which shines the significance of a new religion: that of the supreme value of poetry and culture. As Andrew J. Auge declared, the 'idea that poetry might constitute a surrogate for religious faith is a familiar tenet of modern secularity' (Auge 2013, p.16). In his argument, Auge mentions Matthew Arnold's essay, "Study of Poetry" (1880), where the Victorian poet and critic had affirmed that the:

future of poetry is immense, because in poetry [...] our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to

dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry. (Arnold, in Auge 2013, p.16)

In a world in which there are increasingly fewer certainties about religion and the divine, poetry can constitute a safety net. Auge also cites Eliot and the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, by saying that, in 'contrast to Eliot, who insists that nothing can substitute for religious faith, Charles Taylor credits Arnold with establishing poetry's role as a viable option for those moderns inhabiting the borderland between belief and unbelief' (Auge 2013, p.16). Montale's poetry, like modern Irish poetry, 'operates in the absence of any prevailing framework of transcendental truths, [and thus] its epiphanies are always filtered through the poet's subjectivity, always "indexed to a personal vision"' (Auge 2013, p.16).

In Montale's "*Nuove Stanze*" ("New Stanzas"), the poet's reflection on the function of poetry is counterpoised with the insignificance of the times. Clizia and her 'eyes of steel' (Montale 1998, p.253) are allegorical of the force of poetry to oppose the barbarism of Fascism. The woman appears as a powerful figure, able to dominate history. To the threat of the war outside is opposed her aesthetic intelligence, the strength of poetry and the value of art. In the room, Clizia performs 'her salvific ritual while outside approaches the looming threat of the war' (Luperini 2012, p.114). She engages in the game of chess, while smoking a cigarette. The game of chess symbolizes the war, with the 'pawns' crushed on the chessboard of history (Montale 1998, p.253). It echoes Eliot's "Game of Chess" in "The Waste Land", where, on the chessboard, the poet shows the loveless existence of people in postwar British society. In Montale, the chessboard of the war inside becomes that of

the war on the battlefields outside, when a window suddenly opens. The 'smoke stirs. Below, another swarm / is on the move'; this 'pandemonium / of men' (Montale 1998, p.253) is 'more menacing than the bishops and the horses that face one another on the "squares"' (Luperini 2012, p.27). The boundary between inside and outside is disintegrated (Luperini 2012, p.27), and the poet tells Clizia:

I doubted you yourself  
knew the game unfolding on the squares  
that's now become a storm outside your door. (Montale 1998,  
p.253)

He has a moment of doubt about the salvific power of the woman, symbolized by the smoke, which is 'stirred' by the opening of the window. Allegorically, the image represents the poet's doubts about the salvific power of poetry in society, because, as he says in his Nobel lecture, "Is Poetry still Possible?" (1975), poetry 'has entered a crisis that is closely bound up with the human condition' (Montale 1982, p.58). However, he realizes that, with her 'lightning' 'eyes' (Montale 1998, p.253), the woman is able to contrast the 'burning mirror' of the war, which 'blinds' the 'pawns' (Montale 1998, p.253), the common people, who are 'prisoners of a precise historical reality' (Luperini 2012, p.139). Poetry can survive even in the most horrifying conditions, and perhaps can contribute to create 'a future society that is better than the present' (Montale 1982, p.311). Montale, like several other intellectuals who adhered in those years to the journal *Solaria*,<sup>6</sup> advocated the primacy of culture and intelligence over political events. He championed the autonomy of culture from politics, and the universality of art and science, condemning the violence of a

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<sup>6</sup> *Solaria* was a literary journal founded in Florence in 1926 by Alberto Carocci, to which adhered writers such as Eugenio Montale, Leone Ginzburg, Aldo Garosci, William Alberti, Giacomo Debenedetti, Sergio Solmi, and several others. They sought to realize an autonomous literary society outside of political compromises and declared a commitment to moral denunciations of their contemporary political reality, namely, Fascism.

totalitarian State in the name of high moral values and democratic liberal principles. Just as Dante had done before him in another time and place, Montale sought that his poetry should be primarily a tool and a testimony to the investigation of the existential condition of man, torn apart by historical events.

Angelo Jacomazzi sees another allegory in the image of the 'burning mirror' of the poem, which is an intertextual allusion to the eye as mirror in *Purgatorio* XXXI. As he writes: 'we are in the presence of the allegorical theme of the eye as a mirror in which the external and phenomenal object is reflected, changed, and revealed, the same as the eyes of Beatrice' (Jacomuzzi 1978, p.138). In that Canto, Dante the pilgrim is in the Earthly Paradise, and the nymphs conduct him in front of the Griffin. In order to see the divine figure, Dante has to look in Beatrice's eyes, as he has not yet acquired spiritual functions. As he does it, he sees:

As in a glass the sun; so in those eyes  
The twofold being shone with varying form;  
Think, reader, how I marvelled, when the thing  
So changeless in itself, appeared to change  
Within its mirror. (*Purg.* XXXI, ll.110-4)

Just as the sun is reflected in a mirror, so the Griffin is reflected in the eyes of Beatrice, now with his human nature, and now with his divine one. Dante can see the divinity only indirectly, through the eyes of Beatrice, which are like a mirror in which shines the image of Christ-Griffin. Similarly, in "*Nuove Stanze*", Clizia's eyes are the only elements that can reflect the light of the 'great beyond' of values that poetry can offer (Montale 1998, p.381). They will serve as mirrors for 'the man who' stands by her, and will be able to counter the absurdity of the war.

Montale's reflections on the role of poetry during war-time continue in the final collection under examination, *The Storm and Other Things*. Here, the dramatic

historical actuality appears through a violent storm, which is an allegory of the Second World War and the barbarism of Fascism and Nazism, which destroy the values of Western civilization. Montale strongly affirms his opposition to a poetry too directly political. As he asserted in *Sulla Poesia (On Poetry)*, poetry is not 'political engagement but moral engagement, taking a stance toward humanity, toward the world. It is the search for a reason for living' (Montale 1976, p.594). Montale wanted to remain faithful to 'a poetry of thought' (Luperini 2012, p.30); however, he could not ignore the political events of his time. It is for this reason that the Dantean allegory becomes even more intense in this collection; through it, the poet is able to highlight the 'hellish' historical moment that humanity was experiencing in those years, the blind and irrational destructive force of the war, and of the distressing post-war condition, without openly illustrating the violence, offering a new perspective on modern society.

Clizia here appears as a woman-angel, and plays a crucial role as she represents a final effort to bridge the detachment between poetry and history, between the poet and reality: 'and I've pledged myself to her, lady or shade, angel or petrel' (Montale 1982, p.303), Montale remarks. The woman-angel is a carrier of values – those of culture, of reason, of poetry (Luperini 2012, p.31). In "*La Primavera Hitleriana*" ("The Hitler Spring"), she becomes allegorical of salvation, as she announces a dawn of renewal 'for all' (Montale 1998, p.375). In "*Intenzioni (Intervista Immaginaria)*" ("Intensions (Imaginary Interview)"), Montale describes her as 'the continuation and symbol of the eternal Christian sacrifice' (Montale 1982, p.304), although obviously, this motive is reused allegorically within the secular culture of the author. 'She pays for all, expiates all. And he who recognizes her is the Nestorian, the man who knows best the affinities that bind God to incarnate beings'

(Montale 1982, p.304). As a Nestorian, Montale believes in the 'divorce between God and man, as Nestorius distinguished in Christ two people as well as two natures' (Contini 1974, p.92). She does not incarnate in herself, as does Beatrice, both the human and the divine. As Joseph Cary points out:

If Clizia is an angel, she is not so because she dwells in another world but because her mission is to "visit" this one. [She is not only] the angel of the victimized but herself victim incarnate [...]. In one of the late motets<sup>7</sup> she is described as a frozen bird with torn feathers, who has, however, arrived. Elsewhere she is threatened by savage beasts, wears rags, is shot. (Cary 1993, p.307)

As Montale himself asserts: 'Her task [...] does not allow her other triumph than what seems failure here below: separation in space, misery, vague phantomlike reappearitions [...]. Her features are always tormented and proud, her fatigue is mortal, her courage indomitable [...]: she preserves all her earthly attributes' (Montale 1997, pp.91-2).

In "The Hitler Spring", she appears as a bird arrived to save humanity from the 'shadowy Lucifer [that] sweeps down on a prow / on the Thames, the Hudson, the Seine' (Montale 1998, p.407). This dark image refers to Hitler, who arrived in Florence in May 1938 to meet with Mussolini. In a letter to his friend Silvio Guarnieri, Montale writes that those were also 'the last Florentine days of Clizia', who returned for the last time in Tuscany in the late spring of that year, and departed definitely for the United States in mid-September (De Caro 1996, p.93). The juxtaposition of Hitler with Clizia serves to oppose the preface of darkness that Hitler's visit to Florence inaugurates, with the possible dawn of salvation represented by the woman. On the day of the German dictator's visit to Florence, a cloud of

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<sup>7</sup> Love-songs that Montale wrote for Clizia, inserted in *Le Occasioni* (which will be analyzed in chapter six).

moths descends everywhere, 'spreading a blanket on the earth that snaps / like sugar underfoot' (Montale 1998, p.373), and this is surely an allusion to the human lives torn apart. In the city, wrapped in the colours of the 'swastikas' (Montale 1998, p.373), and with the signs of the next war tragedy, the opposite clizian signs – 'jewel', 'angels', 'sunflowers' (Montale 1998, p.373), 'love', 'sun', 'wings' (Montale 1998, p.375) – are allegorical of the redemptive mission of the woman. However, in order to accomplish her mission, Clizia has to go 'out of time' (Montale 1998, p.377) and space, in 'the great beyond' (Montale 1998, p.381), so that a time and a future may be possible for all humanity. Only then the horrors of the war and the death that it causes (the 'infernal messenger' [Montale 1998, p.373]) will perhaps come to an end, bringing:

a dawn that may break tomorrow for all,  
white, but without wings of terror,  
over the scorched rockbeds of the south. (Montale 1998, p.375)

However, in a historical condition with no escape, the humanistic values that the woman represents cannot survive.

The poem "*L'Ombra della Magnolia*" ("The Magnolia's Shadow") encapsulates such impossibility. Here Clizia is forced to find a place of safety in the shadow of the magnolia tree, escaping from a world in which poetic function is no longer possible among men. The image of the singing of the dying cicada: 'At the top a lone cicada / chirps off and on' (Montale 1998, p.381), represents the image of the poet. The cicada's singing will soon die; similarly, 'the empty husk of him who sang will soon / be powdered glass underfoot' (Montale 1998, p.381). As Jonathan Galassi points out, here the poet is openly declaring his 'identification with the singing but soon-to-be-silenced insect' (Galassi, in Montale 1998, p.423), epitomizing the powerlessness of poetry to endure. And yet the hopes of Montale 'to

make poetry be reborn from its ashes are not yet extinct' (Luperini 2012, p.37). Like Dante in *Purgatorio* I, the modern poet seeks to make 'poesy revive again' (*Purg.* I, l.7). In that Canto, the medieval poet described how the boat of his genius, his poetry, would lead him from the slavery of sin of the *Inferno*, to the world of moral freedom. Dante believed that poetry was the means through which individuals could achieve enlightenment. In his poem, he emphasized the redemptive power of poetry, and its contribution to human happiness. Similarly, towards the end of his collection Montale suggests that poetry is a creative force that has the power of liberation, as it is not afraid to face even the most difficult conditions. The poet displays this idea through the image of the eel, in the poem "*L'Anguilla*" ("The Eel"), allegorical of vitality and immanence, and of the value of life on Earth. The fish is characterized by an innate energy, instinct, and endurance, and thus she is capable of resisting in the aridity of contemporary existence. She is also Clizia's 'sister' (Montale 1998, p.385), because, like her, the eel indicates a way of salvation for values and for poetry.

The marine animal is depicted as the 'siren / of cold seas, who leaves / the Baltic for our seas' (Montale 1998, p.385), and is characterized by images of light; she is 'light', 'flash', and 'torch' (Montale 1998, p.385). These images also occur in a group of poems by Seamus Heaney, called "A Lough Neagh Sequence", in *Door into the Dark*. In fact, the similarity between the two poets' works is striking here. Heaney recounts the labour of the lough fishermen, intent on catching eels, and this narration is mingled with descriptions of the life cycle of the fish. As in Montale's poem, the figure of the eel's journey is paramount, and emphasis is placed on motifs of descent and darkness. However, just like Montale, Heaney describes her as a source of light: 'a wisp, a wick [...] light / through the weltering dark' (Heaney

1969, p.44). For the Irish author, the cycle of the eel's journey is symbolic of the poet's quest for identity. For Montale, her trajectory – 'infiltrating muddy / rills' and ending up 'in stagnant pools' (Montale 1998, p.385) – represents the road 'from which true art comes and to which it must return' (Zambon 1994, p.112). As Francesco Zambon suggests, "*L'Anguilla*" is 'the perfect lyric synthesis of Montale's early postwar views on poetry and its role in history' (Zambon 1994, p.112). She represents what we are familiar with, the 'life down here, the very life we have seen, known, and touched with our hands since the first years of childhood' (Montale 1946, p.82). Franco Fortini notes the allegorical configuration of "*L'anguilla*", stating:

The biological obstinacy of the animal, the great vital adventure that leads it from the northern seas to the mountains of Europe and from there to the seas, represents a spiritual desire, which is asserted through the concreteness of her earthly condition; and it is also representative of poetry. (Fortini, in Romagnoli and Ghibetti 1985, p.127)

She is the 'green spirit seeking life / where only drought and desolation sting' (Montale 1998, p.385), and a:

spark that says that everything begins  
when everything seems charcoal,  
buried stump;  
brief rainbow, iris,  
twin to the one your lashes frame  
and you set shining virginal among  
the sons of men, sunk in your mire –  
can you fail to see her as a sister? (Montale 1998, p.385)

The word 'sister' places the eel as:

the bearer of Love, and [...] of value [and thus she becomes] Clizia's true "sister." Her "rainbow," which survives even in the dryness of the desert (metaphor for the absence of values in contemporary society),

alludes to the very fate of poetry, to its secret capacity for survival.  
(Luperini 1986, p.159)

The image of the 'iris' highlights once again the importance of the eyes in Montale's poetry. The small iris of the eel is the same as that of the woman, which now shines even among the mud. As William Arrowsmith points out, the denotations of iris – 'rainbow, iris of the eye, iridescence, flower – all relate to the central notion of diffusion of light' (Arrowsmith 1985, p.190). Allegorically, this could signify a desire for the continuation and propagation of poetry in the world. Salvation in the desert and mud of society will be achieved only through this iris, the 'green' power of the eel (Montale 1998, p.385).

In the second-last poem of the collection, "*Piccolo Testamento*" ("Little Testament"), Montale voices his distrust in history, and instead counterpoises the claim of a personal coherence; above all, he makes explicit the indispensable function of poetry in modern civilization. The iris, or 'rainbow' of poetry, here becomes the 'evidence' of a 'faith' and a 'hope' (Montale 1998, p.407) that were weak but tenacious:

All I can leave you is  
this rainbow in evidence  
of a faith that was contested,  
a hope that burned more slowly  
than hardwood on the hearth. (Montale 1998, p.407)

This 'rainbow' is the only gift that the poet is able to offer, not as a message of salvation, but as mere 'evidence' of the endurance of poetry even in difficult times. As he said in an interview of 1968, published in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, on 23 June 1990:

I do not know what is the function of poetry in the world. Perhaps, if it is able to reconcile instinct – the so-called inspiration – with reason, if it is able to find this *modus vivendi*, it may exercise an influence on [...] the entire society [...]. The world, unfortunately is not made only of art, of sounds, of colours, it is not made only of words, but also of practical problems. If we want to save the world, we must however also save things that are not absolutely necessary, as poetry. The economic man alone will not be able to survive. (Montale 1990)

Montale's use of Dante's imagery and style represented the 'sounds' and 'colours' that he needed for his creation of a vivid and concrete poetry through which he portrayed his harsh vision of the modern world. Although allegory is used in different ways in Montale's works, as his thought and sensibility are fundamentally and characteristically modern, we can however, distinguish the same force and determination in both poets to find and resurrect the power of poetic verse. Poetry can help find a moment of liberation from the constricting world, and its survival can perhaps also contribute to the betterment of contemporary society, transforming human consciousness through artistic vision and language.

## Chapter 4: Kinship between Languages in Heaney's

### Poetics

Seamus Heaney's early poetry was characterized by the evocation of Irish pastoral landscapes and traditions. The eruption of the Troubles, and the political tension between English loyalists and Irish republicans in 1969, changed the direction of his poetic scope, and his poetry began to be pervaded by the complex situation in Northern Ireland. This change, together with the poet's increasing focussing on his symbolic relationship with the Irish soil and his preoccupation with a sense of a lost language, caused his poems to be perceived as symbols of national struggle. However, although Irish history, tradition and language are embraced and celebrated by the poet, at the same time, rather than expressing a political idea of literature, Heaney tried to find a middle voice that would express both halves of his culture, English and Irish. This is encapsulated in the place name poems, "Broagh" and "Anahorish", in his collection *Wintering Out*, which show the poet's willingness for a reconciliation of the two traditions through a profound meditation on the cultural and linguistic elements of each one. It is at this juncture that he turned to Dante. The medieval author's belief in the achievement of a sense of national solidarity through the creation of a unitary poetic language was fundamental to the Northern Irish poet's identification with him. Like Heaney, Dante had a profound attachment to his local culture and to the vernacular language; however, at the same time, he had a great ability to transcend those aspects by placing them in a universal framework. Dante is the poet who 'imagined the eternal in the local, the cosmological in the

provincial', by placing a 'constant emphasis on the epistemological function of the mutually enriching confrontation with other cultures and languages, which is ultimately synonymous with an enrichment and not an adulteration of one's own national identity' (Copley 2005, p.12). It is possible to apply this quotation to much of Heaney's work as well, as both poets shared these aims.

Through allusions to the medieval master, Heaney was able to transcend ethnic boundaries and create an increasingly cosmopolitan poetry, in which the specifics of public and personal history would be considered alongside those of world culture. This universal stance is seen especially in his collection *Electric Light*. Here, although still grounded on the Irish soil, the poet enters into conversation with different literatures and languages, and is hence able to be faithful to his own origins while, at the same time, transcending them, thus acquiring, like Dante, a 'perspective beyond history' (Heaney 1985, p.18). In both Dante's and Heaney's poetry, different styles coexist: the local with the universal; the Latin classics with the *Bible*; and the vernacular language with Latin and other European and non-European languages. This stylistic richness is symbolic of their openness to other cultural and linguistic identities and, as Eliot once said, to 'the mind of Europe' (Eliot 1921, p.46). Heaney's poetry traces his development towards a place in the European literary tradition, which was mainly realized through his several translations of various international authors, including Dante. The poet turned to the medieval writer as he needed to find 'images and symbols adequate to [his] predicament' (Heaney 1980, p.56), and he found these images in his rendering of the "Ugolino" episode from *Inferno XXXII-XXXIII*, in *Field Work*. Through this translation, he could address his local concerns through a global framework, extending the universal into the personal and vice versa.

### *Between two Traditions*

Both Dante's and Heaney's poetics have to be understood within the socio-political context in which they were brought into being. Throughout his life, Dante felt a sense of 'in betweenness' with respect to his culture and his language. He struggled to find a balance between personal style and linguistic tradition. As a poet, he used Latin, which was the language of the education system. As a man, he spoke the Tuscan vernacular, which was the language of his parents, his natural mother tongue. In his several treatises – particularly, in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, and in the *Convivio* – Dante championed the development of the vernacular in literature. He sought to demonstrate that the vulgar tongue was suitable for poetic expressions, and that it could be just as authoritative as its Latin precursor. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the poet affirmed that 'since nothing provides as splendid an ornament as does the illustrious vernacular, it seems that any writer of poetry should use it' (*DVE* II, i, 2). His project to raise his mother tongue to a literary level was dictated by three main motivations. Firstly, he had a 'natural love' for his '*propria loquela*' (*Conv.* I, x, 5 [1995]);<sup>8</sup> a love that arose 'from proximity, for nothing is closer to a man than his native vernacular' (Cambon 1969, p.15). Secondly, being the tongue spoken by everyone, the vernacular was a more suitable language for literature, in the sense that it made literature available to all. It was the '*maternam locutionem*' (the mother tongue) (*DVE* I, vi, 2 [1960]), 'the spontaneous, the concrete language of all' (Chandler 1966, p.17), in contrast to Latin, which was artificial, a theoretical and

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<sup>8</sup> The Italian edition of the *Convivio* used is: Alighieri, D. (1995) *Il Convivio*, Franca Brambilla Ageno, ed., Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere. The English translation used is: Alighieri, D. (1989) *The Banquet*, translated by Christofer Ryan, Saragota: Anna Libri. Similarly, for the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, two editions have been used. The Latin version is: Alighieri, D. (1960) *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Pio Rajna, ed., Firenze: Societa' Dantesca Italiana; the English translation is: Alighieri, D. (1996) *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, translated by Steven Botterill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

secondary speech, a '*locutio secundaria*' (*DVE* I, i, 3 [1960]). Finally, Dante believed that a common tongue could be 'a pledge of national unity' (Cambon 1969, p.28). In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Italy was divided into several states, with each speaking a different dialect. This fragmentation created an environment in which 'peoples could not feel a strong sense of national identity based on cultural, linguistic, or racial bonds' (Pullan 1973, p.25). Moreover, political parties were continually competing for power over the cities, and these conflicts further increased Dante's belief that a common tongue could be the means through which some kind of national unity could be achieved. His project consisted in creating an idiom out of small pieces from all the dialects, but yet with features 'common to them all' (*DVE* I, xvi, 4), giving birth to a 'dismunicipalized [and] disregionalized' language (Baldwin 1939, p.55). However, Dante's decision to use vernacular in his poetry was not just an attempt to discard Latin completely. Latin after all was the language of the great classic authors, such as Virgil, Horace, Ovid and Statius, from whom the poet had acquired much of his poetic style. In addition, Dante was aware that, being an oral idiom, his mother tongue lacked the structural rules of Latin, and he embarked on the project of using vernacular with a Latin grammatical structure, thus creating a hybrid language.

Heaney's sense of 'in-betweenness' within his own culture is one of the major characteristics that led to his identification with Dante. Living between two different and seemingly opposed cultures had created a sense of displacement in the Irish poet. As he says in an interview with Neil Corcoran: 'I seemed always to be a little displaced; being in between was a kind of condition, from the start' (Corcoran 1986, p.13). In his poem "Terminus", in *The Haw Lantern*, Heaney says that 'Two buckets were easier carried than one. / I grew up in between' (Heaney 1987, p.5), a

statement that reflects his position in relation to his world. Since his early years in Mossbawn, he had been exposed 'simultaneously to the domestic idiom of his Irish home and the official idioms [of English education], and already picking up the signs of an existing distress between the two cultures' (O'Brien 2003, p.177). Being an Irish man born in British Ulster and speaking an English, which is both ideologically alien, and yet habitually familiar, Heaney, like Dante, is well aware of the problematics of language:

I speak and write in English, but do not altogether share the preoccupations and perspectives of an Englishman. I teach English literature, I publish in London, but the English tradition is not ultimately home. I live off another hump as well. (Heaney 1980, p.34)

Heaney's major endeavour in his poetry is to find a balance between the two traditions. In an interview with Seamus Deane, he stated that what he sought in his poems was to be able to 'be faithful to the nature of the English language [...] and at the same time, be faithful to one's own non-English origin' (Heaney 1977, p.65). He aspires to a 'singular universal' (Heaney 1977, p.71) poetry, which would include the particulars of both cultures.

The place name poems "Broagh" and "Anahorish", in *Wintering Out*, exemplify that the poet has indeed achieved this dualistic loyalty. Heaney moves from one place to another in his local province, exploring the relationship between the two cultural and language traditions in Ireland. Here the poet displays that typical Dantean 'local intensity' that he greatly admired in the *Divine Comedy*, and of which he speaks in his essay "The Sense of Place":

I like to remember that Dante was very much a man of a particular place, that his great poem is full of intimate placings and place-names, and that as he moves round the murky circles of hell, often heard rather

than seen by his damned friends and enemies, he is recognized by his local speech or so he recognizes them. (Heaney 1980, pp.136-7)

In different places of the *Comedy*, the pilgrim is recognized by his use and credit of his mother tongue. In *Inferno X*, Dante meets Farinata, a Florentine leader of the Ghibellines, and enemy to the party of Dante's ancestors, the Guelphs. Farinata recognizes Dante's accent and says to him:

“O Tuscan, live man, through the City of fire  
Going, and speaking thus so worthily,  
Pray thee to stay a little in this place;  
Thy speech declares thy noble country”. (*Inf. X*, ll.18-21)

For Dante, just as for Heaney, the language of the people is embedded in the land. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* the poet shows that the various regions of Italy had different dialects and different mores and cultures (Shapiro 1990, p.18). The ‘Apennines’ divided Italy into two: ‘On each of the two sides, as well as in the areas associated with them, the language of the inhabitants varies’ (*DVE I*, x, 6). The peninsula extended to wherever the Italian dialects were spoken; in fact, Italy is ‘that fair land of the Italian tongue’ (*Inf. XXXIII*, l.72).

Similarly, for Heaney, ‘the point about dialect or hearth language is its complete propriety to the speaker and his or her voice and place’ (Heaney 2008, p.129). This profound connection between language, people and place is displayed in the place name poems, “Anahorish” and “Broagh”. Here the poet adopts the Irish poetic genre of *dinnseanchas*, ‘poems and tales which relate the original meanings of place names and constitute a form of mythological etymology’ (Heaney 1980, p.131). These poems, as Eugene O’Brien suggests, ‘were usually descriptive of the actuality of the place. In this manner, it seems that signifier, signified and referent were fused to create a quasi-organic connection between the people, their language,

and the place' (O'Brien 2002c, p.71). For this reason, Heaney's poems have been read as encapsulating a nationalistic discourse. In David Lloyd's words, they participate in what he defines as 'cultural nationalism'. He claims that:

language is seen primarily as naming, and [...] naming performs a cultural reterritorialisation by replacing the contingent continuities of an historical community with an ideal register of continuity in which the name (of place or of object) operates symbolically as the commonplace communicating between actual and ideal continua. The name always serves likeness, never difference. (Lloyd 1997, p.165)

However, as Auge asserts, in these poems 'Heaney seeks not so much to reterritorialize himself and his culture back onto his native idiom, but rather to deterritorialize the imposed colonial language—to unsettle and disrupt English by infusing it with sonic traces of the discarded Gaelic or Hiberno-English' (Auge 2003, p.275), and in this way, he creates a hybrid language. In fact, it could be stated that these names do indeed serve difference because, as several critics have noticed, both "Broagh" and "Anahorish" are not uprooted Gaelic words, but 'transliterations' of the original Irish etymology '*bruach*' and '*anach fhíor uisce*' (O'Brien 2003, p.16). Thus the two names are Anglicized versions of their originals, that is, they are a fusion of English and Irish, and this attests to Heaney's commitment to use both linguistic traditions: the "“forgotten Gaelic music” that yields the meanings “riverbank” and “place of clear water”, and the modern spelling that acknowledges the cultural [...] English' heritage (Olson 2008, p.67). Heaney confirms such commitment in the following two lines:

Anahorish, soft gradient  
of consonant, vowel-meadow. (Heaney 1973, p.16)

The combination of vowels and consonants is symbolic of the union between Ireland and England. As Heaney has said on different occasions, the Irish sound is associated with vowels, and the English sound with consonants: 'I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awareness nourished in English as consonants. My hope is that the poems will be vocables adequate to my whole experience' (Heaney 1980, p.37). In these poems, English consonants and Irish vowels live together in a conciliatory combination, signalling to 'the possibility of a linguistic rapprochement' (Manganiello 2000, p.103).

This pacific and harmonious union that Heaney seeks to achieve between the English and Irish languages mirrors Dante's project of symbolically marrying the Italian vernacular and Latin *gramatica*. In fact, for the poet, the importance of a structured language like Latin was fundamental in order to achieve perfection in his mother tongue. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he speaks of the longest existing words, and refers to the word *honorificabilitudinitibus*, which in medieval schools served as a tongue-twister. Here the poet considers obvious that a similar word might be used also in the vernacular, and coins the word *honorificabilitudinitate*: 'the well-known *honorificabilitudinitate*, which is twelve syllables long in the vernacular, and reaches thirteen in two oblique cases that exist in *gramatica*' (*DVE* II, vii, 6). By Italianizing a Latin word, Dante demonstrates the communicability between the two languages, and sets up one of a number of linguistic connections between them. The impression created is, as Zygmunt Barański suggests, 'a fluid, "unproblematic" interchangeability between languages – an exchange between equals' (Barański 2012, p.113). The poet does not superimpose one idiom over another but rather creates an equal interrelationship between them. This is also Heaney's project in the place name poems, as he strives to reject hierarchical discourses, and instead create

equality between idioms. In "Broagh", the poet brings three language systems together, the three linguistic strains of Ulster:

Irish, Elizabethan English and Ulster Scots – into some kind of creative intercourse and alignment and to intimate thereby the possibility of some new intercourse and alignment among the cultural and political heritages which these three languages represent in Northern Ireland. (Heaney 2002, p.351)

The cultural multiplicity of Northern Ireland is displayed by the introduction of local dialect words, such as 'rigs' (Scots dialect, a variation of 'ridge', meaning 'furrows in a field'), 'docken' (Scots and Irish dialect term for 'dock'), 'pad' (Scots; as a noun means 'path', as a verb means 'to travel on foot'), and 'Boortrees' (a variant spelling of 'bourtrees', Ulster dialect for 'the elder tree', probably derived from the Scots pronunciation of 'bower tree') (Molino 1993, p.192).

The presence of these words affirms Heaney's perception of different languages as a single unity, and acts as 'a linguistic paradigm of a reconciliation beyond sectarian division' (Corcoran 1986, p.90). In his introduction to *Beowulf*, Heaney expresses his idea of a poetry where no language is banned. He states that his awareness that various languages could be allied in unison started at Queen's University, Belfast, in the lectures about the history of the English Language by Professor John Braidwood:

Braidwood could not help informing us [...] that the word "whiskey" is the same word as the Irish and Scots Gaelic word *uisce*, meaning water, and that the River Usk in Britain is therefore to some extent the River Uisce (or Whiskey); and so in my mind the stream was suddenly turned into a kind of linguistic river of rivers issuing from a pristine Celto-British Land of Cockaigne, a riverrun of Finnegans Wakespeak pouring out of the cleft rock of some prepolitical, prelapsarian, urphilological

Big Rock Candy Mountain – and all of this had a wonderfully sweetening effect upon me. The Irish/English duality, the Celtic/Saxon antithesis were momentarily collapsed [...]. The place on the language map where the Usk and the *uisce* and the whiskey coincided was definitely a place where the spirit might find a loophole, an escape route from what John Montague has called “the partitioned intellect,” away into some unpartitioned linguistic country, a region where one’s language would not be simply a badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition, but an entry into further language. (Heaney 2001a, pp.xxiii-xxv)

Heaney’s different linguistic perspectives allow him to surmount the barrier of difference between English and Irish. Even in their diversity, the cultures of Northern Ireland have, as O’Brien says, a ‘shared history’ (O’Brien 2003, p.137), which can enable them to envision themselves as citizens of one country where reconciliation and harmony can coexist. The entry into ‘further language’ of which Heaney speaks, can only be possible if the differences between cultural languages and traditions are transcended, and are seen as being part of a higher culture.

Likewise, Dante’s Italian regions differed from one another in language (*locution*), manners (*mores*), and customs (*habitus*); however, they were ‘integral parts of the culture of greater Italy [embodying] elements of a higher, quintessential culture: *Italianitas*’ (Lansing 2010, p.529). The Florentine poet sought to achieve a vernacular bonding by conjoining the different idioms of the Italian peninsula in order to create a unique language that did not belong to any city in particular, yet which reverberated and found a ‘scent’ in each Italian city (*DVE* I, xvi, 14). The creation of an ‘illustrious vernacular’ could be the means through which this sense of *Italianitas*, of a communal cultural identity could be achieved. However, Dante’s project has been regarded by modern critics as an attempt to devalue the various mother tongues of Italy. Margaret Ferguson for example believes that:

Dante's theory anticipates a tendency to conflate the ideas of nation and empire in many later discussions of an "illustrious" vernacular language, discussions that dramatize the violence done to the provinces – and to languages and language speakers defined as provincial or regional or colonial – in the process of nation-building [...]. Dante, indeed, articulates a theory of the "illustrious vernacular" through a highly elaborated and socially resonant set of *discriminations* between "good" and "bad" types of language. (Ferguson 2003, p.126)

These assertions are only true if one considers Dante's assumptions against variation in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, where, following the theories of the *Bible*, he conceives of diversity as a form of punishment, 'the loss of original unity, of the unified language of Paradise' (Trabant 2012, p.25). The confusion of tongues, spread after the building of the Tower of Babel, was for the poet a critical second Fall through which human beings had lost their universal language: 'so many were the languages by which the human race was fragmented' (*DVE* I, vii, 7). After Babel, all 'the vernaculars became themselves fallen, corrupt and incapable of fulfilling the primary function of language – universal communication' (Pertile 1999, p.49). Dante displays his theory throughout the *Inferno*, where:

sighs and weeping, wailing and deep groans  
filled all the starless air with mournful echo;  
and, entering, I shed tears for all this woe.  
Strange words and phrases, both of grief and wrath,  
And hands struck in lamenting, made a tumult. (*Inf.* III, ll.20-4)

Confusion of voices, cries of anger, and shouts without meaning in all different forms of speech are the results of God's punishment for the poet. In Canto XXVII, Dante and his guide Virgil meet the soul of the Lombard, Guido da Montefeltro (who is present in Eliot's "Prufrock" as well). Being Florentine, and thus speaking a different dialect, Dante cannot communicate with him, and so it is Virgil (a Lombard

like the damned), who carries on the conversation. In Dante's view, different dialects are seen as obstacles to communication. Dante's denunciation of the story of Babel is rendered explicit in *Inferno* XXXI, where the pilgrim meets Nimrod, the original builder of the tower. He is shouting incomprehensible words: *Raphèl mai amècche zabì almi* (*Inf.* XXXI, l.67 [1975]), which point to his inability to interact rationally. Virgil tells the pilgrim:

“[...] this is Nimrod, through whose thought perverse  
We do not speak one tongue in all the world.  
Let him alone, and do not waste thy speech,  
For every language is the same to him,  
As his to others, being known to none”. (*Inf.* XXXI, ll.62-6)

Since the linguistic confusion was caused by him, his own idiom is now as incomprehensible to others as their idioms are to him, reflecting Dante's idea that language distortion, and the eradication of man's linguistic unity, is a transgression against the divine order.

### ***Transcending Difference***

However, rejection of confusion does not signify rejection of variation. As Bruno Nardi claims, 'the major invention of Dante in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* was to have thought the vernacular languages as governed by variation, something which is in no way seen negatively' (Nardi 1985, p.123). In fact, Dante realizes the 'quasi-biological force displayed by language's capacity to change and renew itself over time' (Eco 1999, p.40), focussing on the diachronic development of language, as opposed to Saussure's privileging of its synchronic element. Linguistic variation happens because man changes over time. As Dante states:

since human beings are highly unstable and variable animals, our language can be neither durable nor consistent with itself; but, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs), it must vary according to distances of space and time. (*DVE I*, ix, 6)

After Babel, man was given free choice to rebuild his own speech, which was made according to his will (*DVE I*, ix, 6). In this context, Irène Rosier-Catach suggests that Dante differentiates between variation and confusion. If confusion is the result of God's punishment after Babel, God did, however, give man 'the possibility of reinventing his speech according to his will [...] This gave rise to the diversity of vulgar languages' (Rosier-Catach 2012, p.44). As Adam tells the pilgrim in *Paradiso* XXVI:

“[...] the tongue  
I spake, it was destroyed and gone before  
The unfinishable work of Nimrod rose

In vain attempt; for never durable  
Is what the mind inclines to, while man's pleasure  
Changes with changing skies from new to new.

It is a work of nature that men speak;  
But in such fashion, and in such, as she  
Leaves to your fancy”. (*Par.* XXVI, ll.113-21)

The language that Adam spoke was completely extinguished even before the building of the tower of Babel because human beings and human reason change continually. That men speak is natural, but either one way or another, nature lets them decide themselves, as it pleases them. Adam's words regard multiplicity as a natural phenomenon, and the variety of tongues is no longer considered negative. What we see here is not a 'discrimination' between 'good' and 'bad' types of

language, as Margaret Ferguson pointed out in her analysis, but rather an acceptance of all forms of idioms.

In *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, the cacophony of Hell is transformed in polyphony, as different languages are placed side by side in harmonious unity, creating, as Heaney would say, a 'further language'; a language that is not 'a badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition' (Heaney 2001a, p.xxv), but a symbol of the multicultural tradition both poets are looking for. In *Purgatorio*, Dante overcomes 'the obstacles to understanding in different languages', as here the souls use speech 'for prayers and guidance, compassion and love' (Jacoff 2003, p.188). Latin is seen as 'our' language, namely a communal universal heritage, as when the Provençal poet Sordello says to Virgil: 'Thou who didst prove the power of our tongue' (*Purg.* VII, l.16). Latin was studied by Dante and his contemporaries throughout Europe; it was the language of their poetry, and thus it was considered 'their' language, though they did not speak it. The possessive pronoun 'our' emphasizes the substantial unity and the sense of historical continuity between Latin and the Romance languages that Dante seeks to emphasize. Latin is spread throughout *Purgatorio*, as in the citations from the *Bible*: '*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*' (*Purg.* II, l.46), or from the *Aeneid*: '*Manibus oh date lilia plenis!*' (*Purg.* XXX, l.21). Beside Latin, a number of 'Franchisms' (French words) are also used, such as '*giuggia*' (*Purg.* XX, l.48), and '*alluminar*' (*Purg.* XI, l.81). Provençal also finds its place in the great encyclopaedic world of the *Comedy*, as in *Purgatorio* XXVI, where the poet Arnaut Daniel speaks in 'his native Provençal for eight lines within the Italian rhyme scheme' (Jacoff 2003, p.189):

*"Tan m'abellis vostre cortes deman,  
qu'ieu no me puesc ni voill a vos cobrire.*

*Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan;*

*consiros vei la passada folor,  
e vei jausen lo joi qu'esper, denan.  
Ara vos prec, per aquella valor*

*que vos guida al som de l'escalina,  
sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor". (Purg. XXVI, ll.140-7 [1975])*

The blending of all these different languages supplants the babelian confusion of tongues of the *Inferno* with a pleasant linguistic harmony. Finally, in *Paradiso*, Dante seems to be moving towards a kind of 'universal language, incorporating Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and French elements, as well as Italian words he creates' (Jacoff 2003, p.188). This idiomatic unity is very close to Heaney's linguistic 'riverrun of Finnegans Wakespeak pouring out of the cleft rock of some prepolitical, prelapsarian, ur-philological Big Rock Candy Mountain' (Heaney 2001a, p.xxiv), an epiphanic moment, in which the differences between languages are transcended and the poet realizes the sweetness of verbal hybridity. In *Paradiso*, Hebrew, God's language, is incorporated into a Latin hymn, as the words 'Sabaoth' and 'malachoth' display: '*Osanna Sanctus Deus Sabaoth, superillustrans claritate tua felices ignes horum malachoth!*' (*Par.* VII, ll.1-3 [1975]). From Greek, the poet even invents a word: '*teodia*' (*Par.* XXV, l.73), from *theos* ('God'), and *ode* ('sacred hymn'), displaying how religion informs the poem as well (Jacoff 2003, p.189). This blending of languages fits well within the Italian text because Dante is 'not trying to put one language over another, but [places] them alongside each other' (Tambling 1999, p.183), refusing to hierarchize them.

Dante's non-discriminating, polyglot achievement is greatly admired by Heaney, who parallels the Florentine poet's plurilingual style with his own ability to

distance himself from political matters. In an interview with Catharine Malloy in March 1990, he stated:

The *Commedia* is an imagined world with its own radiance and consonance and integrity and so on, so it's a complete invention which is other than the historical world that Dante is living in. On the other hand, it retains its symbolic otherness. It is a housing place; it is a documentary world. It's a listening post for what's going on in the world around the poem. It's fantastically voluble, it's fantastically vocal; it admits the unfinished, the conflicting, the messy. The unfinished energies of the world are all there, dramatized. So I like the idea of a poem that could have, if you like, historical volubility, the slice of life energy of documentary, and at the same time would have some kind of defined edge, some kind of otherness from the world of history. And so it was the voices, the dialogic element in Dante that attracted me. (Heaney, in Malloy 1992, p.61)

Like Dante, Heaney seeks to create a poetry involving 'other voices' (Heaney, in Malloy 1992, p.2), through which he can create a world that is not divided by political boundaries. In this venture, the poet follows not only Dante but also James Joyce. His Irish predecessor had taken Dante as a model in his reappropriation of the English language along with other linguistic idioms. In his *Beowulf* preface, Heaney's linguistic river is imagined as the 'riverrun of Finnegans Wakespeak' (Heaney 2001a, p.xxiv). In his book *Finnegans Wake*, in fact Joyce created a universalism of languages, which was also possible due to his engagement with Dante. As Pascale Casanova explains in his book *The World Republic of Letters*, from the first half of the twenty-first century onwards, Irish artists:

reappropriated the work of the Tuscan poet [...] as an instrument of struggle on behalf of cosmopolitan and antinationalist Irish poets. Through a sort of reactualization of the linguistic and literary project laid out in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* [...] Joyce [and other writers]

recreated, recovered, and invoked Dante's subversive power.  
(Casanova 2004, p.329)

In his works Joyce, rendered the sense of belonging between different communities through a multitude of equivalent, competing styles: a polyglot mixture of styles in *Ulysses*, and of languages in *Finnegans Wake* (Deane 1984, p.53). Like Joyce and Dante, in his poetry Heaney aims to establish 'a new sense of identity through a brand-new tongue', getting rid of any notion of nationalism that may originate from a monolingual literature, and entering 'a realm offering new opportunities' (Klitgard 2006, p.116). The adoption of many voices creates a cultural diversity that allows the poet to make a 'radical revision of traditional notions of history, identity and language: language is no longer a transparent means for representing a preordained identity, but the means whereby we construct an identity for ourselves' (Kennedy-Andrews 1998, p.55). In *Crediting Poetry*, Heaney remembers when, already during his childhood in rural County Derry, the radio carried him on a 'journey into the wideness of the world. This, in turn, became a journey into "the wideness of language"', that from then on opened to the 'gutturals and sibilants of European speech' (Heaney 1995a, p.11). It is the contention of this thesis that the work of Dante is of significant import to this project.

### ***Towards Multiculturalism***

Heaney's eleventh collection of poems, *Electric Light*, encapsulates such journeys. Here, although the poet is still concerned with the matters of Ireland, he assumes a more cosmopolitan outlook through the implementation of different voices from other literatures and languages. As O'Brien states, in this book, 'personal, cultural and political events are seen through the alembic of other cultures, literatures and

languages, in such a way as to see them anew' (O'Brien 2002b, p.8). In the poem "Known World" the poet links his own culture to the culture of Macedonia – a country that he had visited during a poetry festival at Struga. Here, in a place divided by sectarian violence, the poet relives that 'old sense of a tragedy' of Northern Ireland; 'Uncomprehended, at the very edge / Of the usual, it never left me once' (Heaney 2001b, p.21). Through the lenses of other cultures and languages the poet can better understand the events of his home ground, and can try to find a sense, and, possibly, a solution to them. Placing his idiom side by side with other European idioms is symbolic of the poet's envisioning of a world:

where no language will be relegated, a world where the ancient rural province of Boeotia (which Les Murray has made an image for all the outback and dialect cultures of history) will be on an equal footing with the city state of Athens; where not just Homer but Hesiod will have his due honour. [A world] where one will never have to think twice about the cultural and linguistic expression of one's world on its own terms since nobody else's terms will be imposed as normative and official. (Heaney 1995b, p.82)

Heaney's project, then, is not that of privileging one language or another, but rather to seek a communion between the seemingly opposite languages and cultures. As he says when quoting Osip Mandelstam, he longs for a 'world culture' (Heaney 1995b, p.82), and all his poetic efforts are devoted to achieve it. The final stanza of "Known World" displays this realization:

I kept my seat belt fastened as instructed,  
Smoked the minute the *No Smoking* sign went off  
And took it as my due when wine was poured  
By a slight *de haut en bas* of my headphoned head.  
*Nema problema. Ja. All systems go.* (Heaney 2001b, pp.22-3)

The space Heaney creates, where English ('*No Smoking*'), Serbo-Croatian ('*Nema problema*'), French ('*de haut en bas*'), and German ('*Ja*'), coexist together in harmonious unison, is symbolic of his desire for a world 'where notions of Irishness are pluralized and opened to different influences' (O'Brien 2002a, p.2). Through these influences and voices the poet is able to open the geographical and mental space of his home ground to the 'gutturals and sibilants of European speech' (Heaney 1995a, p.11), reflecting Dante's project of achieving a polyphony of language in the *Paradiso*.

Crossing time and space, Heaney travels from the present Macedonia to ancient Italy in the next poem, the "Bann Valley Eclogue", which is a reappropriation of Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*. In writing eclogues, where 'song replies to song' (Kallendorf 2007, p.318), Heaney enters in conversation with all the voices of the pastoral tradition, including Dante, who, in 1319 wrote two eclogues to a professor of classics Giovanni de Virgilio, modelled on Virgil's *Tenth Eclogue* (Ruud 2008, p.281). This connection between Virgil and Dante (beside Virgil's authoritative presence in the *Divine Comedy*), is justified by the fact that like Dante, the Latin poet lived in times of social war and chaos, and that similarly, in his poetry, he sought to find a field of force that would contrast the bloodshed of his time. The dialogue with Virgil, and with classical literature in general, has been seen as an attempt on Heaney's part, to abandon his 'roots' and to 'cast [...] off provincialism', becoming 'magnificently authoritative' (Mackinnon 2001, p.5). However, it could also be stated that the poet's conversation with the Latin tradition allowed him to deal with the situation in Northern Ireland from a more nuanced and quasi-transcendent standpoint. In Virgil, the poet found work which interacted with both 'the agrarian and the political', and which suggested 'a guarded optimism that better

things might be possible' (Thomas 2001, p.135). The *Fourth Eclogue* was written around 41 to 40 BC, during a time in which an Italian civil war seemed to be ending. According to Heaney, the poem was 'Virgil's dream of how his hurt country might start to heal' (Heaney 2004, np).

Virgil's eclogue is a hymn to peace, symbolized by the birth of a 'child' who 'will be the ruler of a world / made peaceful by the merits of his father' (Virgil 2000, p.36). Similarly, in Heaney's translation, or transposition, the birth of a girl child represents hope for peace and human betterment (Tyler 2005, p.53). As he says at the beginning of his poem:

Bann Valley Muses, give us a song worth singing,  
Something that rises like the curtain in  
Those words *And it came to pass or In the beginning*.  
Help me to please my hedge-schoolmaster Virgil  
And the child that's due. Maybe, heavens, sing  
Better times for her and her generation. (Heaney 2001b, p.11)

Heaney is singing peace for the child and her generation, hoping that war and hatred will soon belong to the past. The parallel influence of Virgil helps Heaney to prevent 'pessimism and personal and social disruption' (Kallendorf 2007, p.318). As Craig W. Kallendorf points out, "Bann Valley Eclogue" 'is not merely a cultural intertext, but also a linguistic one' (Kallendorf 2007, p.318). Virgil's words resonate in Heaney's contexts:

Here are my words you'll have to find a place for:  
*Carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens*.  
Their gist in your tongue and province should be clear  
Even at this stage. Poetry, order, the times,  
The nation, wrong and renewal, then an infant birth  
And a flooding away of the old miasma.

Whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourselves:  
Earth mark, birth mark, mould like the bloodied mould  
On Romulus's ditch-back. (Heaney 2001b, p.11)

In a prophetic tone, Virgil envisions peace after war. Whatever is inside that 'stains' the poet, whatever guilt for 'old miasma', and for the 'old markings', will be washed away – like the river Bann washes the valley – by 'the new baby's birth' (Heaney 2001b, p.11). The description of Virgil's pastoral and bountiful landscape is symbolic of this future peace. The child will only know 'the pram hood over her vestal head'; and Heaney makes this landscape his own by the use of a dialect word 'fanked up': 'Big dog daisies will get fanked up in the spoke' (Heaney 2001b, p.12), which illustrates the poet's ability to blend the local and the classic in a harmonious way. Virgil's '*ipsa tibi blandos fundent canabula flores*' ('there will be no more snakes and no more deceptive poison plants') (Virgil 1900, np), becomes in Heaney's version: 'Let her never hear close gunfire or explosions' (Heaney 2001b, p.12), a translation which has a strong resonance with Northern Ireland's Troubles. The Virgilian text, with its images of both hope and politics is the perfect setting for Heaney, a poet who has still trust that peace can be achieved in a country ripped apart by civil war. There is also the fusion of Romulus with Heaney's own character, Sweeney, from his translation of *Buile Suibhne*, as they are both associated with 'ditch-backs'.

Like Dante, Heaney made Virgil the guide and master in this poem. Other translations of Virgil appear in other collections by Heaney, such as *Seeing Things*, *The Spirit Level*, *Field Work*, and *Human Chain*, which, besides suggesting the importance of the Latin author, and of the classics in general, also display the importance of translation in Heaney's notion of literature. Translation in fact, is for Heaney 'an integral part of his making poetry' (Brunetti 2001, p.94), because like

poetry, it allows his inner self to come into contact with the external reality, and to better understand his time and himself. Colin Burrow suggests that 'Heaney's translation of Virgil is part of a consistent project late in his career to insinuate himself into an Eliotan-European line of poetry, which links Dante and Virgil and Eliot in one tradition' (Burrow 1997, p.36). Eliot had also appropriated, translated and alluded to Virgil throughout his poetic and critical career. He spoke of 'the new insight into history' that the *Aeneid* offers, and presented Aeneas as 'central' to 'European values', as he is 'a symbol of Rome; and, as Aeneas is to Rome, so is ancient Rome to Europe' (Eliot 1975, pp.128-9). Eliot makes Virgil's discourse his own in order to promote his 'vision of European culture and his own perceived role within it' (Kennedy 1997, p.46). This could also apply to Eliot's own vision of Dante. In fact, the Anglo-American poet emphasized the universal qualities of the Florentine master, rather than his sense of locality, because, as Heaney states: Eliot was taking 'what he needed' from the work of the Italian poet. Moreover, what he needed was 'a way of confirming himself as a poet ready to submit his intelligence and sensibility to a framework of beliefs which were inherited and communal' (Heaney 1985, p.6). Heaney differs from this aspect of Eliot's identification with Dante, as he celebrates both the essentiality of the Italian poet's lyric and his 'classically ratified language' (Heaney 1985, p.12). For Heaney, Dante is both local and universal, and this is what the Irish poet seeks to achieve in his poetry. In *Electric Light*, this double perspective is clearly attained.

Dante's presence here is not only felt stylistically but also philosophically, as the poet translates Dante's sonnet "*Guido I' Vorrei che Tu e Lapo ed Io*" ("Guido, I Wish that You and Lapo and I") – about a magic dream of a journey on a ship with his companions – and makes it his own in the poem "The Gaeltacht". The interplay

between eclogues, sonnets, elegies, glosses and lyrics of all genres is astonishing in this collection, demonstrating Heaney's pluralistic perspectives in terms of poetic form as well as in terms of theme and language. The poet takes Dante's sonnet and places it in rural Ireland, precisely, in Rosguill, Co. Donegal, a place that he had visited as a young man. Dante's poem is part of his early works, in which the poet wrote in the lyric of courtly love, and marks a turning point in Dante's poetic technique, as it represents the birth of the artistic movement that he himself defined *Dolce Stil Novo* (*Sweet New Style*). The literal translation of the sonnet reads as follow:

Guido, I wish that Lapo, you, and I,  
Were taken by some enchantment  
And set aboard a ship, that with all winds  
Would sail the seas at your will or mine

So that no bad luck or bad weather  
Might be of impediment for us  
But by living always together in mutual assent,  
Our desire for close companionship would grow even stronger.

And Monna Vanna, Monna Lagia too,  
With she who's also numbered in the thirty,  
Placed there thanks to the good enchanter,

And there we'd talk about love forever,  
And each of them would be truly happy,  
As I believe we would be too. (My translation)

The main theme of the sonnet is a desire to escape from the realities of life, and this is enacted in the description of a dream of a courtly life, which is completely detached from real life, which allows the speaker to distance himself from the socio-historical context, in search of a fantastic lightness, as the keywords 'I wish',

'enchantment', 'desire', and 'love' denote. Dante and his friends, the two stilnovist poets Guido Cavalcanti and Lapo Gianni, are united by their passion for love, the theme of *Dolce Stil Novo*: 'and there we'd talk about love forever', a subject matter that they explored in their own poetry. The initial individual desire of the poet becomes, in the end, a collective desire, shared by all three friends. The setting of the magical and the fantastic evokes the Provençal lyric, particularly, a *plazer*, that is, a declaration of pleasant realities.

Heaney's poem is enveloped in the same atmosphere of tenderness and beauty as Dante's sonnet, and is about a desire for youth and friendship:

I wish, *mon vieux*, that you and Barlo and I  
Were back in Rosguill, on the Atlantic Drive,  
And that it was again nineteen sixty  
And Barlo was alive

And Paddy Joe and Chips Rafferty and Dicky  
Were there talking Irish, for I believe  
In that case Aoibheann Marren and Margaret Conway  
And M. and M. and Deirdre Morton and Niamh

Would be there as well. And it would be great too  
If we could see ourselves, if the people we are now  
Could hear what we were saying, and if this sonnet

In imitation of Dante's, where he's set free  
In a boat with Lapo and Guido, with their girlfriends in it,  
Could be the wildtrack of our gabble above the sea. (Heaney  
2001b, p.44)

The poet expresses a desire to return in the sixties 'on the Atlantic Drive' with friends, many of whom are no longer here, to speak Gaelic. Dante's line, 'and there we'd talk about love forever', becomes 'we were talking Irish' (Heaney 2001b, p.44)

in Heaney's version. This substitution is symbolic of the profound union that the poet perceives between poetry, love, place and language, and it displays once again Heaney's ability to see his personal concerns through the prism of a universal master. In the final part of the poem, Heaney invokes Dante and his company in their sea vessel in order to refine the sound ('wildtrack') of those former conversations ('babble') between him and his old friends, heard with the maturity of the 'people [they] are now' (Heaney 2001b, p.44). Both poets are thematically connected in the final stanza, as Dante's imagined reunion becomes Heaney's recollected and imaginary reconciliation. His re-adaptation of the ancient text into his own experience and sensibility allows the poet to evoke the 'wildtrack' of his culture and friends, reconciling past and present.

### ***Metamorphosing Language***

Virgil's and Dante's translations and reappropriations are only two of the abundant amount of translations contained in *Electric Light*, and in Heaney's writings in general. In fact, O'Brien points out that for Heaney, translation is a 'synecdoche of his poetic methodology' (O'Brien 2002a, p.130). It is precisely through translation that the poet developed a more European outlook. Through the transferring of a text into another culture a 'double perspective' (O'Brien 2002a, p.130) is produced, and thus, 'the Irish experience' 'is more fully understood when juxtaposed with European exemplars' (O'Brien 2002a, p.130). These exemplars are poets who had the greatest influence in Heaney's poetry, such as Sophocles, Ovid, Horace, Virgil, Dante; poetry by Eastern Europeans like Alexander Pushkin and Jan Kochanowski, and works by unknown authors, such as *Beowulf* and *Buile Suibhne*. Through these translations, the poet lets 'others speak through [him in his] own verse' (Olson 2008,

p.20). This richness of translations allowed Heaney to create a language which would not be simply a symbol of 'ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition, but an entry into further language' (Heaney 2001a, p.xxv). Translation 'changes the language of self, and the language of other, into a language that is neither Irish nor English, Greek nor Trojan but "all throughother"' (O'Brien 2002c, pp.183-4). This term expresses Heaney's willingness to transcend his tribal context, as Dante did in the creation of his polyphonic language. In fact, transposing the language and the thought of the other into the language and thought of the self, allows Heaney 'to achieve a new perspective on his own situation so that he can write about issues that affect him deeply, while at the same time achieving a measure of distance' (O'Brien 2002a, p.110).

This is particularly visible in Heaney's rendering of Dante's "Ugolino", from *Inferno* XXXII-XXXIII, placed at the end of the collection *Field Work*. As Heaney says in an interview with Rand Brandes, this episode:

was a very famous purple passage, but it also happened to have an oblique applicability (in its ferocity of emotion and in its narrative about a divided city) to the northern Irish situation. So one foraged unfairly into Italian and ripped it untimely from its place. (Heaney 1989b, p.12)

Ripping a language from its place is what the poet does whenever he translates. In fact, translation for Heaney is a coherent work in itself, rather than just a form of fidelity to the source-text (McCarthy 2008, p.17). From a linguistic perspective, his rendering could be considered an 'impure' translation. As Heaney declares, a 'pure' translation is that in which the author does 'everything that is possible to bring across the unique and beloved features of the original [text], and this will involve an

attempt at all kinds of precisions, equivalent, and honesties' (Heaney 1989b, pp.11-2). However, the impure translation:

has its own *verité*. You are listening through the wall of the original language as to a conversation in another room in a motel. Dully, you can hear something that is so interesting. And you say: "God, I wish that was in this room." So forage, you blunder through the wall. You go needily after something. (Heaney 1989b, pp.11-2)

Translation is a 'taking over' of the original, an appropriation, where the 'foreign work of art [is carried] across the linguistic frontier by adapting it to the new context' (Gatto 2000, p.66).

In this respect, Heaney resembles Dante, whose vision of translation has much 'in common with the modern notion of a transformation of one text into another [rather] than with the prosaic transfer of a text from one language to another that describes most *volgarizzamento* [translation into vernacular] of his contemporaries' (Cornish 2010, p.10). This is discernible in Dante's appropriation of Homer's story of Odysseus, placed in *Inferno* XXVI. The author makes a number of modifications to the original in order to display his own artistic and moral message. Dante substitutes the Greek name 'Odysseus' with the Latin 'Ulysses', placing the ancient hero in a more modern context. If Odysseus is a returner, then Ulysses is an adventurer. In fact, while in the *Odyssey*, the hero returns to his Ithaca after ten years of struggles during the Trojan War, Dante's Ulysses never returns home. His wish for divine knowledge leads him to continue his journey beyond the Pillars of Heracles, which were the Western limits of the known world. However, his journey ends in tragedy as his ship is dragged under the sea by a whirlwind. Dante reappropriates Homer's story in order to warn human beings of the danger of going against God's will. Ulysses's thirst for knowledge violated a divine prohibition, and

for this reason, he is punished. Dante thought that a language system could not faithfully be translated into another without a degree of stiffness and rigidity. He believed in the 'inspiration of something new into a work of art' (Cornish 2010, p.152). As he says in his *canzone*, "*Donne ch'avete Intelletto d'Amore*" ("Women who have Intelligence of Love") '*quando / Amor mi spira, noto, e a quell modo / ch'è ditta dentro vo significando*' ('When / love inspires me, I take note, and what he within dictates / I write'). This applies also to Heaney, who, when translating, needs, as he affirms: 'a note that pays you back [...]; you need to be making a music that doesn't just match the original but verifies something in yourself as well' (Heaney 2008, pp.425-6).

Heaney found the note for this music in his translation of "Ugolino". As he asserts 'I had that motive, I suppose, in relation to the "Ugolino" section that I did from Dante' (Heaney 1989b, p.12). In his position as an observer of the Troubles, Heaney had a need for reinvented metaphors and new forms of representation. In *Preoccupations*, he states that his dialogue with Dante gave him the opportunity to realize that poetry was not just 'a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon, [but it became] a search for images and symbols adequate to [his] predicament' (Heaney 1980, p.56). In Dante's character, he found the ideal symbol through which to voice the situation in Northern Ireland. Ugolino della Gherardesca was a prominent figure in Tuscan politics in the thirteenth century; in an attempt to gain more power for himself, he was condemned as a traitor by his ally Archbishop Ruggieri. He was imprisoned along with his four sons in a tower subsequently known as the Tower of Hunger. All five were left to starve to death. In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney informs us that while he was reading the *Inferno*, something similar to the "Ugolino" story was happening in Ireland: Ciaran Nugent, imprisoned for

being an IRA member, had started his 'dirty protest' (refusing prison clothing and refusing to clean out his cell) in order to rebel against the decision of the British Government to treat IRA prisoners as criminals rather than political prisoners (Heaney 2008, p.425).

This action initiated the campaign that culminated in the hunger strikes of the early 1980s, in which Nugent and other prisoners lost their lives. Heaney confesses: 'the whole business was weighing on me greatly already and I had toyed with the idea of dedicating the "Ugolino" translation to the prisoners' (Heaney 2008, p.258). However, after meeting a *Sinn Fein* spokesman who charged him with the accusation, 'You never write anything for us' (Heaney 2008, p.259), he felt that he was being 'commanded', with the result that what he 'felt as a gift [...] was suddenly levied' (Heaney 2008, p.259). He rejected the imposed role of spokesman of his tribe, to submit his art to the dictates of the public; for this reason, he changed his mind and did not dedicate his "Ugolino" to the convicts. In fact, as O'Brien points out, Heaney is 'unwilling to speak only the language of his tribe'; instead, he continually demonstrates an 'openness to alterity', which urges him to 'challenge himself continually with different texts and languages' (O'Brien 2001-2002, p.22).

The figures of Ugolino and Ruggieri are illustrative of the seemingly never-ending sectarian hatred in Northern Ireland. In a conversation with Robert Hass, Heaney states: 'there's an almost sexual intimacy between Ugolino and Archbishop Roger, which seemed cognate with the violence and intimacy of Ulster' (Heaney, in Hass 2000, p.13). Nugent is seen as an unforgiving hater in another poem written by Heaney, "The Flight Path", in *The Spirit Level*. Here Nugent's 'red eyes' (Heaney 1996, p.38) are reminiscent of Ugolino's rolling 'eyes' (Heaney 1979, p.63), providing a significant image which fuses hunger and hatred. Heaney stresses the

burning desire for revenge of both Nugent and the medieval count, and parallels them with the sectarian hatred of IRA and Loyalists. Ugolino eats his own kind: 'His teeth, like a dog's teeth / [...] took hold' (Heaney 1979, p.63). This appalling image could be a metaphor for the land eating its own people. Years before Heaney, James Joyce had declared through the words of Stephen Dedalus: 'Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow' (Joyce 2000, p.220). For Heaney, it is symbolic of his fellow citizens feeding on and betraying one another. Darcy O'Brien states that 'Heaney has rendered the vision of the Florentine poet into twentieth century reality' (O'Brien 1996, p.180). As with every translator, Heaney is influenced by the literary conventions of his time, and he affirms: 'it is inevitable that people speak in their own voice in translation' (Heaney, in Hass 2000, p.33). In fact, his rendition takes into account a range of cultural elements and contains some deliberate modifications of the original. For example, Dante's Archbishop Ruggieri becomes 'Roger' in Heaney's translation because Roger, a Protestant name, has associations with the religious Northern Irish conflict (Tsur 2001, p.8). The description of Ugolino 'gnawing' at Roger's head 'like a famine victim at a loaf of bread' (Heaney 1979, p.61) has connotations with the Irish famine of 1845-47 (McCarthy 2008, p.56). It should be noted that Dante's line did not include such a reference; in fact, the word used in the original text is '*fame*' ('hunger') (*Inf.* XXXII, l.127 [1975]). Heaney also adds two descriptions of Roger's brain as 'sweet fruit' and like 'some spattered carnal melon' (Heaney 1979, p.61). Christopher Ricks suggests that the 'fruit imagery emphasizes the ties that the translation of "Ugolino" has to the rest of *Field Work*' (Ricks 1997, p.95) because it counterpoints the opening poem of that collection "Oysters", in which the image of the oysters eaten alive is a metaphor for the appalling actions by which human beings destroy each other.

In another passage, Dante's expression:

[...] if words  
Of mine may prove the seeds of future fruit  
Of infamy for that traitor whom I gnaw,  
Thou shalt have speech and grief together, (*Inf.* XXXIII, ll.6-9)

is syntactically transformed by Heaney into a more contemporary style and lexicon:

[...] while I weep to say them, I would sow  
My words like curses – that they might increase  
And multiply upon the head I gnaw. (Heaney 1979, p.61)

His translation creates a more colloquial language, which is more accessible to the modern reader. Moreover, it should be noted that in this passage Heaney, 'the poet of Irish farmlands, has bent Dante's original metaphor of words as seeds to his own "natural" attitude of perceiving poetry as a form of "digging and sowing"' (Sperandio 2009, p.214). This reflects how intimate has become Heaney's affinity with Dante's poetry, and his ability to use the master's images to his own purpose. In Heaney's translation, Dante speaks 'not only as a man of this nation, but as a man of this age' (France 2000, p.7). The Irish poet's characteristic sense of place is also visible in the lines:

Ah Pisa, you are an insult to the people  
Of this beautiful country where the "si" is heard; (My translation)

which the Irish poet translates in:

Pisa! Pisa, your sounds are like a hiss  
Sizzling in our country's grassy language. (Heaney 1979, p.63)

Dante's reference to the language, where Italy is identified as the country in which the 'si' is heard, is transformed by Heaney 'into a tiny *dinnseanchas* relating the very

hissing sound of the toponym Pisa to the treacherous nature of the town, alluding to the phrase “snake-in-the-grass” (Gatto 2000, p.71). Heaney recreates the ‘local intensity’ that greatly fascinates him in the *Comedy* through the reverberations of the idiom of his home place. In fact, as he says in the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, the translator has to transport into a different language, not only the meaning, but also the music of a poem. He claims:

It is one thing to find lexical meanings for the words and to have some feel for how the metre might go, but it is quite another thing to find the tuning fork that will give you the note and pitch for the overall music of the work. (Heaney 2001a, p.xxvi)

The pitch and the lexicon used by Heaney in his version, transfer Ugolino’s social reality from the Middle Ages to that of the present, creating a fruitful conversation with the Irish poet’s cultural environment. Heaney’s ‘impure’ translation definitely correspond to what Walter Benjamin defines the ‘survival’ (Benjamin 1969, p.58) of the original text in a new form of poetry. The original flourishes thanks to the translation; however, in this process the ‘tongue of the translator is transformed as well’ (Benjamin 1969, p.72). In this way, the relationship between Heaney’s version and Dante’s original becomes ‘a natural one, or more specifically, a vital connection’ (Benjamin 1969, p.71). This relation between translation and original is symbolic of the ultimate ‘kinship of all languages’ (Benjamin 1969, p.74). Heaney’s rendering of “Ugolino” displays his dream of a common ‘world culture’, in which differences between cultural languages and traditions are transcended, and are made part of a higher culture, creating a ‘kinship’ between them. In this way, the Irish poet, like his medieval predecessor, can create a world that is not divided by political boundaries but is open to the sounds of all the other voices of Europe.

## **SECTION THREE: CULTURAL INFLUENCES**

## Chapter 5: Eliot's Spiritual Quest for Meaning and Redemption

T. S. Eliot's intertextual engagement with Dante allowed him to investigate his personal and cultural realities, and to achieve an increasing spirituality, while at the same time evolving a new poetic craft. A very important role in his development was played by his engagement with the spiritual message of the *Divine Comedy*, which provided the scaffolding for his own poetic works. Eliot's literary and spiritual journey allows him to achieve new learning experiences, a vivid hope for change, and a different ethical world. However, before attaining understanding, the poet has to go through the desolation of "The Waste Land", which resounds with hellish echoes, similar to the imprisonment of souls in the *Inferno*. Then the poet experiences a period of purification in "Ash Wednesday", which depicts his struggle against doubt, and his uncertain steps towards a tentative faith (following his conversion to the Anglo-Catholic Church in 1927). Here, there is a change in the nature of suffering, the theme of hope becomes predominant, and the tone assumes a more purgatorial nature, as in Dante's *Purgatorio*. Finally, just like Dante in the *Paradiso*, in "Little Gidding", the poet achieves divine understanding in the ineffable contemplation of God's light, affirming his belief that 'rarefied and remote states of beatitude can be the material for great poetry' (Eliot 1932a, p.252). Although it may not have been a conscious decision on Eliot's part, this pattern is important in understanding the changing character of his poetic development. These poems

exhibit the poet's trustworthy observation of the plight of man in the Modern Age, the condemnation of his moral recklessness and the presentation of a rebirth of lost spiritual values. The poet's vision of the world progressively changes due to an increasing Christian ardour, and through his engagement with Dante's works, he is able to display his own spiritual message more coherently.

This structural similarity with the *Divine Comedy* testifies to Eliot's ongoing affinity and identification with Dante, which was fundamental in his decision to borrow from the Italian master's work. This affinity is mostly displayed in the similarity of their poetic message, namely, to urge human beings to search for truth, which, for both poets is represented by God. Humans' complete fulfillment in fact requires a union with the Supreme Being. The similarity of their artistic meaning makes the theory of intertextuality particularly applicable to the analysis of their poetic relationship, as intertextual references are always relevant to the author's communicative purpose. In Peter White's words, 'the most basic intertextual evaluation is one of "implied" relevance' (White, in Kornetzki 2011, p.102). Similarly, Stefanie Brinkmann affirms that the practice of referencing is not simply a connecting of texts, but can be seen as a conscious action which connects the texts at a conceptual level (Brinkmann, in Kornetzki 2011, p.102). Dantean intertextual positioning is brought into play by Eliot in order to display its relevance to his current communicative purposes. As the poet himself states:

You are entitled to take [a phrase or an image] for your own purposes  
in so far as your fundamental purposes are akin to those of the one who  
is, for you, the author of the phrase, the inventor of the image. (Eliot  
1932b, p.12)

Eliot's dictum reminds the reader of Seamus Heaney's belief that when writers borrow from an ancient master, it is because they find in him 'a reflection of their

own imaginative needs' (Heaney 1985, p.5). For both Heaney and Eliot, Dante was a constant authority, and 'had a capital importance in [their] own development' (Eliot 1965, p.127). Eliot recognized in the Italian master 'a temperament akin to [his] own' (Eliot 1965, p.126), and this similarity allowed the medieval poet to become 'the most persistent and deepest influence upon [his] own verse' (Eliot 1965, p.125). The 'socio-political' and religious thought exposed throughout Dante's *oeuvre*, are 'translated into [Eliot's] art and criticism', and through them the poet achieves 'the idea of a Christian society' (Manganiello 1989, p.5).

Like Dante's, Eliot's journey is a journey towards understanding. Both poets are *homos viators* (pilgrim men), who, after experiencing a dispersal of the soul, attempt to find their way towards salvation. However, while the world in which Dante moves is dominated by the figure of God, and by a steadfast conception of the otherworld, as taught in the *Bible*; Eliot's world is instead characterized by the loss of spiritual values (strengthened by the Darwinian disbelief in God's existence), which created a society dominated by waste and futility. Before World War I, Christianity had been the fundamental belief-system that had held humanity together; its disappearance had provoked a fracture in the very core of society. Through his spiritual journey, Eliot, like Dante, can look into himself, and can escape from a life dominated by sin and error. During this inner search, he undergoes what Carl Jung calls the 'archetypes of transformation', a psychic process of growth, change and transition (Jung 1956). Adriana Mazzarella defines such processes as 'passages of death-rebirth' (Mazzarella 1991, p.59). These involve the descent into Hell, a fundamental stage that enables the hero to experience and understand pain and death, and to become aware of the forces that destroy men. The Italian critic points out that the journey to the underworld is typical of the initiation process, which leads to a

new beginning through a process of internal searching. Typical examples are the journey of Orpheus, who descended into Hades looking for Eurydice; the journey of Ulysses, who made the same passage in search of his mother; the journey of Aeneas, who descended into Hades to find his father; and that of Christ, who went to Hell and after three days resurrected from death (Mazzarella 1991, p.108). The experience of Hell is thus recognized and accepted as necessary. For both Dante and Eliot, salvation is possible; however, only after having known evil, will they be ready to expiate their sins and purify themselves in the fire of purgatory, which leads to that heavenly place where there is only:

pure light: light intellectual  
And filled with love; love of true good most full  
Of gladness; gladness which transcends all sorrow. (*Par. XXX*,  
ll.37-9)

### ***“The Waste Land”: A Spiritual Drought***

As it was demonstrated in chapter two, hopeless torment and images of the *Inferno* abound in “The Waste Land”. Here, Eliot describes the landscape which man inhabits, and suggests that not only has the physical world crumbled, but that the spiritual one has done so as well. Burton Rascoe elucidates the central image of the poem, namely:

the universal despair or resignation arising from the spiritual and economic consequences of the war, the cross purposes of modern civilization, the cul-de-sac into which both science and philosophy seem to have got themselves and the breakdown of all great directive purposes which give joy and zest to the business of living. It is an erudite despair. (Rascoe 1922, p.8)

Modern man is compelled to live in a world devoid of meaning and of spiritual values, and this is reflected in the physical landscape as well. The pilgrim travels through a desert, where there is 'no water but only rock' (Eliot 1963, p.66), and 'mountains of rock without water' (Eliot 1963, p.66). The repetition of the word 'rock', which occurs several times in the poem (Eliot 1963, pp.53; 54; 66; 67), illustrates the rough setting, similar to the landscape that Dante found on entering the seventh circle of Hell (*Inferno* XII), where the perpetrators of violence against their neighbours are punished. There, Dante describes an immense mass of rocks, which renders the land impractical and craggy:

And so we hurried down through crumbling shale,  
And pebbles which gave way beneath our feet. (*Inf.* XII, ll.23-4)

The image of the 'red rock' in Eliot's poem (Eliot 1963, p.53) is a specific reminder of that 'river of blood' (*Inf.* XII, l.39) found at the end of Dante's uneven stony path in which the sinners are plunged (Manganiello 1989, p.43). It is worthy of note that the same image was adopted by Heaney in his poem "Sandstone Keepsake" (*Station Island*), which depicts the poet meditating on the atrocity perpetrated in the internment camp at Magilligan (in Derry, Northern Ireland). While 'wading a shingle beach on Inishowen' (Heaney 1984, p.20), in County Donegal, the poet finds a piece of sandstone, which reminds him of 'Phlegethon' (the river of blood). He compares the cruelty of those torturers in the camp to 'that damned Guy de Montfort [in] the boiling flood' (Heaney 1984, p.20) (Guy de Montfort is plunged into Phlegethon with the rest of the perpetrators of violence against their neighbours). Heaney, like Eliot, uses Dante's infernal images in order to display his preoccupation with the reality around him. Their decision to draw on the medieval poet is in fact symbolic of the affinity existing between the two modern poets as well, and this intertextuality

establishes a strong connection between their poetry. For the Irish poet, these images spark thoughts of violence and torture, reflecting the situation in Northern Ireland; for Eliot, they are paralleled with the barrenness of modernity after the First World War. The only possibility of revitalizing and strengthening the 'dull roots' (Eliot 1963, p.53) and the 'dead men' (Eliot 1963, p.57) of contemporary society is to seek the life-giving rain, symbol of Christianity (Gallagher 2012, p.19), which will restore the spiritual drought of "The Waste Land".

The lack of religious beliefs brings a sense of isolation to individuals, who become increasingly self-centred, and incapable of any satisfactory human relationship, and are only able to convey a 'disordered' love. Eliot's perception of his loveless society was influenced by Dante's notion of ordered and disordered love in the *Comedy*. In fact, the poem might be viewed as a treatise on love. The *Inferno* displays the punishments of those who, during their lives, had inadequate love for humanity and for God, and did not repent before dying. For this reason, they are placed near the centre of the Earth, far away from God. In the *Purgatorio*, there are individuals who loved either inadequately, or excessively; however, since they repented, they are allowed to be purified from these sins in the purgatorial flames. The *Paradiso* reveals the result of living with proper and balanced love, and represents ordered love. Here we find those who were kind to other people, and who thus felt connected to God. Dante took these concepts from St. Augustine, who affirmed that love is disordered when it searches for happiness in worldly things, an action that causes a variety of diseases in human conduct:

In all such things, let my soul praise You, O God, Creator of all things,  
but let it not cleave too close in love to them through the senses of the  
body. For they go their way and are no more; and they rend the soul  
with desires that can destroy it, for it longs to be one with the things it

loves and to repose in them. But in them is no place of repose, because they do not abide. (*Conf.* IV, x, 15)

Like Dante, Eliot acknowledges St. Augustine's thought in the third section of "The Waste Land", "The Fire Sermon", and this could represent his condemnation of dysfunctional love:

To Carthage then I came  
Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest  
burning. (Eliot 1963, p.64)

These lines refer to book III of the *Confessions*, where Augustine affirms: 'I came to Carthage, where a cauldron of illicit loves leapt and boiled about me' (*Conf.* III, i, 1). The parallel intertextual use of Augustine's teaching in both Eliot's and Dante's poetry demonstrates the affinity of their message: namely, to display that 'human life [is] lived purely on the sensual plane' (Rai 1988, p.108), and to urge the need for change. Falling in the 'cauldron of illicit loves' leads individuals to act like beasts. Eliot displays this dehumanization of love in the immoral image of the rape of Philomela, 'So rudely forced' (Eliot 1963, p.56) 'by the barbarous king' (Eliot 1963, p.56); or in the sexual affair between the bored typist and the city clerk (Eliot 1963, p.61). These hollow relationships undermine 'any civilization built on love' (Manganiello 1989, p.46).

In his 1929 essay on Dante, Eliot asserted that human love 'is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals' (Eliot 1932a, p.274). Every feeling of love that is not addressed to the supreme good leads to degradation, even to bestiality, as Dante proves emblematically in *Purgatorio* XXVI, through the episode of Pasiphae, wife of King Minos of Crete.

She fell in love with a bull,<sup>9</sup> and from their union, the Minotaur – half-animal, half-human – was born. The clear message is that lust gives birth to monsters. Eliot admired Dante's ability to subsume human love into a divine framework. In the *Vita Nuova*, the poet recounts of his love for Beatrice, a woman who made his 'vital' and 'animal' spirits shiver (VN II, 4; 5). This carnal love however, is transformed into a desire for God's grace in the *Divine Comedy*, where Beatrice, identified with faith, will lead the pilgrim through the heavens towards the vision of the Trinity. Eliot, like Dante, believed that human beings must transcend human love in order to reach the divine. However, only in his later poetry ("Ash Wednesday" and "Little Gidding"), can we see the poet reconciling human with divine love. In "The Waste Land", purely human love is unable to meet individuals' 'inherently divine yearnings' (Lowe 2002, p.129). Their separation from God leads to their personal isolation, and this is displayed in the image of the crowds 'walking round in a ring' (Eliot 1963, p.54), enclosed in the prison of the self. These people:

think, feel, and will in a Bradleyan finite circle closed on the outside which [contrasts with] the infinite reality imaged by Dante as "a sphere of which the centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere" (this is in fact the common medieval definition of God to which Dante alludes in the *Vita Nuova*, XII). (Manganiello 1989, p.52)

This circular enclosure is symbolic of their entrapment, an idea reinforced by the infernal vision of Ugolino as 'immured' in the Hunger Tower: 'we think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison' (Eliot 1963, p 69). These lines are an implicit reference to Dante's *Inferno*, and display the drama of modern man in his exile and solitude. The tower and the key allegorically symbolize

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<sup>9</sup> Poseidon had given a beautiful bull to Minos, with the expectation that he would sacrifice it to him. However, the king kept the bull for himself, and to punish him, the god made Pasiphae fall in love with it.

man's entrapment and isolation in the tower of his individual selfhood, condemned to decline and spiritual death.

However, towards the end of the crossing through the desert of modernity, there is a change of tone and imagery in the poem. As the arduous and solitary journey in search of a new spirituality comes to an end, the poet gives a message of hope in the 'objective correlative' represented by the 'thunder' (Eliot 1963, p.68), which pronounces one of the key words in man's liberation: 'da', which in the Sanskrit *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, means 'be compassionate' (Rainey 2006, p.119). Already in "The Waste Land", we can see Eliot's attempt at a more positive view of the world, and also his belief that something better can be achieved. The arid images of the opening of the poem, embodying the path that the soul makes through the desert of ignorance and suffering, are replaced in the end, with a state of plenitude, affirmed by the arrival of the life-giving rain on the arid landscape: 'Then a damp gust / Bringing rain' (Eliot 1963, p.68). This is the 'apocalyptic moment, when the reanimation of modernity can finally come to fruition'. However, Eliot displays that there can be a 'regenerative, spiritual rebirth' (Gallagher 2012, p.20) not only through water, but also through fire (anticipating the imagery of the next poem). The intertextual reference to Arnaut Daniel, who dwells in the 'refining fire' (Eliot 1963, p.205) of *Purgatorio* – '*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*' ('And he turned / To the refiner's fire, which hid his form' [*Purg.* XXVI, ll.118-9]) – indicates the poet's desire to abandon the literary and spiritual desert of "The Waste Land", and to embark on a purgatorial purification in "Ash Wednesday".

***“Ash Wednesday”: The Agèd Eagle Stretches its Wings***

“Ash Wednesday” (1930) was published three years after Eliot’s conversion to the Church of England on June 27, 1927, and it epitomizes the poet’s search for spiritual renewal after the angst of the previous years. In a letter to William Force Stead in 1928, the poet writes about the sense of release that he experienced after his conversion:

[I] feel as if I had crossed a very wide and deep river: whether I get much further or not, I feel very certain that I shall not cross back, and that in itself gives one a very extraordinary sense of surrender and gain.  
(Eliot, in Schuchard 1999, p.152)

This sense of surrender and gain is explored by Eliot through the description of ‘the process of spiritual progression from a condition of despair to a point where belief is possible’ (Dickens 1989, p.150). The poem emphasizes the purgatorial side of human experience, and is considered the most Dantean of Eliot’s works. Like the *Comedy*, it is set in the Easter period. The medieval poem starts on the night before Good Friday and ends on the Wednesday after Easter in the year 1300. The liturgy of Ash Wednesday, to which Eliot’s poem refers, begins forty days before Good Friday, starting the beginning of the Lenten season. Russell Elliott Murphy even suggests that in its ‘broadest conceptualization, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is his “Ash-Wednesday”, a poem not only designed to take place at the very end of the Lenten season during Easter weekend but one in which the poet confesses to his sinfulness and his desire for repentance and salvation’ (Murphy 2007, p.60). Repentance from sins, rebirth and regeneration, are the main concerns of both Dante’s and Eliot’s works.

Each of the five movements which compose “Ash Wednesday” contains some Dantean echoes. The original title of the first movement was “*Perch’Io non*

*Spero*" ("Because I do not Hope"),<sup>10</sup> and is a translation of the first line of a poem by Guido Cavalcanti, Dante's best friend:<sup>11</sup> '*Perch'io non spero di tornar giammai*' ('Because I do not hope to ever come back') (Cavalcanti 1813, p.26). It was written when the poet was dying in exile, and through these verses, he hoped to continue to live in the memory of his lady. In line with the facets of *Stilnovism*, love here is a complex psychological experience, full of melancholy and longing, dream and anticipation. Eliot's choice of this line as the opening of "Ash Wednesday" is symbolic of his troubled love life at the time of the composition of the poem. His marriage with Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot was ending due to her psychological state of mind, which eventually resulted in her relegation to a mental institution in 1928. Probably due to this dolorous event, after his conversion, the poet made a vow of chastity. When the speaker, in the third stanza of the poem says:

I renounce the blessed face  
And renounce the voice  
Because I cannot hope to turn again, (Eliot 1963, p.85)

he is renouncing temporal love and desire, and aspires to a spiritual life. Ronald Schuchard points out that the poem represents 'the beginning of an exile's arduous Lenten journey from a life of tormented human love toward the prayerful hope of finding, like Dante, a *vita nuova* in divine Love' (Schuchard 1999, p.150). Like Cavalcanti's verse, Eliot's first movement contains themes of 'introspection, solitariness and despair' (Duncan-Jones 1966, p.39); and also tormenting doubt for not being able to undertake the journey of purification. His uncertainty is displayed in the next stanza, where he portrays himself as an 'old man' (Manganiello 1989,

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<sup>10</sup> The first movement was published separately in 1928; only in 1930 Eliot united the five parts together to form a single poem.

<sup>11</sup> Cavalcanti was a *Troubadour* poet, and had a great influence on Dante. He is mentioned in *Inferno* X (ll.52-72), where the pilgrim meets Cavalcante de Cavalcanti, father of his old friend.

p.67) who resists spiritual regeneration: 'Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?' (Eliot 1963, p.85), he asks. The image of the 'aged eagle' suggests impotency. Its wings, which beat the air 'smaller and dryer than the will' (Eliot 1963, p.86), are symbolic of the weakness of the spiritual will to go forward. In his hesitation, the poet resembles Dante, who also experiences insecurity and anxiety before starting the journey through the three realms of the afterlife. The pilgrim is not sure of his moral and physical strength, and tells Virgil:

"O poet-guide, look well  
Whether my virtue has sufficient strength,  
Ere than dost trust me on this lofty pass". (*Inf.* II, ll.10-2)

Similarly, Eliot's pilgrim is conscious of the hardness of the journey, as it entails renunciation of all worldly pleasures, 'penitential suffering, and annihilation of self' (Blistein 2008, p.114). However, the eagle is also symbolic of spiritual regeneration, in both religious and secular contexts. In *Psalms* 103 we read: 'how he contents all thy desire for good, restores thy youth, as the eagle's plumage is restored' (*Psalms* 103, 5); and in *Isaiah*, we see that 'those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength, like eagles new-fledged; hasten, and never grow weary of hastening' (*Isaiah* 40, 31). Similarly, medieval legends tell that in its old age, the eagle flew up to the sun where its feathers burnt and then it fell into the water where its youth was restored (Rao 1996, p.48).

The latter representation was adopted by Dante in *Purgatorio* IX, where the pilgrim, who is at the exit of ante-purgatory, falls asleep and has a dream. He seems to be on Mount Ida near Troy, and sees coming towards him an eagle with golden feathers: 'In dream it came to me to see suspended / A golden-feathered eagle in the

sky' (*Purg.* IX, ll.17-8).<sup>12</sup> The bird descends 'like lightning' (*Purg.* IX, l.26), and carries Dante to the sphere of fire, where both burn in the flames:

And there, it seemed, both he and I together  
Burned with such ardour that I broke my sleep;  
And so I awoke. (*Purg.* IX, ll.28-30)

Than did I shake myself for sleep to flee  
My face, and I grew pale, as one for fear  
Grows pale and cold. (*Purg.* IX, ll.37-9)

The heat of the fire immediately awakens the pilgrim, who is taken by a great fear as he finds himself in another location, namely, at the entrance of purgatory proper. Dante is later told by Virgil that it was Saint Lucy who lifted him upwards and brought him there, and the pilgrim, reassured by his guide's words, soon recovers his strength:

Like one  
In doubt, encouraging himself, whose fear  
Is changed to strength and comfort, when the truth  
Has opened out upon him; so I changed. (*Purg.* IX, ll.59-62)

Dante's fear changes to courage and confidence, and he starts his ascent towards the regions of purgatory with a new and exciting sense of purpose. Similarly, Eliot's desire for a 'higher dream' (Eliot 1963, p.90) of spiritual life, gives him 'strength beyond hope and despair' (Eliot 1963, p.89). What had appeared as 'a latent note of [discouragement] in his brooding [is converted] into a feeling of rejoicing' (Tiwari 2001, p.114): 'I rejoice, having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice' (Eliot 1963, p.85). Appealing to the Virgin Mary, 'the human mediator and advocate

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<sup>12</sup> The image of the eagle that brings its prey between its claws was already in Virgil's *Aeneid*: 'Jove's swooping armour-bearer [the eagle] has caught up aloft from Ida in his talons' (*Aeneid* V, ll.254-5). Dante's greatness was to be able to apply secular images to his own Christian philosophies.

between God and his children' (Murphy 2007, p.61), the speaker invokes: 'Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death' (Eliot 1963, p.85), which are the words of the prayer to the Virgin Mary. The figure of the Virgin mingles throughout the poem with that of a Lady, a Beatrice figure, who will help the pilgrim on his way. The second movement of the poem is dedicated to her. The relationship Lady-Beatrice is confirmed by the fact that, when it was first published in 1927, the title of this part was "Salutation", a direct reference to Beatrice's greeting to Dante, narrated in the *Vita Nuova*. In that work, the medieval poet recounted the effects that the love for his lady had on his growth as a person and as a literary man. Dante was writing in the tradition of the *Troubadours*, for whom the love for a lady was 'akin [...] to one's love for the divine' (Murphy 2007, p.55). However, for the Provençal poets 'love [had] no direct relation to the love of God', but rather, it was 'an imitation of religious love' (Williams 2007, p.9). Dante enlarged 'the boundary of human love so as to make it a stage in the progress of the divine' (Eliot 1993, p.166). Thus, Beatrice is the mediator who instils love in him in order to redirect it towards God.

The greeting to which Eliot refers happens nine years after Dante's and Beatrice's first meeting at the age of nine. The poet is so inebriated by the lady's salute that later that day, he has a dream in which the personification of Love feeds Beatrice with his own heart. The meaning is clear:

Love permits the self to be consumed in selflessness by virtue of a complete devotion to another. More, it is by that very awakening of the person to love through a selfless devotion to another that the soul is prepared for its own awakening to a selfless love for God. (Murphy 2007, p.62)

In the *Comedy*, Beatrice continues to be the beloved woman. Her stilnovistic attributes are still the same (the gleaming face, and the luminous eyes); however,

they acquire new mystical meaning, as they become a reflection of divine radiance.

In his 1929 essay on Dante, Eliot stated:

The attitude of Dante to the fundamental experience of the *Vita Nuova* can only be understood by accustoming ourselves to find meaning in *final causes* rather than in origins. It is not, I believe, meant as a description of what he *consciously* felt on his meeting with Beatrice, but rather as a description of what that meant on mature reflection upon it. The final cause is the attraction towards God. A great deal of sentiment has been spilt, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, upon idealizing the reciprocal feelings of man and woman towards each other [...]; this sentiment ignoring the fact that the love of man and woman [...] is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals. (Eliot 1932a, p.274)

Dante transformed sexual love into a way of achieving salvation. In a 1930 letter to Paul Elmer More, Eliot confessed that he viewed his own poem as a continuation of Dante's thought in modern times: 'The *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' (Eliot, in Harries 1972, p.141). As in Dante's poem, the Lady in Eliot's poem is symbolic of love and beauty:

Because of [her] goodness [...]  
And because of her loveliness and because  
She honours the Virgin in meditation. (Eliot 1963, p.87)

Eliot symbolically refers to her as the 'Rose of memory' (Eliot 1963, p.87), and 'Rose of forgetfulness' (Eliot 1963, p.88), images which, in E. E. Duncan-Jones's words, evoke 'the stream of Lethe and Eunoe which run through Dante's Earthly Paradise' in *Purgatorio* XXVIII (Duncan-Jones 1966, p.47). The river Lethe

'obliterates the memory of sin, and Eunoe, [...] restores the memory of good deeds'  
(Duncan-Jones 1966, p.47):

On this side it flows down  
With virtue to wash out all memory  
Of sin, and on the other to restore  
All memory of good. (*Purg.* XXVIII, ll.114-7)

Remembering and forgetting are two moments in the process of achieving a form of spiritual perfection, which takes place in the pilgrim; this involves the obliteration of all negative spiritual elements (the evil done), which triggers the reviviscence of positive elements (the good accomplished). Like Dante's rivers, the Lady in Eliot's poem helps the pilgrim remove the memory of sin and pain, and this is the first step towards regeneration.

To assist the pilgrim towards his goal, there are also 'three white leopards' (Eliot 1963, p.87), which the poet introduces in the second movement, and which remind the reader of the three wild beasts that Dante meets at the beginning of his journey in the *Inferno*. However, while Dante's beasts seek to keep the pilgrim from salvation, Eliot's leopards are divine agents, which are meant to help in the purification of the pilgrim (a vivid example of how the author is not just imitating Dante, but appropriating images from his works and transforming them for his own contemporary literary needs). Francis Otto Matthiessen suggests that the three animals personify 'the world, the flesh and the devil' (Matthiessen 1947, p.116). However, Duncan-Jones points out that they are more likely to be 'the goodness of the Lady, her loveliness' (Duncan-Jones 1966, p.45). In fact, the action of the three animals, namely, feeding on the speaker's 'legs', 'heart', 'liver and that which had been / contained' (Eliot 1963, p.87), symbolically depriving him of his old self, serves to make him ready for spiritual renewal. Eliot takes this idea from the *Vita*

*Nuova*, in which Dante recounts that Beatrice's greeting affects him in all the principal forces of life in the body:

At that very moment, and I speak the truth, the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the most minute veins of my body were strangely affected. (VN II, 4)

As Murphy suggests, 'Eliot expresses the same reductive and yet restorative effect of divine love, which reduces the person to the least possible remnant of his own being, thereby enabling him to find new life' (Murphy 2007, p.63). In fact, the leopards' consumption of the body is symbolic of the pilgrim's detachment from the material world, and his cleansing from worldly sins, allowing him to achieve the real blessed love.

This process of renewal is represented in the third movement by the speaker's climbing to the summit of the stairs. Eliot uses the model of Dante's *Purgatorio* as 'the scaffolding, or rather staircase, on which to construct the rising movement that must now succeed the annihilation [of] Part II' (Murphy 2007, p.63). This ascent 'makes straight / [...] whom the world so twisted' (*Purg.* XXIII, ll.99-100). In contrast to the 'aimless direction of the mountainous road in the circular waste land, the mountainous road to purgatory straightens the will which was made crooked by the disorder of original sin' (Manganiello 1989, p.68). Like the first two movements, this third part of "Ash Wednesday" was originally published separately in 1929, and was titled "*Al Som de l'Escalina*" ("At the Top of the Stairs"). The phrase is an explicit reference to the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel, from *Purgatorio* XXVI: '*Ara vos prec, per aquella valor / que vos guida al som de l'escalina, / sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor*' ('By power that guides thy steps [at the summit of the stairs], at fitting time, / Bethink thee of my sorrow' [*Purg.* XXVI, ll.117-8]). Eliot had already

referred to Arnaut at the end of "The Waste Land" with the line: '*Poi s'ascese nel foco che gli affina*' (Eliot 1963, p.69), ('And he turned / To the refiner's fire, which hid his form' [*Purg.* XXVI, ll.188-9]); through that allusion, the poet had emphasized 'the successful closing to the arduous journey that crossing the waste land from start to finish had been for the speaker' (Murphy 2007, p.64), referring specifically to his passage from the *Inferno* to the *Purgatorio*. It is no surprise, then, that in "Ash Wednesday", the poet should cite him again, as he identifies with this soul who, in his purgatorial flame says: '*que plor e vai chantan*' ('I weep me here, but yet I walk, and sing') (*Purg.* XXVI, l.114), 'looking forward with joy to that day when, purged of these remnants of his worldly sinfulness, he shall be joined at last with God' (Murphy 2007, p.64).

Eliot's purgatorial mountain is represented by three stairs, which will lead him to 'the Garden / Where all loves end' (Eliot 1963, p.88) (just as Dante's purgatory leads to the Garden of Eden) (Blistein 2008, p.114). These stairs correspond to the three steps that Dante has to climb in order to enter purgatory:

[...] the first  
Was all white marble of such polished surface  
That I could see myself therein. (*Purg.* IX, ll.87-9)

The three steps are symbols of three fundamental moments in the Sacrament of Confession. The first step is the contrition of the heart, the moment when we examine ourselves, and in which the sinner recalls all his sins and repents fully, and so he/she becomes white as marble, without blemish of sins:

[...] the second  
Was of a stone more dark than reddish black,  
And rough, and hot, and cracked in all directions. (*Purg.* IX, ll.92-4)

The second step symbolizes the oral confession, when sinners bare themselves and reveal the dark, contradictory parts in their life of sin:

Above the two the third one massed itself  
Of costly flaming porphyry, as red  
As blood fresh springing from a vein. (*Purg.* IX, ll.92-4)

The third step symbolizes the remission of sin through good deeds, namely, the commitment which the penitent takes on in reparation for the sins committed, or what can be termed the notion of penance. The colour 'red' indicates the spirit of charity, the love of God from which the repentance arises. Finally, the massive size of the step, symbolic of firmness, indicates the firm Christian intention to avoid sin.

Eliot's first turning, in which the pilgrim sees the 'same shape' of himself 'twisted on the banister', 'struggling with the devil of the stairs' (Eliot 1963, p.89), could be compared to Dante's first step, where the sinner examines himself, and struggles with the devil of human passions. The darkness of Eliot's second turning is paralleled instead to 'an old man's mouth drivelling, beyond repair', and to 'the toothed gullet of an aged shark' (Eliot 1963, p.89). Like Dante's second step, this is the moment in which Eliot's speaker bares himself and reveals the dark, contradictory, and harsh parts in his life of sin, epitomized by those 'stark images of mouths exhausted and ruined by lifetimes of appetency' (Schuchard 1999, p.157). The speaker is conscious that, to achieve salvation, this darkness must be left behind. However, he cannot help but turn back, tormented by previous sins and memories 'that stop the mind in its ascent' (Schuchard 1999, p.157): 'Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind' (Eliot 1963, p.89). We find the same ponderousness in *Purgatorio*. After climbing the three steps, at the entrance of purgatory proper, an angel warns Dante the pilgrim not to turn back to his past actions:

He pushed the entrance door  
Of the great sacred gates, and said: "Go in,  
But mark; who looks behind him, he goes back". (*Purg.* IX, ll.129-  
31)

Absolution loses its effectiveness if the sinner goes back to his old sins, and does not continue to repent: absolution must establish a strict and total opposition to sin. The phrase 'pushed the entrance door', effectively displays that the pushing of the door is accompanied by an effort to overcome the resistance of that door (symbolizing the difficulty of leaving behind one's former way of life). The connection with the memory of the human world is still very much alive; however, the pilgrim has to continue his ascent as salvation awaits him after his purification.

The third turning indicates the moment of satisfaction by works. Here there is a reward for the speaker. The vista suddenly opens on 'the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene' (Eliot 1963, p.89). A 'broadbacked figure drest in blue and green' (Eliot 1963, p.89) is waiting for him. It is the lady, who guides the speaker toward God. In 'the light that she brings [...] the previous darkness and threats of defeat are dispelled' (Murphy 2007, p.65). She wears 'White light folded, sheathed about her' (Eliot 1963, p.90), and emanates a 'bright cloud of tears' (Eliot 1963, p.90). These images are Eliot's adaptation 'of that imagery of light' (Eliot 1932a, p.267) through which Dante conveys blessedness. In *Paradiso*, according to the different degrees of beatitude, every spirit has its shape in varying degrees of light. Light is the robe and sash of the souls; however, it is not true form, but a mere illusion to Dante's human eyes. This light is itself beatitude, the joy of the souls:

My happiness conceals me; for it beams  
Around and hides me as the silk the worm. (*Par.* VIII, ll.53-4)

Similarly, Beatrice is enveloped in light, and several times Dante describes how this light helps him fly upwards, as in *Paradiso* I, where the glow in his lady's eyes gives him new vigor as he is lifted towards the sky:

In stillness Beatrice stood her eyes,  
Fixed on the eternal orbs; but I on her  
Fed mine, forgetful of the heaven above. (*Par.* I, ll.62-4)

In a similar way, helped by the mystical vision of the Lady, and filled with a 'strength beyond hope and despair' (Eliot 1963, p.89), Eliot's speaker climbs the third step, praying the Lord to 'Speak the word only' (Eliot 1963, p.89). This utterance displays his humility and sense of faith in God, as he is aware that only through His Word, will the pilgrim be able to restore his broken spirit.

The scene of the fourth movement recalls the moment in which Dante meets Beatrice 'risen from flesh to spirit', in the Earthly Paradise (Duncan-Jones 1966, p.50). The lady is waiting for the pilgrim in order to accompany him for the rest of his journey. Virgil (who guided him throughout *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*), then has to leave, as, being born before Christianity, he cannot enter Heaven. It is by virtue of Beatrice's guidance, then, that the pilgrim will be able to achieve the final vision of Paradise. Similarly, at the end of his purgatorial ascent, Eliot is awaited by the Lady. However, here her figure merges with the figure of the Virgin, as the speaker intones the *Salve, Regina*: 'And after this our exile' (Eliot 1963, p.91), alluding to 'humanity's exile from the rewards of paradise following the Fall in the Garden of Eden' (Murphy 2007, p.67). She is the intercessor between the human and the divine, and only through her can humanity hope, one day, not to be 'exiled from being in the perpetual presence of [God]' (Murphy 2007, p.67). Through the mediation of the Virgin/Lady, the poet no longer feels like an 'aged eagle' but, rather like the 'white sails [which] still fly seaward, seaward flying / Unbroken wings'

(Eliot 1963, p.94). He can now journey 'towards that haven of tranquility' (Manganiello 1989, p.35), described in *Paradiso* III: 'His pleasure is our peace' (*Par.* III, l.78), which in Eliot becomes 'Our peace in His will' (Eliot 1963, p.95). In that Canto, Piccarda Donati, a thirteen-century noblewoman, explains to the pilgrim that souls in Heaven long only for what they have, and so their wills are entirely in agreement with the will of God. Though they know there are others in higher spheres of Heaven, they rejoice in their placement. As she affirms:

His pleasure is our peace; that sea to which  
All moves that it creates, or nature makes. (*Par.* III, ll.78-9)

The peace and the beatitude of the souls are in the fulfillment of the divine will, which is a sea in which all living beings move. As Eliot states, quoting St. John of the Cross, in his essay "Liberty":

The soul, by resigning itself to the divine light, that is, by removing every spot and stain of the creature, which is to keep the will perfectly united to the will of God – for to love Him is to labour to detach ourselves from, and to divest ourselves of, everything which is not God's for God's sake – becomes immediately enlightened by, and transformed in, God. (Eliot, in Schuchard 1999, p.180)

Eliot's words testify that the speaker has achieved a sense of complete devotion, confirmed in the poem by the final invocation from the *Anima Christi* by St. Ignatius de Loyola: 'Suffer me not to be separated' (Eliot 1963, p.95). The speaker has arrived at his destination. Like Dante, he is now ready to embark on the final part of his journey. Through his purification, he has attained a spiritual awakening through which he can leave behind the state of confusion and uncertainty of "The Waste Land" and complete his spiritual journey in "Little Gidding".

***“Little Gidding”: At the ‘still point of the turning world’***

The resolution and the culmination of Eliot's artistic and spiritual quest is represented by “Little Gidding” (1942), the last poem of the *Four Quartets*, which ‘captures magnificently [the poet's] arrival at (ultimate) understanding’ (Atkins 2012, p.vii). Here, the existential despair and anxiety found in his early works are replaced by the hope that something better can be achieved. As Eliot himself affirmed in a letter to Stephen Spender, the *Quartets* are ‘the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering’ (Spender, in Under 1975, p.133), and represent the moment in which he ‘achieves a deeper experience and a fuller understanding of his Christian faith’ (Perkins 1969, p.254). In fact, the *Quartets* are considered the epitome of Eliot's religious poems, and are placed ‘along with other important religious works, such as Chartres Cathedral, the *Divine Comedy* [...], and the Mozart Requiem’ (Howard 2006, p.16). Particularly, because of its spiritual vision, “Little Gidding” is considered Eliot's *Paradiso*, representing the pinnacle of his indebtedness to Dante's poetic imagination. Like his medieval predecessor, the modern poet explores ‘personal emotions in terms of the divine goal’ (Schuchard 1999, p.185), making ‘the spiritual visible’ in human life (Eliot 1932a, p.267).

Little Gidding, a place in Huntingdonshire (England), was an earlier religious community, founded in 1626 by the deacon Nicholas Ferrar. Legends tell that King Charles I of England went to this place in 1646, seeking shelter by night, like a ‘broken king’ (Eliot 1963, p.201), following the defeat of his army at Naseby by Oliver Cromwell's troops (in the civil war of 1642-1649, which ended in Charles's arrest and execution). In 1936, Eliot visited the village, of which only the chapel remained, and was ‘strongly impressed by the story and by the ideals of the community that had lived in that place’ (Gardner 1949, p.179). For the poet, Little

Gidding is an exemplar of the 'contemplative life, founded as it was on a mystical devotional spirit that he would embrace with increasing intensity' (Schuchard 1999, p.175). When Eliot was writing the poem, in 1942, London was under the attack of the German air raids during World War II. For this reason, fire is the poem's prevalent element. However, contrary to his earlier works, in which infernal fire is predominant, "Little Gidding" is filled with *Purgatorio's* 'refining fire' (Eliot 1963, p.205) prefiguring the possibility of restoration. Fire is suggested in the first lines in the image of the 'sun [which] flames the ice' of the 'Midwinter spring' (Eliot 1963, p.200). The literal meaning assumes a more symbolic connotation in the next few lines, where the sun acquires a spiritual association, and becomes:

A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.  
And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,  
Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire  
In the dark time of the year. (Eliot 1963, p.200)

This fire melts the frozen feelings and stirs the sleeping inner life. 'Between melting and freezing / The soul's sap' (Eliot 1963, p.200) 'that had long been frozen "quivers" and begins to flow' (Fairchild 1999, p.80). The descent of the Pentecostal fire symbolically means a spiritual awakening, and in this 'moment of beatitude the natural world of *Little Gidding* is wholly transformed by the supernatural' (Schuchard 1999, p.187). The blinding light generated by this fire becomes a divine light, the 'hints and guesses' (Eliot 1963, p.199) of an 'other creation' (Eliot 1963, p.191), as Eliot envisioned in "The Dry Salvages". This light is like the glare, which blinds Dante in Heaven. There, the pilgrim loses his sight when he looks into the brilliantly luminous presence of St. John the Evangelist (*Par. XXVI*), and also when he reaches the Empyrean, 'the heaven / That is pure light' (*Par. XXX*, ll.36-7), and

his eyes are dazzled by the brightness which blinds him. However, through the power of that light, his spiritual vision is restored, and he is ready to see the Trinity at the end of his journey.

Eliot's Midwinter spring's light displays the 'hints' of a divine order which intervenes in the temporal flux. The 'Midwinter spring' is 'Sempiternal', 'suspended in time' (Eliot 1963, p.200), just like Dante's Earthly Paradise, which is described as a 'perpetual spring' (*Purg.* XXVIII, l.129). In addition, in *Paradiso* XXVIII, the angelic orders are compared to the flowers of a 'perpetual spring' (*Par.* XXVIII, l.104), which prefigures the 'eternal rose' ('*rosa sempiterna*') of *Paradiso* XXX (l.114) (which becomes the rose of fire of the final image of "Little Gidding"). The 'Midwinter spring', like *Paradiso*, 'is symbolic of spiritual peace' (Llorens-Cubedo 2013, p.66). The idea of an eternal and peaceful spring had already appeared in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the poet tells us that in the Golden Ages there was eternal spring all the time: 'Springtime it was, always, for ever spring' (*Met.* I, l.107). This interweaving of references – from Ovid to Dante, and from Dante to Eliot – creates a dialogue between texts, and is in line with the theory of intertextuality, which affirms that each utterance is in dialogue with previous utterances. In this way, the new text becomes a reflection of earlier texts (Brenner and Fontaine 1997, p.427). It is the task of the reader to build bridges between the new work and the other works, and this bridging enriches the understanding of both texts. This confirms Eliot's statement, in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", that:

no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (Eliot 1921, p.44)

“Little Gidding” represents the epitome of Eliot’s ‘relation to the dead poets’, particularly in the second movement of the poem, where, in a Dantean fashion, the speaker meets the ‘familiar compound ghost’ (Eliot 1963, p.203) of his literary predecessors.

In the final lines of the first movement, Eliot wonders where and when will take place the summer of the soul: ‘Where is the summer, the unimaginable / Zero summer?’ (Eliot 1963, p.200), which represents ‘the full ripeness of spiritual awakening that the poet longs for’ (Fairchild 1999, p.80). Achieving the zero summer is like achieving Paradise on Earth, the start of a ‘period of peace and abundance [...], order in the world’ (Fairchild 1999, p.80). The path to this spiritual season for the poet is through Little Gidding, where one comes to ‘kneel’ (Eliot 1963, p.201) and ‘pray’ (Eliot 1963, p.204), and one must arrive in humility, leaving ‘the rough road’ and putting off ‘Sense and notion’ (Eliot 1963, p.201). One must renounce earthly desires and rational thinking, because ‘prayer is more / Than an order of words’ (Eliot 1963, p.201). Prayer is something ineffable, it is ‘the moment when words achieve universality’ (Cooper 2008, p.149). Being ‘tongued with fire beyond the language of the living’ (Eliot 1963, p.201), prayer facilitates the communion with the dead, as Eliot suggests through the scene of the dialogue with the ‘compound ghost’ (Eliot 1963, p.203), who has come ‘from beyond the bourne of death’ (Moody 1994, p.5). Here, the poet creates a hallucinatory scene, evoking the spirit of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The meeting occurs in ‘the uncertain hour before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night’ (Eliot 1963, p.202), after ‘the dark dove [the German bombers] with the flickering tongue’ (Eliot 1963, p.203) has dropped its bombs, and has returned to its base. Contrary to the Pentecostal fire of the first movement, this fire is destructive, falling from above in a devastating and

uncontrollable gush. Eliot reveals the dual meaning, material and spiritual, of fire, destroyer and bringer of death and, at the same time, purifier and generator of life.

The speaker describes the ghost as having 'brown baked features' (Eliot 1963, p.203), as someone who has gone through fire. This is an explicit allusion to *Inferno XV*, the Canto of the sodomists, where Dante meets his former teacher Brunetto Latini, who, similarly, has a 'burned face' (*Inf. XV*, l.22), because of the flaming rain coming down on the smoldering ground where he is punished. However, Eliot's ghost is not to be identified with either Latini or Dante, nor with any of the various authors that different critics have suggested (such as Yeats, Mallarmé, Virgil, Milton, and Joyce). In fact, as Eliot states, the ghost is 'one and many' (Eliot 1963, p.203), and this is confirmed by his decision to address him with the pronoun 'you' ('What! are you here?') (Eliot 1963, p.203), rather than with his first name, as Dante does ('Ser Brunetto, art thou here?' [*Inf. XV*, l.25]). Originally, Eliot had identified the ghost as 'Ser Brunetto'; however, subsequently, the poet removed the name, making the identification more ambiguous. In a letter to John Hayward of August 27, 1942, he explained the reason for his decision:

I think you will recognise that it was necessary to get rid of Brunetto for two reasons. The first is that the visionary figure has now become somewhat more definite and will no doubt be identified by some readers with Yeats though I do not mean anything so precise as that [...]. Secondly, although the reference to that Canto is intended to be explicit, I wish the effect of the whole to be Purgatorial which is more appropriate. (Eliot, in Gardner 1978, pp.64-5)

Besides the abolition of the name, a purgatorial atmosphere is also achieved through the explicit reference to the 'refining fire' (Eliot 1963, p.205) (a prominent theme of the *Purgatorio*), running throughout the poem, and particularly emphasized by the ghost at the end of his speech.

Moreover, other Dantean intertextual borrowings allow Eliot to give the scene an unearthly tone, for example in his use of a version of Dante's rhyme scheme *terza rima*. By reproducing aspects of Dante's style, the modern poet reproduces the atmosphere of the *Comedy*. This rhyming scheme is also used by Heaney, especially in his collection *Station Island*, where the poet meets his dead relatives, friends, and literary predecessors. As Richard Rankin Russell suggests, by employing *terza rima*, Heaney seeks to go beyond his earthly region, towards 'the region of eternity'<sup>13</sup> (Russell 2014, p.251). The same can be said of Eliot. Like Heaney in fact, the Anglo-American poet combines *terza rima* with the dialogue with the dead, and this combination offers him new perspectives that go beyond his immediate reality. Dante's style, imagery, and language, can help the modern poets to reach different states of knowledge that surpass human experience. These intertextual references transform Eliot's poem, adding extra layers of meaning to it. However, at the same time, through his borrowings, the meaning of Dante's text is transformed as well. As Sudha Shastri emphasizes, intertextual relationships 'cause changes in the *ur*-text, since the new text invariably revises received ways of reading the older one' (Shastri 2001, p.10). Just 'as the context of the *Inferno* directs the purgatorial elements of Eliot's passage, the context of Eliot's walk through "the uncertain hour" provokes the reader to re-evaluate the meaning of Dante's encounter [...]; the approach to its meaning will in this other time alter Dante' (Jay 1983, p.232). This idea recalls Eliot's affirmation in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", that:

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<sup>13</sup> Like Eliot, Heaney 'had long experimented with the tercet [...], particularly in poems that deal with fluidity and movement' (Russell 2014, p.251), such as those recounting his journey in *Station Island*.

what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (Eliot 1921, p.44)

In this way, through Eliot's borrowing of Dante's scene, 'the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' (Eliot 1921, p.45). Such intermingling of past and present is displayed in the two poets' meeting each other in a moment with 'no before and after' (Eliot 1963, p.203), in which their 'two worlds become much like each other' (Eliot 1963, p.204). Eliot's devastated present is joined, in an eternal moment, with the world of his predecessor. This fusion of past and future, before and after, old and new, 'directly combats the temporality' that Eliot seeks to overcome in his poem (Rees 1998, np).

The ghost's advice to the speaker is to transcend earthly concerns, and instructs him on the road towards redemption. At first, he discloses the bitterness of mature age, in 'the gifts reserved for age / To set a crown upon [his] lifetime's effort' (Eliot 1963, p.204). He warns the poet that he will experience:

“the conscious impotence of rage  
At human folly, and the laceration  
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.  
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment  
Of all that you have done, and been, the shame  
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness  
Of things ill done and done to others' harm  
Which once you took for exercise of virtue”. (Eliot 1963, p.204)

However, not all is lost, all human errors and passions can be restored by 'that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer' (Eliot 1963, p.205), as that fire will 'discharge from sin and error' (Eliot 1963, p.207). This image is an implied allusion to *Purgatorio* XXVII, when the pilgrim, before entering the Earthly Paradise, must go through a circle of fire, in which all imperfection and sin will be purified (*Purg.* XXVII, ll.41-5). Earthly desires and passions can be redeemed and restored by divine love, that is, the Pentecostal fire:

the only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre  
To be redeemed from fire by fire. (Eliot 1963, p.207)

Redemption from 'the fire of desire, is by the fire of the Holy Spirit' (Perkins 2001, p.8). Through the words of the ghost, Eliot sets out a direct opposition between the destructive fire of the 'dark dove', which suggested the aerial attack of the German bombers, and the purifying fire of the Pentecost. The dove, which at the beginning of the poem was descending and dropping its bombs on the city of London, is now the fire of the Holy Spirit. The 'refining fire', the same which 'purifies' (*Purg.* XXVI, l.148) the soul of Arnaut Daniel from his sin of lust in *Purgatorio* XXVI, is here indicated as the way to break free from one's own mistakes, in the hope of reaching the 'peace that passeth understanding' (Eliot 1963, p.76), that the poet was looking for in "The Waste Land". Eliot's ghost warns the speaker that the only path to redemption is through purgatorial suffering. However, as Peter Lowe points out, the 'torment of painful self-consciousness can be overcome, and the 'refining fire' becomes a step towards blessedness' (Lowe 2004, p.324).

The nature of fire in Eliot's later poetry is completely different from that which we find for example in "Prufrock", whose epigraph displayed an individual who was trapped in an infernal blaze, or in "The Waste Land", where people are

consumed by the fire of earthly desires. The fires of "Little Gidding" on the contrary 'gather into a single image flames of desire and suffering, destruction and redemption, as well as the tongues of the dead and those of the Holy Spirit' (Brooker 2009, p.69). These paradoxes are united in the same image in the final movement of the poem, where the poet gathers 'diversity into unity' in the image of the fire and the rose. To reach spiritual harmony, 'everything, even war, death, and the dark "descending dove", time as well as the timeless, must be included' (Fairchild 1999, p.85); only then:

All manner of things shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one. (Eliot 1963, p.209)

The union of the rose and the fire represents the eternal 'still point of the turning world' (Eliot 1963, p.177), the foundation and the conclusion of all existence, where 'past and future are gathered' (Eliot 1963, p.177). Like Dante's 'unmoved' mover (*Par.* XXIV, l.110), the 'still point' is 'the crowning point of eternal love [and] the fountain source of all creation' (Verma 1979, p.23). It resembles the point of dazzling light that the pilgrim envisions in *Paradiso* XXVIII:

I saw a point which radiated light  
So keen, the face it sets on fire must turn  
To hide from its sharp edge. (*Par.* XXVIII, ll.14-6)

The vision that Dante beholds is the revelation of God as a non-dimensional point, which indicates its unity and indivisibility. It is ringed by nine glowing spheres representing the angelic hierarchy, revolving around their centre, and forming the 'eternal rose' (*Par.* XXX, l.114). The point seems to be enclosed by those celestial

circles, but instead includes them inside itself, it is 'enclosed by that which it encloses' (*Par.* XXX, l.10); it is both centre and circumference, both within and without. Similarly, Eliot's still point is 'in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire'; it is 'the outer compulsion, yet surrounded / By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving' (Eliot 1963, p.177).

In this moment of fusion 'in and out of time' (Eliot 1963, p.199), Eliot senses the divine; he achieves that 'further union, a deeper communion' (Eliot 1963, p.190) which he has so intensely looked for throughout his poetic career. He achieves his *Paradiso*:

Quick now, here, now, always –  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well. (Eliot 1963, p.209)

In this entry into simplicity, the 'higher dream' (Eliot 1963, p.90), the human aspiration toward an understanding of the nature of the divine, is redeemed, and the promise that 'All shall be well' (Eliot 1963, p.209), offers the final affirmation of the assurance of a Christian hope. The intertextual reference to Julian of Norwich ('all shall be well') implies that in all circumstances, however adverse, Love will ultimately conquer all. In the final passage of Julian's book *Showings*, we read:

What? Wouldest thou wit thy Lords meaning in this thing? Wit it well:  
Love was his meaning. Who sheweth it thee? Love. Wherefore sheweth  
he it thee? For Love. Hold thee therein, thou shalt wit more in the  
same. But thou shalt never wit therein other without end. (Julian of  
Norwich 1978, p.333)

Julian understands the key to all spiritual experience: love. Similarly, Eliot affirms:

Who then devised the torment? Love.  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove. (Eliot 1963, p.207)

Love is 'unmoving', yet, it is 'the cause and end of movement' (Eliot 1963, p.181). It is the key to the functioning of the universe. In Dante, love 'literally makes the world go round. The created universe moves and functions out of yearning for its creator' (Shaw 2014, p.116). Near the end of the *Paradiso*, the pilgrim describes the whole of creation as the scattered pages and gatherings of a book. Those pages are 'Bound up with love in one majestic volume' (*Par.* XXXIII, l.82). The multiplicity of human experience has meaning only if bound together by love. Love 'holds everything together. In the final lines of the poem, when he is absorbed in the beatific vision, Dante's desire and will are attuned to and move in harmony with those of his maker' (Shaw 2014, p.117):

And as the tranquil turning of a wheel  
My wish and will were moved by Him Who is  
The Love that moves the sun and all the stars. (*Par.* XXXIII,  
ll.139-41)

Like Dante, Eliot makes the final discovery in terms of what gives power to the universe: Love. The journey of understanding here comes to an end, with the full and complete comprehension of the harmony that governs things in the cosmos. The moment of final unification represents the 'mystical union of the soul with God that gives meaning and beauty to an otherwise purely physical realm' (Perkins 2001, p.3). Eliot's Christian belief enabled him to find a way beyond the isolation of men in the modern world, and to reconcile human love under the love of God. Through his engagement with Dante, he was able to display his own spiritual message, and

ground it in the European Christian intellectual tradition. Following his predecessor's example, the modern poet learned that 'more and more rarefied and remote *states of beatitude* can be the material for great poetry' (Eliot 1932a, p.252), and like him, he successfully turned his mystical experience into poetry.

## Chapter 6: The Evil of Living: The Impossibility of Redemption

This chapter addresses the Dantean theme of the journey in Montale's collections of poems *Cuttlefish Bones*, *The Occasions*, and *The Storm and Other Things*. The idea that his poetic enterprise should be seen as a journey of experience was affirmed by Montale himself in his essay "*Ho Scritto solo Un Libro*" ("I Wrote only One Book"), where he evaluated his three volumes of poetry against Dante's *Divine Comedy*, by saying: 'my poetry should be read together, as a single poem. I don't want to make the comparison with the *Divine Comedy*, but I consider my three books as three canticles, three stages of human life' (Montale 1976, p.604). However, in contrast to Dante (and as we have seen, also to Eliot), Montale does not accept the journey as a figure of exploration and regeneration, as he consciously rejects any notion of restoration. As a witness to the twentieth century, and to its turbulent consciousness, Montale sets out to describe human solitude and selfishness, and the brutal and overwhelming reality of history. His poetry explores the doubts, frustrations, and pessimism of modern individuals in a world in which the process of decomposition, started with World War I, can be neither inverted nor stopped. The yearning for some hidden transcendental meaning 'that will finally lead to the heart of a truth' (Montale 1998, p.9), can never be seized in Montale. Thus, his poetry does not illustrate an 'epistemological journey aimed at finding a solution to the existential problems that triggered the poetic quest' (Ciccarelli 2009, p.220). Instead, and contrary to Dante, the modern author thought that the 'task of the poet is the search

for a specific, not a general, truth' (Montale 1982, p.299). His poems usually deal with fragmentary experience, the meaning of which is either obscure or disturbingly absent. Montale's poetic quest does not lead to Paradise, but back to a modern Hell.

His first collection, *Cuttlefish Bones*, best encapsulates the torment of the poet, as it depicts the individual's disharmony with a barren and Godless world. Like Dante's *Inferno* and Eliot's "The Waste Land", the collection depicts an existential despair, which invades all manifestations of life. The poet is rejected by the infinity of nature; he looks in vain for an epiphanic moment, a flash of a vision, but his quest is destined to fail, and his desire to get in touch with 'another dimension' remains unfulfilled (Montale 1982, p.302). His second book, *The Occasions*, could be seen as a 'close counterpart of Dante's purgatorial process' (Cambon 1982, p.92). As well as the intertextual allusions, it is the tone of hope for some form of transcendence through brief 'occasions' of contingent illumination, that makes this collection similar to Dante's second canticle. This is especially evident in the central section of the collection, entitled "*Mottetti*" ("Motets"), where this hope is represented by Clizia, the 'sunflower' feminine figure (Montale 1998, p.47), who is, at the same time, woman, cloud and angel. Through her, the poet can try to escape the boundaries of his life, and thereby achieve salvation. This aspiration is still very strong at the end of the collection; however, the poet's hope is shattered by an increasing sense of imprisonment in the mechanisms of reality, and in a frustrating and grey life rendered more dramatic by Fascism and the Second World War. In his third collection, *The Storm and Other Things*, Montale shows that there is no consolation in this world, as here, the dark essence of the conflict predominates. The storm which defines the book is an allegory of the war, and of the cruelty of Nazism and Fascism. Here, Clizia still offers him support among such anguish, and she

increasingly assumes the features of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* and in the *Divine Comedy*. In a manner that parallels Dante and his beloved, the modern poet sees in Clizia the signs of another reality, not threatened by time or memory. She is the mediator in the tormenting search for hope; she is the link between Earth and sky. However, contrary to Dante's muse, Clizia does not guide the poet to a religious rebirth. The cold war forces the poet, by the end of his poetic journey, to abandon that 'hope that burned more slowly / than hardwood on the hearth' (Montale 1998, p.407), the hope of a liberating salvation symbolized by Clizia. The woman-angel ultimately disappears, unable to survive in a world in which 'only drought and desolation sting' (Montale 1998, p.385).

Montale's poetry, like almost all modern poetry, is concerned with the poet's search for certainties in a desolate and faithless world. As Marion Montgomery points out, the poet looks for a 'point of rest which reflects an order and harmony of mind' (Montgomery 1973, p.xiii). This 'point of rest' refers to the author's sense of joy when achieving the moment of supreme truth, when he/she finally makes his/her thoughts consonant with nature or with God. Dante attained this moment in the last lines of the *Paradiso*, when he looks inside the mystery of creation, and his mind becomes all in one with God's mind. Similarly, in *Four Quartets*, Eliot achieved this in 'the still point' (Eliot 1963, p.126), a moment in which the soul 'rest[s] in completion', and where 'life, death, heaven, earth, mutability of seasons and the human heart are transcended in a peace of mind beyond understanding' (Montgomery 1973, p.53). In the last lines of their works, both Eliot and Dante attempted not simply to show 'the soul moving on toward an ideal state [but] to include the aspects of time, as they relate to the soul, within the timelessness of the soul', achieving 'an ideal complete state of being' (Montgomery 1973, pp.133; 135).

In Montale's poetry, on the contrary, this moment of harmony of the individual in nature, which allows us to transcend temporal and spatial dimensions, what he calls, the 'miracle' (Montale 1998, p.9), is perceived only for a fleeting second, and then quickly disappears, leaving the poet in a reality of 'immobility' and uncertainty (Montale 1998, p.111). In contrast to Eliot, who, after embracing Anglo-Catholicism, reached a plateau of spiritual serenity, Montale pronounces God's word without faith, mirroring the religious perplexity and anxiety of the century: of the Christian without Church, and of the religious without religion. For this reason, the search for meaning, the necessary discovery of a signification in the present existence, is met by the bitter certainty that neither salvation nor redemption is possible.

### ***Cuttlefish Bones: A Strangled Life***

Montale's first collection, *Cuttlefish Bones*, expresses the tragedy of the crisis of the old certainties and the confusion of man in front of a dolorous lack of faith. For the poet, religion cannot save man, thus all consolation is denied. Although he believes in the redemptive power of love, this sentiment is however pervaded by a sense of precariousness and despair (Perella 1979, p.240). His private psychological and moral 'maladjustment' (Montale 1982, p.311), what he calls, the 'evil of living' (Montale 2004, p.45), is projected on the surrounding world, thus becoming universal. Like Eliot's 'wasteland', Montale's existential dictum has come to emblemize 'the spiritual aridity of modern life and a sense of the negativity, even the frustrating absurdity of existence' (Perella 1979, p.240). The sense of the anxiety of modern individuals, abandoned in a world devoid of meaning and value, is expressed in the impossibility of overcoming the hardness of life, symbolized by a

wall 'which has on top sharp shards of bottle' (Montale 1998, p.41). The poet tries tirelessly to overcome the 'wall', to find a 'miracle' which would open a passage, a 'crossing' (Montale 1998, p.157) beyond its limits, as he believes that life must somehow have a meaning, and his poetry is a continuous search for that meaning, which, however, constantly escapes.

Against the descriptive background of his native Liguria, between 'seascapes and arid landscapes, Montale explored both the seriousness and the absurdity of the world' (Chevalier 1997, p.572). In his poem "*Mediterraneo*" ("Mediterranean"), he narrates the end of an original identity where man lived close to nature (represented by the sea) and in harmony with it, and the uncertain process of reconstitution of a new identity in a world that tends to depersonalization and anonymity. The poet feels like the skeletons of the cuttlefish bones that float on the waves of the sea and are dragged ashore as useless debris:

Oh, tumbled then  
like the cuttlefish bone by the waves,  
to vanish bit by bit. (Montale 1998, p.143)

The disillusion of the end of childhood, and of his organic relationship with the natural world, creates a situation of confusion and fragmentation in the poet; his soul becomes 'divided' (Montale 1998, p.145) and 'shapeless' (Montale 1998, p.71). He becomes increasingly aware of the existential limits of human life. To return to origins, to the natural and limitless realm represented by the sea, is, as the poet himself asserts, an 'impossible event' (Montale 1998, p.79). The destiny of man is on land, and one 'must accept with "humility" the limit of that condition' (Luperini 2012, p.19), without any hope of a redeeming 'miracle' (Montale 1998, p.9). For Montale, individuals in the modern world cannot find answers in a divine mind, as Dante and his contemporaries did. In his poetry, the modern poet struggles without

getting answers or guarantees. To the Dantean Providence of a world which seeks relief and finds answers in a religious faith, Montale replaces his 'divine Indifference' (Montale 1998, p.47), a divinity which remains passive and inflexible in the face of the joys or sorrows of men. The poet places himself out of the ethical and religious tradition that formed the background of Dante's thought (Antonello 1996, p.113), as he feels that the medieval poet's spiritual belief is inappropriate in our times, corroded as they are by existential doubt. His verses are full of anguish because they lay bare the wound, the crisis, of our being eradicated in a world that has become strange and indifferent to human needs.

While Montale's world resembles the *Inferno*, the final reward of Paradise is missing. The dark atmosphere of Dante's first canticle, where the landscape reflects the impossibility of hope, redemption and salvation, is a core theme of the poem "Arsenio", a persona who is Montale's alter ego. As he affirms: 'Arsenio [is a] projection [...] of myself' (Montale 1982, p.323). The story of Arsenio is the narrative of a desperate search for the instant which would allow him to escape from 'finishing [the] journey', the journey of life, with its 'repetitious, / interwoven hours' (Montale 1998, p.111). However, it is impossible to flee 'the flow of time on Earth, and the persona is unable to go beyond mere contingent reality' (Scarpati 1989, p.83). The poet's search begins with his descent towards the sea, in an infernal atmosphere:

Whirligigs of wind stir up the dust  
in eddies over the roofs and empty places  
where horses wearing paper hats  
tethered in front of gleaming hotel  
windows nose the ground. (Montale 1998, p.111)

The restless horses, and the whirlwinds that run at dizzy speeds, predict the calamity that is to come. The tempest of the sea is allegorical of the tempest in Arsenio's life. However, a 'refrain of castanets', which 'explodes' to contradict cyclical time, 'the repetitious, interwoven hours', is seen as representing a 'Sign of another orbit' (Montale 1998, p.111), prefiguring some hope. The speaker encourages Arsenio to:

follow it.

Descend to the horizon, overhung  
by a lead stormcloud high above the riptide  
and still more erratic: a salty, roiling  
maelstrom, blown  
from the rebellious element up to the clouds. (Montale 1998,  
p.111)

The dark image of the 'lead stormcloud', and the sea stretching towards it in a single embrace, takes on a hellish movement. However, this version of Hell is a sign. Montale always looks for an epiphanic sign in nature, which opens some form of beyond. The sea that gurgles is one of these signs (Testaverde 2005, p.40). For this reason, the poet urges Arsenio to continue his descent: 'Go down into the falling dark' (Montale 1998, p.113). Maybe this plunge into the sea, and towards self-knowledge, will free him from the grasp of this journey of life; this 'frenzy [...] of immobility' (Montale 1998, p.111), in which the speaker goes forward, but without progressing. However, for one who has been rejected by the sea, the descent cannot resolve in a reconciliation. The poet must accept his fate from which he cannot escape; he must continue living this journey of life that is more like death, what Andrea Ciccarelli calls 'journey as stasis' (Ciccarelli 2009, p.213), the same condition of death in life of the 'crowd' flowing 'over London Bridge' (Eliot 1963, p.55) that Eliot describes in "The Waste Land".

Like their journey, Arsenio's crossing results in a profound despair. He meets the sea, stretches towards it like a 'reed that drags [its] roots' (Montale 1998, p.113), hoping to be swallowed by it. The miracle seems to happen: 'the crest of the old wave that rolls you / swallows you' (Montale 1998, p.111), but it is just an illusion. Life rips him from the embrace of the sea, and brings him back to the 'street colonnade walls / mirrors' (Montale 1998, p.113), which 'freezes' him 'in one gelid gathering of the dead' (Montale 1998, p.113). This Dantean image, taken from *Inferno* XXXII, emphasizes the sense of entrapment of modern individuals. Dante's Canto is characterized by immobility, as sinners are punished by being frozen in Cocytus, the icy lake where traitors are buried: 'the ice [...] held their livid frames' (*Inf.* XXXII, 1.31). Zygmunt G. Barański suggests that in Montale's poetry, the Cantos which depict immersion and/or immobility become fused into a single system with which to describe the brute state of the majority of human beings or their environment (Barański 1986, p.356). In fact, the intertextual appropriation of this image in "Arsenio" is symbolic of Montale's belief that modern individuals are trapped and isolated. As the poet states in his essay "*La Solitudine dell'Artista*" ("The Artist's Solitude"), in our century, 'Man [...] is inevitably isolated' (Montale 1982, p.25). The final image of the poem confirms this statement as it displays a sense of defeat and dissolution:

a strangled life arisen for you, and the wind  
carries it off with the ashes of the stars. (Montale 1998, p.113)

Montale reveals an existence that is wished for, but unachievable. The visionary moment that could free Arsenio from the 'evil of living', and join him with the divine, does not hold. He is 'of the race / who are earthbound' (Montale 1998, p.17), and his journey ends on the shore of the sea, on the threshold of his solitary Hell.

In his poetry, Montale starts from the examination of his own soul; however, he also opens his mind and his poetic explorations to difference in order to discover the possibility of the transcendent in the 'other'. The poem "Falsetto" presents a recurrent situation in the poet's works: a woman's natural ability to achieve the transcendent, and an earthbound man. In fact, if the journey towards the sea ends at the shores for Arsenio, in "Falsetto", the poet shows that the journey is possible for Esterina (one of the several saving feminine figures present in his poetry). The woman in Montale, as in Dante, is sublimated and safeguarded by the corrosion of time and the world. In the modern poet's work, she is the only one who has access to the infinity of the sea and of the divine. The poem is built on the juxtaposition of two opposing temporal dimensions (Tortora 2011, p.167). The first is represented by the almost divine immortality of Esterina, who with her 'gaiety already / has mortgaged the future', and with 'a shrug demolishes / the tall walls of [her] clouded tomorrow' (Montale 1998, p.17). The other is that of the lyrical 'I', for whom that wall is insurmountable, as it is topped with 'broken bottle shards' (Montale 1998, p.41). He is trapped in an irreversible sense of time, a 'time [which] rushes, [and] burrows deeper' (Montale 1998, p.105), and which 'never spills its sand / the same way twice' (Montale 1998, p.33); in short, a world in which 'Everything hurtles' (Montale 1998, p.105).

The poet warns Esterina of the danger of time but the young woman is almost indifferent to it:

You know, but you're fearless all the same.  
We'll see you swallowed by the haze  
the wind breaks through  
or whips up, wild.  
Then you'll emerge from the ashen wave  
brownier than ever,

face like Diana  
the archer's intent  
on a farther adventure. (Montale 1998, p.15)

Esterina immerses herself in the clouds, and emerges from them with a divine aura, reminiscent of the phoenix (she is 'swallowed by the haze'), and of 'Diana / the archer' (Montale 1998, p.15). Montale recalls the Egyptian myth of the phoenix, which, after five hundred years, dies in order to resurrect from its own ashes, a scene which appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* XV, but which arrived at Montale through the Dantean mediation (Tortora 2011, p.167). In fact, in *Inferno* XXIV we read:

[...] he lit, burned up, turned ash,  
Which, falling, scattered on the ground, and then  
Regathering itself re-formed in him,  
All of a sudden. Thus the wise men say  
The phoenix does every five hundred years;  
Consumes, and springs afresh. (*Inf.* XXIV, ll.88-93)

This infernal image is combined by Montale with the vision of the 'Elysian spheres' (Montale 1998, p.15), which is reminiscent of Dante's *Paradiso*:

now an omen tolls for you  
in the Elysian spheres.  
May no sound leave  
you thunderstruck,  
like a cracked jug;  
let it be for you an ineffable  
concert of collarbells. (Montale 1998, p.15)

The 'omen' of a miraculous event comes from the skies of Paradise, placing Esterina in an unearthly dimension, which is different from that of the poet. The imagery of the divine implies an absence of temporality. The poet's attempts to warn Esterina

against the passage of time are therefore unnecessary, because the young woman can subtract herself to its devastating effect (Tortora 2011, p.169).

Esterina increasingly assumes divine and superhuman appearances, and the gap with the lyric 'I' becomes unbridgeable. In the second part of the poem, her panic fusion with the sea occurs:

Water is the power that tempers you,  
you find yourself, renew yourself in her:  
to us you're seaweed or a stone,  
a water creature. (Montale 1998, p.15)

Esterina's otherworldly nature is sealed by the merging with the 'voracious sea' (Montale 1998, p.87), and by her transformation into 'a water creature' (Montale 1998, p.15); she is capable of continual rebirth, and this allows her to live an eternal present, the 'Unknowable tomorrow doesn't faze' her (Montale 1998, p.15). Admitting his own difference, the poet asserts the timeless nature of his interlocutor:

How right you are! Don't muddy  
the happy present with worry.  
Your gaiety already  
has mortgaged the future,  
and a shrug demolishes  
the tall walls of your clouded tomorrow.  
We watch you, we of the race  
who are earthbound. (Montale 1998, p.17)

The last two lines emphasize the detachment between Esterina and the speaker. The personal pronoun 'we' affirms an identity different from that of the girl. The self is destined to remain 'earthbound'; for him life must continue on a wasteland, on an unstable 'dry slope' (Montale 1998, p.73), in a 'disjointed universe' (Luperini 2012, p.17). "Falsetto" encapsulates the existential anguish of *Cuttlefish Bones*; the suffering that the poet experiences in the failure to achieve a higher reality beyond

his everyday life. This failure leaves him with a greater awareness of his own isolation. Contrary to Dante, who, after experiencing Hell, is certain of the approaching of his purgation and of his eventual salvation, Montale's first collection explores the agony that comes from knowing that there is a transcendent reality, but that, as humans, we only ever gain the briefest glimpse of it. This agony, which arises from feeling that something fundamental is missing, is accompanied by a resigned acceptance of the human condition, trapped in time and space, without any hope of change.

### ***The Occasions: Looking for the 'Lost Sign'***

The resignation of the first collection is replaced in *The Occasions* by a subdued optimism and hopefulness on the part of the poet, which instils an almost purgatorial tone to the poems. In Gianfranco Contini's words, this collection represents a 'second time' of Montale's poetry; a 'positive' time because of the moral momentum that supports it – whereas he had commented on the 'negative and destructive' tone in *Cuttlefish Bones* (Contini 1974, p.22). The composition of *The Occasions* occurred during a time in which Fascism was increasingly affirming itself in Italy. However, despite the 'darkness that descends' (Montale 1998, p.229) on the world, these poems are characterized by the search for the '*life that glimmers*' [*italics original*] (Montale 1998, p.149), and for the 'crossing' (Montale 1998, p.157) that could save the poet, even if only for a moment, from 'the narrow space of human days' (Montale 1998, p.227). This personal search for salvation is linked to the presence of a woman, who will later be identified as Clizia (Clizia is the senhal of Irma Brandes, the American-Jewish woman that the poet met in Italy in 1933). From the beginning, she is 'linked to light and fire, which are placed in opposition to

the darkness, both physical and spiritual, that hovers' in the life of the poet (West 1981, p.41). This woman is always pursued and desired, more often absent than present, but alive in the memory of the poet who elects her as the main beneficiary of his own existential reflections. Like Dante's Beatrice, Clizia has the ability to liberate the hidden world; she is the only hope of salvation in a universe without reason and sense, characterized by startling violence and darkness.

Arshi Pipa points out that in this collection, Montale came even closer to Dante, and related his poetry at many points to the *Divine Comedy* and also to the *Vita Nuova* (Pipa 1968, p.56). It is worthy of note that in this period, Montale was in correspondence with T. S. Eliot, as he translated his poems "The Song of Simeon" and "La Figlia che Piange", both published in the journal *Circoli*, in 1933 (D'Alessandro 2005, p.121). It could be suggested that the stilnovistic influence found in *The Occasions*, may have been affected by Eliot's critical attention to the *Vita Nuova* (D'Alessandro 2005, p.121), of which the Anglo-American poet speaks in his 1927 essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", and also in his 1929 essay "Dante". Some years later, the religious message of Dante's book would constitute (as we have seen in chapter five), the main theme of "Ash Wednesday", in which the Dantean dialectic of salvation-damnation is prominent. Dante's main theme in both the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy* is the theme of deliverance through the intercession of the salvific woman. Particularly, in the *Comedy*, the medieval poet took a specific historical situation, and universalized it in the terms of salvation and religious condemnation (Luperini 2012, p.25).

In the same way, in *The Occasions*, Montale, carries on a metaphysical search among biographical and historical events, recreating both the same Dantean alternative of salvation and damnation, and the same figure of mediation, the salvific

woman (Bontifogli 1963, p.62). Dante's Christian religious terms and concepts are, however, reused by Montale within a new entirely secular culture. While Beatrice is emblematic of religious salvation, Clizia is allegorical of culture and civil values, and helps the poet towards the search for self-knowledge. The originality of Montale's intertextual use of Dante gives expression to a completely modern drama (Bontifogli 1963, p.62), and serves to enrich his own works. In fact, Harold Bloom's assumption that in their artistic process, modern poets are burdened by the relationship that they have with precursor poets, does not really apply to Montale, and this could also be said of Eliot and Heaney. Although the three poets borrow abundantly from Dante, nevertheless their poetry is never imitative of the works of the Florentine author. Their intertextual relationship constitutes a 'fundamental poetic strategy for engaging both directly and indirectly with literary tradition' (Forman 1871, p.15). Their use of quotations and allusions is a means by which the modern poets:

can establish and assert [their] identity as poet[s] alongside and against [their] peers and precursors. It is a way both of building a literary community – with the intertextual associations serving to forge links between the members of that community [...], and of asserting independence of voice: the knowing of departures and subversions announce control over the material rather than dependence on it. (Forman 1871, p.15)

What is displayed in their works is not the poets' fear, or 'anxiety', but rather a significant approval and celebration of their inherited resources. Their engagement with Dante is not a 'wresting with the mighty dead', but a 'convers[ation] with the mighty dead' (Douglas-Fairhurst 2002, p.51), and this conversation has motivated rather than subdued the modern poets' artistic creativity, allowing them to attain a lyrical voice which is wholly their own.

This element is clearly visible in all of Montale's poetic experience, but particularly in the parable of Clizia, the new Beatrice. Like Dante, Montale believes in the power of redemptive love, and his love for Clizia is a 'source of strength and comfort in an infernal situation' (Pipa 1968, p.56). The first poetic meeting with the woman occurs in the core section of *The Occasions*, the "Motets", which is composed of twenty poems, and is described by the poet as his 'little autobiographical novel' (Montale 1982, p.305). As Rebecca West suggests, this section could be seen as Montale's '*libello*' (Dante's *Vita Nuova*) (West 1981, p.40). Like Dante's autobiographical book in fact, the "Motets" are love poems that 'point to the emergence of the Clizia figure in *La Bufera*, much as Dante's "little book" prepares for the triumphant emergence of the *Commedia*'s Beatrice' (West 1981, p.40). As a poetic form, the motet was practiced by Guido Cavalcanti, Dante's friend, and therefore it is part of the stilnovistic repertoire. Clizia herself is described in stilnovistic terms; her bright eyes, her strong look, her inapproachability, are all signs that describe her spiritual strength and superiority. The "Motets" originated in a moment of physical distance, when Irma Brandes had already left Italy due to the racial persecution laws, and was 'three thousand miles away' (Montale 1982, p.304). The dialectics of absence-presence, light-darkness, and salvation-damnation are thus very important: her presence brings light and hope, her absence darkness and foreboding of evil.

Invoked in the memory of the poet, Clizia returns almost by a miracle. The first motet under examination, "*Addii, Fischei nel Buio, Cenni, Tosse*" ("Farewells, Whistling in the Dark, Waves, Coughs"), recalls an 'infernal' situation associated both with the separation and deprivation of the woman, and with the presence of 'robots' (Montale 1998, p.197), which, in Montale's words are: 'Men walled in their

compartments, men understood as mass (and ignorance)' (Greco 1980, p.34). Like "Arsenio"'s 'gelid gathering of the dead' (Montale 1998, p.113), the image of the 'robots' emphasizes once again the alienation and the incommunicability of these individuals, who are 'walled in' in the 'corridors' (Montale 1998, p.197) of their futile existence, which is worsened by the senseless massification of modernity, as represented by the 'train' (Montale 1998, p.197). Those men are the excluded who do not know Clizia: as the poet illustrated in motet XI, "*L'Anima che Dispensa*" ("The Spirit that Dispenses"), 'I speak of something else / to one who doesn't know you' (Montale 1998, p.203). These men are satisfied with an inauthentic life, and remain on this side of reality, not looking for a beyond. In a moment of doubt, the poet asks himself if they might 'have it right' (Montale 1998, p.197), if their life might be the true one, and that perhaps nothing exists beyond. However, this uncertainty is dispelled by the sudden emergence of the rhythm of the Carioca, a 'secret syntony' (Isella, in Montale 1986, p.86) between chosen souls (based on hints of agreement not comprehensible to others). This syntony is emblematic of the hope of a possible 'redemption through [music], art and Spirit; a hope which, even if only for a moment, can save from the mechanically inhuman existence' to which modern individuals are condemned (Bausi 2012, p.81). The deep affinity between the poet and Clizia makes them different from other people. However, the poet's question at the end of the poem:

Do you too lend your train's  
faint hymn  
this awful, faithful carioca rhythm?, (Montale 1998, p.197)

displays his uncertainty that the woman shares his feelings: her departure and her distance put into question their telepathic communication. However, the poet

continues his search for her ‘lost sign’, as it is ‘the single / pledge’ (Montale 1998, p.193) that he has from her. These signs can be concrete and real things, to which Montale assigns a metaphorical and transcendent value.

In the motet “*Il Ramarro, se Scocca*” (“The Green Lizard, if it Darts”), the poet searches for traces of the ‘you’ in the manifestations of a lizard:

The green lizard, if it darts  
out of the stubble  
under the great heat. (Montale 1998, p.201)

Moreover, a sailing boat, and the boom of the ‘the noon cannon’ (Montale 1998, p.201), can also potentially bear evidence of her:

the sail, when it luffs  
and dives at the jolt  
from the reef—

the noon cannon  
fainter than your heart  
and the stopwatch if it sounds  
without a sound—

.....

then? Lightning in vain  
can change you into something  
rich and strange. Your stamp was different. (Montale 1998, p.201)

The salvific signs of the woman can occur at any moment, and can derive from ordinary things. However, as Clodagh J. Brook asserts, the full line of dots, which follows the manifestations, implies not continuation, but lack. The dots signify silence, and this ‘poignant silence’ fails to bring Clizia back (Brook 2002, p.162). The ‘lizard’ is under the ‘stubble’, and it will not dart, the sail ‘luffs and dives’, indicating the opposite of an epiphany of the divine, as the boat disappears down into

the abyss. Lastly, the beat of the ‘noon cannon’ is fainter than that of Clizia’s heart. All of these daily images cannot compare with the lightening of Clizia, the saving ‘light for the man who’s lost’ (Montale 1998, p.259); they are only epiphanies of ‘intermittent gleams’ (Cambon 1982, p.75), which do not bear any promise of salvation.

In “*La Canna che Dispiuma*” (“The Reed that Softly Molts”), the poet displays that ordinary daily things – ‘The reed that softly / molts its red / flabellum in spring’, ‘the path down in the ditch’, and ‘the panting dog’ (Montale 1998, p.211) – are of secondary importance to him: ‘it’s not for me to recognize’ them, he says (Montale 1998, p.211). What he needs now is to look towards the sky, where Clizia’s eyes look:

there where the reflection bakes  
hottest and the cloud hangs low,  
beyond her distant pupils, now  
two simple light beams crossing. (Montale 1998, p.211)

The eyes of Clizia are able to counter evil, and are the guide of the poet. He has to follow those ‘light beams’, those ‘distant pupils’, which direct his view towards a point where he can find real salvation. This passage is reminiscent of *Paradiso I*, where Beatrice too looks towards the sky:

In stillness Beatrice stood, her eyes  
Fixed on the eternal orbs; but I on her  
Fed mine, forgetful of the heaven above. (*Par. I*, ll.62-4)

Dante emphasizes the power of Beatrice’s bright eyes. They are the means through which the pilgrim apprehends truth, as they are ‘firmly fixed on God and on that point of the highest Heaven from which Beatrice has descended’ (Kalkavage 2014, np). Her gaze directs ‘his gaze upward’, and gives ‘his mind its proper focus and

opens him up to the whole of things and to the good of that whole' (Kalkavage 2014, np). On the contrary, Montale can only see the divine light indirectly. As Gilberto Lonardi suggests: 'the eyes of the earthbound man, can't bear the lightening-flash [of the divine], just as his feet can't support flight' (Lonardi 1980, p.36). The miracle, the beatific moment of fullness, remains distant for Montale. Despite his yearning for vision, the poet is unable to experience the celestial whole. Only through the woman can he glimpse at it, and for a moment, he can rise from the abyss of his corruptible human condition.

In the motet "*Ti Libero la Fronte dai Ghiaccioli*" ("I Free Your Forehead of the Ice"), the woman appears 'angelized' (West 1981, p.86), prefiguring the image of the woman-angel in *The Storm*. In fact, Clizia experiences the same transformation, or, as Dante would say, '*trasumanizzazione*' ('transhumanization' [Montale 1982, p.141]), as Beatrice, that is, she raises 'from human to divine' (*Par.* I, l.68). Montale himself, in his essay "*Dante, Ieri e Oggi*" ("Dante, Yesterday and Today"), affirmed that the *Vita Nuova* 'gives a preliminary shape, already complete in itself, to what will become Beatrice's process of transhumanization' (Montale 1982, p.141). In the *Vita Nuova*, from an initial carnal passion, the Dantean muse increasingly assumes a miraculous nature. Dante refers to her in a parallel manner to the way he refers to Christ, that is, through superlatives: she is 'the most gracious' (*VN* III, 1), the colour of her dress is 'the purest white' (*VN* III, 1), and her greeting is 'the sweetest' (*VN* III, 2). In addition, the circumstances of Beatrice's life remind us of Christ. Her companion is named Giovanna, as *Giovanni il Battista* (John the Baptist) (Lansing 2010, p.164), and she walks between two women (*VN* XXIV), just as Christ was among two men on the cross. One of the main messages of the *Vita Nuova* is that Dante receives 'new life' through his love for and adoration of

Beatrice. Like Christ, the woman represents a ‘miracle’ (VN XXIX, 3), temporarily sent to Earth to inspire others, but ultimately destined for the highest Heaven (Lansing 2010, p.164). She represents a direct divine intervention with a specific end – to redeem Dante and all human beings (Hyde 1986, p.53). Similarly, Clizia goes through a series of transformations. From a simple ghostly apparition in the first motets, she becomes a visiting angel in “I Free your Forehead of the Ice”, and in *The Storm* she will be the ‘*Cristofora*’ (Montale 1981a, pp.699; 946), the bearer of Christ, who descends to Earth to save humanity.

In this last motet under examination, Clizia, appears as a heavenly messenger and as a saving creature. The poet tells her:

I free your forehead of the ice  
you gathered as you crossed the cloudy  
heights; your wings were shorn  
by cyclones; you startle awake.

Noon: in the square the medlar’s black  
shade lengthens, a chilled sun hangs on  
in the sky: and the other shadows turning  
into the alley aren’t aware you’re here. (Montale 1998, p.203)

The first stanza describes the supernatural attributes of the woman. She is imagined as a bird that arrives after a long journey, escaped from the fury of the elements. Her presence is the secret which illuminates the cold winter day of the poet. However, in the second stanza, the sound of a clock – ‘noon’ (Montale 1998, p.203) – brings him back from dream to reality. The poem traces the journey from the Astral and magic world of the Angel, to the ‘cold’ world of the speaker (Montale 1998, p.203), full of human ‘shadows’ who ‘aren’t aware’ of her existence (Montale 1998, p.203). However, for him, the ‘miraculous’ event is real, and constitutes an element that

makes him different from the others, ‘those who do not know, that ignore the possibility of similar events’ (Isella, in Montale 1986, p.82). This poem anticipates the atmosphere of the third collection, *The Storm*; the ‘cyclones’ prefigure the ‘storm’ of the war, while Clizia’s destiny is already foreseeable: she will descend from the north to save those of the ‘scorched rockbeds of the south’ (Montale 1998, p.375), as the personal appeal of the poet to Clizia becomes universal.

### ***The Storm and Other Things: Back into the Dark***

In *The Storm and Other Things*, Montale weaves together his most intense emotional responses to the woman-angel, and the external events, ‘the horror of the war and the broad social and cultural, not to say human, threats that it poses to the world at large’ (West 1981, p.86). The collection contains poems composed during the war and in the immediate post-war period (1940-1954), and describes the transition between these two different historical experiences. It focuses on the evil of the conflict, on the hope for a different world after the Liberation, and on the anguish of those who, like Montale, saw the end of an entire civilization and no chance of redemption, of reconciliation with time and with nature. The storm is an allegorical illustration of the violence, anxiety, and displacement experienced by the poet and by society as a whole. This collection has been defined as being the most political of Montale’s works. However, the political dimension is expressed not through rhetoric, but rather is embodied by the atmosphere, by representations of states of mind and by suggestive images. Even if Montale’s poetry is committed, it is never openly campaigning, nor militant. Montale kept clear of political power and distanced himself from all regimes (he never accepted the Fascist regime). In an interview in 1951, in the midst of the discussions about the political engagement of literature,

Montale affirmed, referring to his own anti-Fascism: the 'poet is certainly not *obligated* to write "political" poems' (Montale 1982, p.322); 'I have not been indifferent to what happened in the last thirty years'; 'I [chose] as a man; but as a poet I soon realized that the battle was taking place on another front' (Montale 1982, pp.310; 311).

In this sense, Montale's thought is very similar to Heaney's view of poetry as being quasi-independent from politics. During the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the poet had been accused of betrayal by his own community, as he refused to take sides in his poetic works. Indeed, Heaney had distanced himself from the place of the conflict, moving from North to South as he felt that the situation in Northern Ireland was affecting his artistic work; he did not want to become a politically committed poet, but sought to speak for all human beings equally. Similarly, Montale believed that the 'subject of his poetry (and [...] of all possible poetry) is the human condition considered in itself; not this or that historical event' (Montale 1982, p.310). Like Heaney, after the war, the Italian poet was heavily criticized for his uncommitted and apparently apolitical verse. Although an opponent of Fascism, the poet chose not to write overtly political poems, engaging instead in a more metaphysical verse. Both Montale and Heaney relied on Dante's allegory and symbolism in order 'to talk about things which cannot be addressed openly in an oppressive political climate' (Barański 1986, p.361). Through their drawing on their ancient master, they have been able to place themselves 'in a historical world yet submit that world to a scrutiny beyond history' (Heaney 1985, p.18). The 'storm' of Montale could be paralleled to Dante's 'whirlwinds of Gehenna, [a] never resting' (*Inf.* V, l.28) infernal tempest, allegorical of the danger and violence of earthly passions. By uprooting individuals from their firm foundations, this storm makes them become

creatures with no autonomy, who are overcome and subjugated by external forces. In Montale's work, the infernal storm depicts, through a number of metaphors, not only the horrors of World War II, but also the 'advent of industrial mass society [which for the poet represented] a nondescript way of life that [he] equate[d] with formlessness and abdication of individual character and values [and with the] accelerated disintegration of Western civilization in our century' (Cambon 1982, p.96).

In this collection, the personal mythology that Montale had elaborated in *The Occasions*, the figure of the salvific woman, is no longer a private fact, which determines moments of light and discomfort in the poet; instead, it assumes a universal significance. Clizia, incarnation of absolute values, is able to counteract the evil of history; she can be the bearer of salvation 'for all' (Montale 1998, p.375), contrasting with 'these blind days' (Montale 1998, p.177). Here, Montale's Dantean vision becomes more powerful. Like his predecessor, who advocated salvation for all human beings, leading 'the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory' (*Epistle XIII*, 21), the modern poet is concerned with the fate of mankind at large. The woman-angel functions as a bearer of transcendental hope beyond the limits of immediate historical realities. Montale himself elucidated the Christian symbolism to which the lady is openly linked in this collection. She represents 'the continuation and symbol of the eternal Christian sacrifice' (Montale 1982, p.304). However, the poet does not rely on an organized system of orthodoxy like Eliot or Dante. His recourse to Christianity, as Angelo Jacomuzzi points out, is part of his search 'for a principle of hope in a modern world of hopelessness'; the religious appeal and its symbols are evoked against the

insignificance of the world as the ‘only chance of salvation, not as an object of faith, but of hope’ (Jacomuzzi 1978, p.53).

In the poem “*Iride*” (“Iris”), the religious language focuses in particular on the Christian theme of the Incarnation. The figure of Christ, which joins in itself both divine and earthly nature, is transferred in the ‘*Cristofora*’ Iris (‘bearer of Christ’) (Montale 1981a, pp.699; 946), who can be seen as another representation of Clizia. Amid the violence of the war that pushes him into a ‘charnelhouse’ (Montale 1998, p.355), the poet feels lost, surrounded by a visionary landscape, animated by ‘sky-blue sapphires, palms / and storks aloft on one leg’, which, however, ‘can’t hide the atrocious view’ of the conflict (Montale 1998, p.355). The ‘sky-blue sapphires’ recall *Purgatorio* I, where Dante mentions the ‘Sweet color of the eastern sapphire rose’ (*Purg.* I, l.13) in order to describe the limpid atmosphere of Purgatory. After the dark and painful infernal journey, the poet reveals the contrast between the brightness of the present and the hellish darkness of the past. In Montale however, both infernal and celestial images are part of the present, but the ‘sky-blue sapphires’ and the ‘palms’ do not save the poet from ‘the war / that shoves [him] in a charnelhouse’ (Montale 1998, p.355). Only Clizia, the ‘Iri of Canaan’, the ‘rainbow’ (Montale 1998, p.385) of the ‘Promised Land’ (Cary 1993, p.317), a bright and colorful bridge between Earth and Heaven, can open a road towards salvation.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker looks for a sign of her:

When suddenly Saint Martin shunts his embers  
down his sluiceway, stirring them  
deep in Lake Ontario’s dark furnace,  
the popping of green pinecones in the ashes,  
or the steam from a fume of poppies  
and the bloodied Face on the shroud

that keeps me from you. (Montale 1998, p.355)

Plant emblems such as ‘green pinecones’ and ‘poppies’ (Montale 1998, p.355) represent Clizia’s signs. Above all however, the poet envisions a sacramental sign, ‘the bloodied Face on the shroud’ (Montale 1998, p.355), which refers to the shroud of the Veronica where is impressed the face of Christ. The ‘Face’ is a ‘sign’ that unites the poet and Clizia, but at the same time, divides them – ‘keeps me from you’ (Montale 1998, p.355) – as a different religion (Irma Brandes was Jewish) forced her to move away from him. The same image appears in *Paradiso XXXI*, where, in ‘our Veronica’ (*Par. XXXI*, l.101), Dante the pilgrim observes bewildered the human form of Christ. Moreover, in the *Vita Nuova*, the Veronica appears linked to Beatrice (Lansing 2010, p.164), as, after the lady’s death, the poet parallels her with Christ by affirming that:

during the season when many people go to see the blessed image that Jesus Christ left us as a visible sign of his most beautiful countenance (which my lady beholds in glory), it happened that some pilgrims were going down a street which runs through the center of the city where the most gracious lady was born, lived and died. (*VN XL*, 1)

Beatrice and Christ are related as they both have a saving mission. Similarly, Iris has to sacrifice ‘for all, expiate for all’ (Montale 1982, p.304). The ‘Stigmata of [her] Spouse upon [her]’ (Montale 1998, p.381) is the sign of her sacrificial destiny materialized. Like Jesus, she is ready to accept self-sacrifice for the sake of God and of men.

However, by becoming a ‘*Cristofora*’, Clizia also becomes increasingly distant from the poet:

this is all of you that reaches me

from the shipwreck of my people,  
and yours, now an icy fire  
evokes the land of yours you didn't see. (Montale 1998, p.355)

The Eliotic oxymoron 'icy fire', confirms the sense of detachment between the two lovers, as it 'combines the ardour and the distance, the fiery love and the imperious inaccessibility of the beloved' and thereby foreshadows the strange conclusion (Cambon 1982, p.129). The end of the poem stresses the intimate relationship between the privileged creature and the divinity:

If you appear, you bring me here again,  
under the pergola of barren vines  
by the landing on our river-and the ferry's not returning,  
the Indian summer sun dissolves, goes black.  
But if you come back, you're not you,  
your earthly history is changed. (Montale 1998, p.357)

In the poet's imagination, Clizia appears as Beatrice did to Dante when he reached the Garden of Eden in *Purgatorio* XXX. In that Canto, the woman reminded him of his 'youthful love and their personal bond' (Cambon 1982, p.128). In Montale's poem, the woman too brings back to his memory a specific day when they met 'under the pergola of barren vines' on a riverbank (Montale 1998, p.357). At the vision of Beatrice, Dante recognizes the force of the old love that he felt for her: 'I know the traces of the ancient flame' (*Par.* XXX, l.48). Similarly, addressing the lady, Montale refers to the 'flame [which] has given you form' (Montale 1998, p.355). However, this Clizia is far from the woman he met on that day; as he tells her: 'if you come back, you're not you, / your earthly history is changed' (Montale 1998, p.357). To the 'poor Dismayed Nestorian' (Montale 1998, p.355), as Montale calls himself, she appears unapproachable, as she is no longer an 'incarnate being' (Montale 1982, p.304). Intimately 'close though she may be to her troubadour's

heart, she reasserts her transcendent distance' (Cambon 1982, p.128). The poet displays the difficulty of an encounter between the human and the divine. This concept is crucially important in order to understand why Montale's journey is different from that of Dante. In the final lines of the *Comedy*, when the pilgrim beholds the mystic vision, in one of the 'three orbs' (*Par.* XXXIII, l.113) forming the Trinity, he sees 'the form of man, in hue of man' (*Par.* XXXIII, l.128). The human figure of Christ is all in one with God, and thus the pilgrim beholds the mystery of the Incarnation. Through this image, Dante implicitly denies Nestorianism, while for Montale, the two natures, human and divine, are separated. More than anything, the poet believes in the human nature of beings. It is for this reason that the increasing transcendence of Clizia will bring him to distance himself from her. Clizia is in the 'great beyond' (Montale 1998, p.381), and 'out of time' (Montale 1998, p.377), and this makes it impossible for the earthbound poet to reconcile the divine with the human. The terrene man 'cannot join the female in flight [...]; although he feels an empathetic identification with [her, she] nevertheless remains "other"' (Galassi, in Montale 1998, p.477).

Different poems display this unbridgeable separation. In "*Voce Giunta con le Folaghe*" ("Voice that Came with the Coots"), Clizia appears more and more incorporeal. The poet displays the angelic beloved as having a transcendental dialogue with the ghost of his dead father. Her apparition is described as 'weightless [...] and utterly transparent' (Cambon 1982, p.101). She resembles the various shades that Dante meets in his journey through ante-Purgatory and Purgatory proper, where the souls are transfixed by the sunbeams (*Purg.* V, ll.1-6) as 'the day's first rays transfix' Clizia's body (Montale 1998, p.377) in Montale's Dantean representation. Here she is paralleled to his dead father: 'this shade weighs no more

than yours / interred so long' (Montale 1998, p.377). In the imagination of the poet, the woman no longer appears as a living presence bearer of meaning, as an incarnate divinity, but as a divine messenger in the process of disembodiment (Ott 2006, p.215). In "*Gli Orecchini*" ("The Earrings"), the poet will flee 'the goddess who won't be flesh' (Montale 1998, p.279). In a letter to Glauco Cambon, Montale stated that the 'visitor cannot return in flesh and blood, her time has ceased to exist as such. Maybe she has been dead for some time, perhaps she will die elsewhere in that moment' (Montale 1962, p.45). This slow death is encapsulated in the fading away of her symbols. The image of fire, her prominent characteristic, disappears, and what remains are the emblems of coldness and darkness, which are also markers of fear and distrust in her salvific action: the Sun that she brings is 'sightless', and is 'consumed' by her God (Montale 1998, p.375); with the absence of the woman, the traces of the divine become increasingly imperceptible.

In the poem "*La Bufera*" ("The Storm"), Clizia vanishes into darkness like a flash of lightning: 'you turned and [...] / waved to me—and went into the dark' (Montale 1998, p.269). Amid the destruction of the war, the affinity that the poet had with his beloved is broken, and the 'invisible lines' (Montale 1998, p.143) that held their universe together are shattered. The figure of the woman-angel, bearer of humanistic and ethical ideals, cannot survive in a world deprived of faith and values. The angel walks away in the darkness which is descending on the world; her light retracts. Now the deadly lightning of the war, the blinding light that kills, dominates. The illusion of a progressive contact with the divine light loses consistency. These factors make clear how unbridgeable the gap that separates the figure of Beatrice from Clizia has become. They are both divine signs, able to free humanity from the 'evil of living'; like the Dantean muse, Clizia is also announced by light (symbolic

of revelation and salvation). However, the light that accompanies the Montalian muse is manifested only at times, in ‘flashes’ (Montale 1998, p.287), and towards the end, it assumes negative connotations. Clizia becomes ‘light-in-shadow’ (Montale 1998, p.241), and ‘spectral, snowy light’ (Montale 1998, p.253), emphasizing the precariousness of her salvific power, and men’s doubtful attitude toward transcendence. Beatrice, in turn, is identified with the light of the sun itself, so she is grace and revelation at the same time. Beatrice becomes brighter as she ascends the Heavens. As Dante says in *Paradiso* III, ‘She / At once so blinded me with brilliancy’ (*Par.* III, l.117), and in *Paradiso* X, he says, ‘O Beatrice! She so swiftly moving / From good to better [...] / how needs must she / Be radiant!’ (*Par.* X, ll.35-8). Beatrice is the reflection of God’s light; in her luminous ‘gay and laughing face / [...] God seemed to rejoice’ (*Par.* XXVII, ll.92-3). She is doomed to eternal life, while Clizia is doomed to death. Her literal defeat can be better understood if we consider that Montale’s original intention was to title his third collection *Romanzo* (*Novel*), and to model it after the soteriological narrative elaborated in Dante’s *Vita Nuova* (to make Clizia the exclusive saving figure) (Macchia 1982, pp.305-6). However, the poet changed his mind, and Clizia was eventually displaced by Volpe (the poet Maria Luisa Spaziani, who was Montale’s companion from 1949 until his death in 1981), the ‘Antibeatrice’, similar to Dante’s ‘donna Pietra’ (Montale 1996, p.2673), because, as Montale himself affirms, ‘it is impossible to imagine a process of salvation without the counterpart of error and sin’ (Montale 1996, p.2675).

Pietra, the stony woman, is the addressee of Dante’s *Rime Petrose* (*Stony Rhymes*). She evokes physical and carnal love in the poet, which is antithetical to the love for Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*. The passion for Pietra occurred during the painful period that Dante experienced after the death of Beatrice, and during which

he moved away from the worship of the woman who changed his life, as he says in the *Vita Nuova*. Beatrice, might be referring to Pietra when in *Purgatorio XXX*, she accuses Dante of having betrayed her with other women:

“[...] soon when at the threshold of my youth  
My life was changed, he took himself from me  
And gave to others: when from flesh to spirit  
I had arisen, and was grown in beauty  
And excellence, I was less dear to him;  
I pleased him less. He turned his steps away  
From the true road, and followed fabled fancies”. (*Purg.* XXX,  
ll.113-9)

After Beatrice’s death, the pilgrim started to follow a false path, and false images of the real good. However, he recognizes how reckless and foolish he has been for falling into the seduction and vanity of worldly things, when he lost the ‘greatest pleasure’ (*Purg.* XXXI, l.46) of Beatrice’s fleshly person, as he realizes that worldly goods are frail and illusory. Eventually, Dante repents of his past actions and follows the true path, that is, Beatrice, who will lead him to God. In contrast, to Clizia’s spirituality, Montale opposes the immanence of Volpe, as he realizes that the former’s transcendence cannot survive in this world. In the years during, and immediately after, the war, in the mass society that was taking shape, the humanistic values of which Clizia was the allegory no longer appeared viable, so they could no longer be a message of salvation. The poem “*Anniversario*” (“Anniversary”) marks a moment of painful self-awareness. The crisis of values, the end of the divine, and the distancing of the Christian sacrifice ‘for all’, are expressed in the following words:

the gift I dreamed  
not mine but everyone’s belongs  
to me alone, God separate  
from mankind, from the clotted blood

on the high branches, on the fruit. (Montale 1998, p.403)

Clizia is ultimately ‘consumed’ by her God (Montale 1998, p.375); her absorption by ‘Christian altruism takes her from the speaker [who] remains divorced from the uppercase God’ (Galassi, in Montale 1998, p.425). In the end, Montale affirms the choice of a lower and elementary world, where ‘the language [...] of erotic passion communicates [a] vital boost’ (Luperini 2012, p.34), and is able to resist in the aridity of contemporary existence.

The salvation that the poet had proclaimed for all human beings is now only personal in nature. In the poem “*Dal Treno*” (“From the Train”), he displays the private character of the communion between himself and Volpe, as he says: ‘love flashed for me alone’ (Montale 1998, p.343). This love is ‘so intense as to render the poet blind to the world beyond’. This private spark of love ‘stands in opposition to the universal salvation announced in the [light] of Clizia’s stare’ (Galassi, in Montale 1998, p.568). However, that light was just a ‘flash’ (Montale 1998, p.273), after which there was only darkness, and this is confirmed by the dialectic of absence-presence with which the woman is described. Contrary to Beatrice, who is a constant source of light, symbolic of a pre-modern notion of theological truth, Clizia’s flash represents only an illusion of salvation. Thus, all the poet can do is start his descent, from the ‘high inhuman dawns’ (Montale 1998, p.347) of his devotion to Clizia to the startling new earthly love for Volpe. Montale’s journey cannot display the same process of ‘transhumanization’ that Beatrice and Dante experienced in the *Divine Comedy*. Clizia cannot act as ‘the necessary intermediary in [the pilgrim’s] ascent to God’ (Montale 1982, p.141). Montale’s structure of redemption cannot work in a world where the ‘purge goes on as before, no reason given’ (Montale 1998, p.409). This world, contrary to Dante’s world, is beyond redemption for Montale. His effort

at elaborating a coherent 'system of transcendence has turned out to be ephemeral, its redemptive design effortlessly swept away' (Polizoes 2009, p.413).

Montale's poetry oscillates between the bleak disillusion of man in the darkest moment of historical tragedy, and the opening of a hopeful metaphysical perspective. The poet receives a light of hope from the salvific woman, who can open another form of truth beyond the terrible truth of the war and that of the desperate situation of human beings. Through Clizia, Montale managed to raise himself, albeit briefly, above the immanence of the here-and-now. Once Clizia disappears, however, she takes the hope of redemption away with her, leaving him in a 'devalued' world, in which a 'direct access to a beyond' is denied (Benjamin 1998, p.79). Without her, Heaven and Earth are hopelessly divided. Although the poet struggles terribly to find a way of salvation, his religious scepticism defeats him in the end. He remains on Earth, with the bitter consciousness that even if there exists an ultimate and higher sense beyond the world of the visible, it is however unreachable for him.

## Chapter 7: Heaney's Journey into the Self - Towards the Light

In the midtime of life I found myself  
Within a dusky wood; my way was lost. (*Inf.* I, ll.1-2)

Dante's opening lines of the *Inferno* capture Heaney's preoccupation, midway through his own career, with the relationship between his vocation as a poet and the political troubles in Northern Ireland. During the early 1970s, the increasing violence began to be a prominent theme in his poetry. This created a sense of uncertainty in the poet, who was torn between the demands of his art and the demands of his community. As a nationally known and valued author, Heaney has always been confronted with the public's request to give voice to Ireland's situation. The poet aspired to this task, but felt that excessive dedication to this matter was threatening the artistic element of his verse. As Seamus Deane affirms, for Heaney 'writing had become a form of guilt and a form of expiation for it' (Deane 1985, p.181). At a certain point of his career, however, the poet felt the need to break away from the continuing burden of political obligations. His desire to restore the pastoral element of his poetry, and his determination to come to terms with the cruelty of the conflict, resulted in his self-exile to the Republic of Ireland. In this new location, in Glanmore, in County Wicklow, he aspired to regain his own artistic vision, away from the violence. It is in this period that his engagement with Dante became of vital importance. The medieval poet suggested to the modern poet a new way of writing poetry, enabling him, to gain 'a perspective beyond history' (Heaney 1985, p.13). In

fact, as already noted in the previous chapter, Heaney admires Dante because of his 'ability to place himself in a historical world yet submit that world to a scrutiny beyond history' (Heaney 1985, p.18). The Irish poet identified with the Florentine poet in various ways, as they have the same Catholic background and share the same concern for themes such as culture, land, politics and language. Most importantly, they share a tormenting sense of exile. Dante was accused of treason and was forbidden to return to Florence for political reasons. Heaney imposed a form of self-exile on himself in order to come to terms with the political situation in Northern Ireland, and was accused of betrayal by his own people. However, for both poets this period initiated an inner renewal. It enabled Dante to create the *Divine Comedy*, while it allowed Heaney to slowly come to terms with his own guilt for detaching himself from Northern Ireland, and increased his desire for the attainment of a new poetry liberated from any social imposition.

This chapter will examine some of the ways in which the influence of Dante changed Heaney's poetic style and his treatment of political commitment. In his collections *North*, *Field Work*, *Station Island*, and *Seeing Things*, the poet metaphorically re-enacts the Dantean journey, and this allows him to free himself from contemporary political obligations. In *North*, Heaney draws a parallel between the images published in P. V. Glob's *The Bog People* – those victims found in the bogs of Jutland, sacrificially murdered to ensure the fertility of the land – and the situation in Northern Ireland. After having been preserved for centuries in the bog, the resurfacing bodies are symbolic of the simmering hatred between Catholics and Protestants, which burst into life on the streets of Ulster. The poems are suffused by an intense sense of suffering and darkness that recalls the infernal atmosphere found in the *Comedy*. Dante's vision of the *Inferno* was inspired by the violence he saw

around him in a Florence ripped apart by the hatred between Guelphs and Ghibellines. Likewise, Heaney's employment of dark imagery mirrors his distress about the situation in his own community, and in the face of the senseless killing of many innocent people. In *Field Work*, the poet brings together characters and images from his private past, and through them, he tries to understand the right direction to take in his pursuit of an innovative art. In the central section of the collection, the "Glanmore Sonnets", he returns to write about love and the pastoral again. However, these poems still contain political connotations because, although the poet is willing to trust art's ability to confront the conflict between autonomy and responsibility, he still feels a haunting sense of guilt for failing to have more impact on the situation in Northern Ireland.

*Station Island* is a collection that in its themes and structure resembles Dante's *Comedy*. Re-enacting a purgatorial pilgrimage, Heaney engages in dialogues with shades from his private past in order to display the afflictions of the people around him, and to give them a voice. These dialogues allow the poet to answer his questions and to affirm his commitment. In the last collection under examination, *Seeing Things*, the practice of poetic individualization is achieved, and we can see Heaney's most successful attempt at creating a more transcendental poetry that deals less with history and the Troubles. The figures of Dante and Virgil, evocative of the journey to the underworld, recur continuously in the verses. The crossing of boundaries becomes symbolic of the possibilities of poetry. Poetry can provide the 'crossing from the domain of the matter-of-fact into the domain of the imagined' (Heaney 1995b, p.xiii). The power of the imagination infuses this collection with an intense luminosity and serenity characteristic of the atmosphere of Dante's *Paradiso*.

Like his master, Heaney is determined to commit himself completely to art as a mode of communicative existence, becoming a venerator of ephemeral visions.

### ***North: A Point of Departure***

In his collection *North*, Heaney felt ethically and emotionally responsible for addressing the violent situation of contemporary Northern Ireland in his work; however, simultaneously, he was also seeking its inherent cause. For the poet, 'those were years of pain and adjustment to pain, years in which the larger drama of our politics would preoccupy the private imagination' (Heaney, in Parker 2002, p.89). Existential despair and angst are the prominent themes in the poems of this collection. As the poet himself asserted, *North* was the book that 'came most intensely out of the first shock of the Troubles' (Heaney 2008, p.448). There was a certain amount of public pressure on poets and writers to respond to the conflict in their works, and the personal dilemma for Heaney was how to address the bloodshed in his own poetry. He has always been aware that, though the artist has a responsibility to his community to remember the deaths in the national struggle, there exists a danger that the very act of remembrance would bring additional killing.

Poets:

were needy for ways in which they could honestly express the exacerbations of the local quarrel without turning that expression into just another manifestation of the aggressions and resentments which had been responsible for the quarrel in the first place. (Heaney 1989a, p.15)

At the same time, he was aware of the difficulty of being compelled to write on a topic without having found the relevant form or theme:

You have to be true to your own sensibility, for the faking of feelings is a sin against the imagination. Poetry is out of the quarrel with ourselves and the quarrel with others is rhetoric. It would wrench the rhythms of my writing procedures to start squaring up to contemporary events with more will than ways to deal with them. (Heaney 1980, p.34)

At this juncture, Heaney became acquainted with an archaeological study of Iron Age Jutland, Peter Vilhelm Glob's *The Bog People*. The photographs of the sacrificial victims symbolize his most intense preoccupations: land, religion, violence, history and myth (Parker 2002, p.91). The resurfacing of the bodies, and their dramatic past, is analogous for the poet to the sudden dramatic eruption of hostilities existing in contemporary Irish history, hostilities that had hitherto been dormant. It is as if the 'resurrected sectarian hatred, which has been buried under the seeming civilities of the Northern Irish state, has now, like these bog people, come to the surface again in a chillingly lifelike manner' (O'Brien 2002a, p.22). In these bodies, the poet finds the 'images and symbols' that he needs for his poetic 'predicament' (Heaney 1980, p.56), which allow him to engage the 'Northern experience [...] by refracting it through some exterior [...] material' (Corcoran 1986, p.184); in this way, he is able to comment on the Troubles without openly illustrating the violence, thereby offering a new perspective on Northern Irish society.

It is in this period also that Heaney became acquainted with Dante, who would become an ideal model for the poet writing in the midst of political strife. In the *Comedy*, Dante also illustrates his personal and public concerns using allegories and symbolic images. The whole journey through *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* is in fact an allegory for the lost soul in search of redemption. The pilgrim's wandering in the woods in the midpoint of his life at the opening of the book is

symbolic of his personal confusion and lack of direction. Heaney was himself experiencing a mid-life crisis, both personal and artistic, when, in 1972, he started to read Dorothy Sayers's translation of the *Inferno* (De Petris 1989, p.72). Some critics state that Dante started to have an influence on Heaney's poetic only in the late 1970s, with the publication of *Field Work* (1979), when the poet's urge to disengage his poetry from political interference had become more acute. John Rickard suggests that 'Heaney's turn toward Dante begins in *Field Work*, after he has moved away from the archaeological metaphors of the bog poems in *North*' (Rickard 1996, p.254). However, it could be argued that Heaney's choice to award the Florentine the status of enabling literary forebear was more a question of degree than of absolute consciousness. As Michael Cavanagh observes, 'Heaney was Dantean before he knew he was' (Cavanagh 1999, p.128). The reading of Sayers's translation – which occurred three years before the publication of *North* (1975) – undoubtedly affected the composition of that collection. Divided into two sections, the volume displays two distinct aesthetics and tones. With its dark imagery and the sense of suffering it conveys, the first section seems a re-interpretation of Dante's *Inferno*, while the second part represents Heaney's more personal considerations on political circumstances, and the beginning of a new consciousness about the validity of poetry in the face of historical events. The Irish poet admires Dante for his ability to purge his poetry of historical phenomena thereby converting it to a higher purpose: what could be seen as poetry as a tool of salvation. Similarly, at the end of *North*, Heaney realizes that poetry cannot be 'a diagram of political attitude' (Heaney 1980, p.219); his meditations on art affirm his intent to shape his own poetic vision and illuminate his people with the light that poetry can offer.

In his journey towards redemption, Dante's only way to escape from the dark woods is to go down into the *Inferno*, because 'man must first descend into humility before he can raise himself to salvation' (Bondanella and Conaway Bondanella 1996, p.154). When he reaches the centre of Hell, he painfully turns on the monstrous flanks of Satan and sees 'The ruler of that realm of final woe' (*Inf.* XXXIV, l.27). This is the very last part of his journey into the dark place, 'the central point / Which draws the weight on every side' (*Inf.* XXXIV, ll.96-7); from now on, he will begin to rise, he is no longer hampered by gravity, and heads upward out of Hell and toward the light to see the stars, 'the shining things / Which the sky carries' (*Inf.* XXXIV, ll.122-4). Descending in order to arise is symbolic, for both Heaney and Dante, of the poetic act: writing 'poetry is a participation to a cleansing, affirming ritual that progresses through abnegation in order to achieve completion' (Pellegrino 1998, p.18). When Heaney sinks to despair and self-accusation is when his poetry reaches the nadir (McCarthy 2008, p.79); after this, there is a revival of spirit: 'My feet touched the bottom and my heart revived' (Heaney 1984, p.85). Heaney's descent to the dark recesses of the earth in *North* initiates an aspiration for a liberation from the 'gravitational pull of myth and its history' (Hart 1993, p.94), in order to lift his spirit and restore his vision. Turning to the dark in order to gain new light turns out to be prophetic of Heaney's entire *oeuvre*.

The bodies that emerge from the bog in Jutland mirror the historical drama of people in Northern Ireland, as in these poems, the land represents the geographical place from which the past emerges and embodies the poet's 'rootedness in Northern Irish soil, history and culture' (Padilla 2009, p.24). The land is a caring mother that represents Heaney's conception of identity. However, he understands that besides being a source of love and strength, the Irish land is also a cause for suffering. In one

of his first 'bog poems', "The Tollund Man", the earth is a dreadful goddess who works 'her terrible juices' (Heaney 1973, p.47) on the victims sacrificed to her. In Danish Mythology, the goddess Nerthus required sacrifices to ensure the earth's fertility; people were ritually murdered before being buried in the bog. The poem represents the goddess as antagonistic and sexually destructive: 'She tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen' (Heaney 1973, p.47). Here, Nerthus is associated with Mother Ireland, and the sacrifice of the Tollund man is juxtaposed to:

The scattered, ambushed  
Flesh of labourers,  
Stockinged corpses  
Laid out in the farmyards. (Heaney 1973, p.48)

The poet compares the Iron Age sacrificial victims to contemporary victims of Irish violence; both are sons of a land which, instead of protecting them, asks for their blood and sacrifice.

Dante's relationship with his native land was also a conflicted one; like Heaney, he refers to Florence in maternal terms. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the poet expresses his sorrow at having lost what he sees as a mother in his years of exile, asserting to 'love Florence so much that because [he] loved her', his unjust 'exile' intensified his agony (*DVE* I, vi, 3). However, later Dante realizes that his city is empty of 'pity, and devoid of love' (*Epistle IV*, 5) for having banished him. In the *Comedy*, Dante depicts a crueller Florence through the words of his ancestor Cacciaguida. Using an intertextual reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Cacciaguida compares the city to Phaedra – wife of Theseus and stepmother of Hippolytus – who, having been rejected by her stepson, banishes him from Athens (*Met.* XV, ll.497-545). Like Phaedra, Florence is 'Perfidious and impious' (*Par.* XVII, l.41), and, Cacciaguida warns the pilgrim, she 'will [...] be / Arrayed against thee' (*Par.* XVII,

ll.56-7). Heaney and Dante have witnessed the brutal aspects of their native lands, and in their works, they display the sense of injustice they feel in a country which, though passionately loved, is burdened by a heart-breaking conflict.

The bog metaphor develops from Heaney's deep attachment to the land. For the poet, the bog is a geological memory-bank, the mythical space of the Irish landscape, where he 'can go back beyond tribal memory to the source of the racial unconscious'. The bog becomes both 'graveyard and reliquary, a repository not only for Celtic artefacts but also for the turbulent pre-Christian civilizations of northwestern Europe' (Collins 2010, p.53). In the poem "Bog Queen", the woman in the bog is not one of the Jutland bodies, but the first documented body found in Ireland, in the Moira estate (Belfast), in 1781 (Corcoran 1986, p.69). For Heaney, she becomes 'a kind of Kathleen Ni Houlihan, a mother Ireland' (Corcoran 1986, p.70), for whom, as William Butler Yeats wrote, 'so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death' (Yeats 1994, p.322). Heaney connects the mutilations of the bog bodies with 'the martyrs of the Easter 1916 uprising in Ireland and all the reprisals and repercussions visited on both communities' (Covington 1996, p.2). Past and present, Jutland and Ireland, are conflated by the poet in order to display the universality of the suffering of those whom hatred has annihilated. Like Dante, Heaney seeks to give voice to this suffering. In Valeria Tinkler-Villani's words, Dante 'animates the dead to make them reveal the true state of things' (Tinkler-Villani 1994, p.86). Similarly, Heaney makes the bog queen expose her own state of sorrow; she describes her history and the process of her physical decomposition: 'the seeps of winter / digested me, the illiterate roots / pondered and died' (Heaney 1975, p.32). The 'transformation from human to natural object that is undergone by the bog queen seems to indicate a

direction in the poem which will see her totally subsumed by the land' (O'Brien 2002a, p.34), emphasising once again the consuming power of the ground. Words such as 'died', 'carius', 'wrinkling', 'robbed', 'barbered', and 'stripped' (Heaney 1975, p.33), are part of the lexicon of the violence in Northern Ireland, and the degradation inflicted on human beings. This violence cannot be stopped while communities remain locked in tribal hatred; after lingering for centuries underground, like the bog queen in the poem, this hatred resurfaces rising 'from the dark, / hacked bone [and] skull-ware' (Heaney 1975, p.34), precluding any chance for human redemption and cultural restoration.

Persistent hostility and rage are also the characteristic traits of medieval Florence, depicted by Dante in *Inferno* VII. The image of the bog is also found here, representing the dwelling place of the wrathful, 'the souls of men whom anger conquered' (*Inf.* VII, l.103), who are eternally condemned to attack one another in the slime. Dante states:

And I who stood intent to see, beheld  
People half smothered in the grievous bog,  
Naked, with faces full of injury:  
And each was fighting other, not with hands  
Alone, but head and body, feet and teeth,  
Tearing and tearing. (*Inf.* VII, ll.97-102)

These bodies, tearing each other to pieces, are symbolic of a divided community, united only by a mutual hatred. Dante classifies two kind of wrath: one is active and brutal, causing anguish and devastation on other people and on itself. The other is passive and gloomy and can find no joy in God or man. Both are immersed in the black bog: the first, on the surface, rip and roar at one another; the second, at the bottom, lie gurgling, incapable of articulating even a single word for the anger that

suffocates them. Like the Irish Catholic and Protestant population, these souls are engulfed in a cauldron of hatred and violence due to inner antagonisms and resentments that they are not able to leave behind.

The question of ethical and aesthetic responsibilities during acts of violence is the prominent theme of the second part of *North*. Here, Heaney abandons the Nordic mythology of the bog bodies for a more personal exploration of the self, his community, and the role of poetry in times of reprisals. In “Whatever You Say Say Nothing”, the persona expresses his total exasperation with a country ‘where bad news is no longer news’ (Heaney 1975, p.58). He attacks the ‘famous / Northern reticence’ (Heaney 1975, p.59), and confesses his own and everybody else’s lack of courage because they cannot react with strength to the dreadful situation. He admits: ‘We tremble near the flames but want no truck / With the actual firing’ (Heaney 1975, p.58). Heaney’s use of the pronoun ‘we’ suggests that his feelings of attachment to this community are strong; however, he realizes that, like them, he has become ‘forked-tongued’ (Heaney 1975, p.58). He admits his failure for not being able to take a defined stance. He wants to tell the truth in the midst of atrocity through his poetry; however, he cannot stand in the role of war-reporter and use his art to display ‘the dolorous circumstances of [his] native place’ (Heaney 1995b, p.8). His desire to voice a sense of belonging to his community is in contrast with the urge towards poetic individuation. He seeks to liberate himself from the ‘gravitational pull’ that oppresses him in order ‘to accomplish visionary poetic freedom’ (Padilla 2009, p.25). The image of the mythological hero Antaeus, which appears twice in the collection, is symbolic of this transformation.

In "Antaeus", Heaney describes the Greek hero's need for 'the dark that wombed me and nurtured in every artery' (Heaney 1975, p.12). His invincible strength depends on his permanent contact with the earth: 'When I lie on the ground / I rise flushed as a rose in the morning' (Heaney 1975, p.12). Heaney feels a sense of association with this figure. He says: 'I identified with this earthman because I saw myself as something of an earthman, somebody with his poetic feet very much on the local ground' (Heaney 2009a, p.2). However, he continues: 'I was also aware that Antaeus [...] was far from invulnerable' (Heaney 2009a, p.2). In the poem, "Hercules and Antaeus", the 'sky-born and royal' (Heaney 1975, p.52) Hercules defeats the Greek hero by lifting him in the air:

Hercules lifts his arms  
in a remorseless V,  
[ ... ]  
and lifts and banks Antaeus  
high as a profiled ridge. (Heaney 1975, p.53)

For Heaney, this struggle embodies the everlasting battle between earthy nature and airy imagination. 'Hercules represents the balanced rational light while Antaeus represents the pieties of illiterate fidelity' (Deane 1985, p.66). Antaeus's liberation from earthy bounds is symbolic of Heaney's own poetic evolution; as he himself affirms, he feels 'subject at all times to the gravity and grieves for our human condition but at the same time susceptible to the lift of the heart when I'd lift up my eyes to the heavens' (Heaney 2009a, p.4). The struggle between these two forces in his inner self is still a dilemma for the poet at the end of *North*, which reflects his ambivalent feelings with the problems of involvement and withdrawal. However, he realizes that, by remaining an 'earth-grubber', he may be cut off from the 'royal' light. The collection's closing poem, "Exposure", displays the coming to shape of

this realization and represents the beginning of a new kind of poetic consciousness for Heaney.

In the woods of County Wicklow, the poet is assailed by doubts and self-reproach for leaving the North and escaping 'from the massacre' (Heaney 1975, p.72). He sits 'weighing / [his] responsible *tristia*' and feels like 'An *inner émigré*' (Heaney 1975, p.72). These lines evoke the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam and the Roman Ovid who, in their works, both entitled *Tristia*, recount the tragedy of their exiles. Ovid is also a figure with whom Dante identified. The Latin author 'became the uncontested classical model for a theme that is central in medieval literature [...]: the theme of exile' (Barolini and Storey 2003, p.390). Dante himself made use of *Tristia* in the *Comedy* (Wheeler, in Ovid 2010, p.xxxviii). However, contrary to Ovid, who depicted the bleak reality of exile, Dante transforms his experience 'from a state of social alienation into a potent means of spiritual identification [...] substituting the attainment of celestial citizenship for the loss of the worldly citizenship' (Barolini and Storey 2003, p.391). Similarly, Heaney's internal exile will create new personal and poetic revelations. He will no longer serve 'the rules of his tribe by exposing its hidden violent origins' (Tobin 1999, p.138), because his responsibility is not to take sides. His role is to rise 'for the efficacy of song itself, [to be] an emblem of the poet as potent sound-wave' (Heaney 1988, p.xx), just as Dante did before him. Rejecting the impossible political demands that the Troubles placed on him, he will look instead into himself, using his poetry as a form of communication between self and other.

An essential belief in poetry 'as an agent [...] of evolution towards that more radiant and generous life which the imagination desires' (Heaney 1995b, p.133), distinguishes both Dante's and Heaney's poetry. At the end of his pilgrimage, Dante

sees the light of all creation and all time, the Holy Trinity. He invokes God's help in order to give him the capacity to put his experience into words for the sake of his fellow men:

O Light of heaven [...]  
[...]  
Give to my tongue but power enough to show  
One only spark of thine o'erflowing glory,  
That I may leave it for the future folk. (*Par.* XXXIII, ll.63; 66-8)

Dante yearns to find that 'One only spark' of inspirational light which allows him to pass on to future generations the magnificence of his experience. Similarly, at the end of *North*, Heaney seeks the 'once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet's pulsing rose' (Heaney 1975, p.73), in order to transform the 'meagre heat' that has characterized his poetry as a committed Northern Irish poet into 'a ton of light' and poetic 'sparks' (Heaney 1975, p.73). Heaney however, feels that he has 'missed' that portent, and in this respect, he resembles the Italian poet Montale, who sees such signs as transient, and never lasting or permanent. Nonetheless, both poets will use these fleeting 'sparks' of light in their effort to keep poetry away from public pressures and violence, contrasting the evil of the world. For Heaney, his role as a poet is to distance himself and his art from the charged politics of the North, and his longing for a world of love and justice is his incentive to do this. Having come to this realization in *North*, the poet is ready to embark on his endeavour in his next collection *Field Work*.

### ***Field Work: Towards Liberation***

*Field Work* represents a turning point in Heaney's artistic life because it displays the poet's self-confirmation, and his 'celebration of the belief in the redemptive power

of art' (Parker 2002, p.164). Although images and tone in these poems obsessively describe the horrible violence in Northern Ireland, with the guidance of Dante, the poet increasingly acquires a new trust in poetry and in its healing power. In a letter to Brian Friel, Heaney states: 'I no longer wanted a door into the dark, I wanted a door into the light' (Heaney, in Corcoran 1986, p.128). Dante is a reinforcing figure for Heaney in this period, and becomes crucial in his 'reconciliation of the ideal world of art and the real world of suffering' (Tobin 1999, p.164). This collection explores the poet's position in the world he inhabits and his attitude toward the private sphere of his family. Here, most references to Dante are taken from the *Purgatorio*, as Heaney feels that he has to go through his purgation in order to find the 'comet's pulsing rose' (Heaney 1975, p.73), the light of poetic redemption that he had missed at the end of "Exposure". His new responsibility is now, not only to victims of the massacre, but also to the search for his individual voice in the midst of atrocity. In his essay "Envy and Identifications", Heaney declares:

The main tension is between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self. I hoped that I could dramatize these strains by meeting shades from my own dream-life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world. They could perhaps voice the claims of orthodoxy and the necessity to refuse those claims. (Heaney 1985, pp.18-9)

The communication with the dead allows the poet to answer his questions, to validate his commitment, and to make sense of what is happening around him.

The numerous elegies in this collection explore the dramatic impact that the political reality had on the lives of Heaney's family, friends and artists. "The Strand at Lough Beg" opens with an epigraph from *Purgatorio*, in which the undertone is

one of expectation because the image of the 'oozy sand', which grows even amongst 'tall rushes' (Heaney 1979, p.17), is an emblem for regeneration. The poem is dedicated to the memory of Heaney's cousin, Colum McCartney, who was murdered in a sectarian attack. The poet performs on his cousin the same ritual of purification that Virgil enacted on Dante, washing the grim of Hell from his face before entering *Purgatorio*:

In the thick grass aside, my master plunged  
Both his hands softly [...]  
And here he washed away from me the hue  
Of the sad place. (*Purg.* I, ll.114-8)

Similarly, Heaney:

Kneel[s] in front of [his cousin] in brimming grass  
And gather[s] up cold handfuls of the dew  
to wash his [face]. (Heaney 1979, p.18)

After the purification, Virgil surrounds Dante with a 'plant / [and] at once it sprang again where he had pulled it' (*Purg.* I, ll.123-4). Likewise, Heaney interlaces 'scapulars' from 'rushes that shoot green again' (Heaney 1979, p.18). Blake Morrison states that 'Heaney's tone in *Field Work* is elegiac, concerned not to probe the causes of a nation's sorrow but to mourn the loss of relatives and friends' (Morrison 1986, p.133). Through Dante's images, the poet can commemorate the dead without having a direct involvement with the Troubles. The necessity for Heaney to express his own art outside the demands of his community is evident in "Casualty". Here, the figure of the fisherman, Louis O'Neill, murdered because he was unwilling to accept the restrictions of his own people, is admired by the poet. 'He was blown to bits' (Heaney 1979, p.22) because 'he broke' his 'tribe's complicity' (Heaney 1979, p.23). This reality suggests that there is a real sense of

danger in moving beyond the safety of the tribe, though its rules are constricting for the murdered man. His independence is a model for Heaney, who realizes that he can achieve artistic freedom only by moving beyond the expectations of his people. At the end of the poem, Heaney makes the comparison between the fisherman and himself:

I tasted freedom with him.  
To get out early, haul  
Steadily off the bottom,  
Dispraise the catch, and smile  
As you find a rhythm  
Working you, slow mile by mile,  
Into your proper haunt  
Somewhere, well out, beyond Field. (Heaney 1979, p.24)

As the fisherman's work is fundamentally free, in the same way, the correct role of the poet is to be free of the pull of the crowd, and to work in the rhythm of inspiration and language.

At the centre of *Field Work* there are the "Glanmore Sonnets", which represent 'a momentary still point in the poet's life from which [he] observe[s] the outside world' (Tobin 1999, p.156). Eliot's 'still point' (Eliot 1963, p.126) comes to mind, which for the poet represented a time of renewal and transformation. Similarly, Heaney's experience of this moment of stillness prefigures his rebirth as a poet and as a man, away from the violence of Northern Ireland. Interestingly, when faced with a moment of crisis, both poets turn for guidance to the same exemplar, namely, Dante, who helps them to become continually 'renewed, transfigured, in another pattern' (Eliot 1963, p.205). Heaney had seen the influence of the medieval master on writers of the twentieth century, especially on Eliot, for whom he had a particular admiration; this gave him the stimulus to

attempt a direct dialogue with the Florentine poet.<sup>14</sup> However, Heaney's affinity with the ancient master is different from that of Eliot. If the Anglo-American poet was attracted to the religious aspects of the *Comedy*, 'Heaney looks to Dante's humanity and sense of justice in the light of his craving for peace' (Stevenson 1994, p.134). The "Glanmore Sonnets" embody exactly this craving: a search for peace in the contemplative solitude of the countryside. In the first sonnet, Heaney imagines the poet as a ploughman; 'Vowels [are] ploughed into others' (Heaney 1979, p.33) in the endeavour to dig into poetry and give it the power to transform the world into art: art is 'a paradigm of earth new from the lathe / Of plough' (Heaney 1979, p.33). In sonnet II, the poet declares that, 'Words' and poetry enter 'the sense of touch' (Heaney 1979, p.34), comparing a poem to a sculpture. Here art is conceived as a gratifying fusion with life. However, in the last three sonnets, we perceive that even if away from the Northern Irish situation, the atrocities of the conflict are still troubling the poet. His fear of something menacing is visible in sonnets VIII and IX, where the persona's mind fills with images of the repercussion of the bloody hostilities. He asks, 'What would I meet, blood-boltered, on the road?' (Heaney 1979, p.40), and imagines 'Blood on a pitch-fork, blood on chaff and hay' (Heaney 1979, p.41). Here his wife's love offers him support against terror and anguish. He summons her, saying, 'Come to me quick, I am upstairs shaking' (Heaney 1979, p.41). The poet displays his vulnerability and seeks sexual and spiritual relief from this fear and anxiety. Daniel Tobin states that the 'marital union of lovers prefigures the more encompassing union of life and art' (Tobin 1999, p.162). The contemplative world of Glanmore allows Heaney to determine a contact between nature, art and human relationships.

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<sup>14</sup> Just as Eliot's intertextual relationship with Dante has been a source of inspiration for Montale.

However, his difficulty in detaching himself from the political events is also exposed in these sonnets, through images of fear and a profound sense of guilt.

Nevertheless, with Dante's assistance, the Irish poet learns to 'trust art as reality, to trust artfulness as an affirmation and not to go into the self-punishment too much' (Hart 1993, p.121). Heaney poetically elevates Dante for his spiritual strength, and for his ability to be 'faithful to the collective historical experience and [...] true to the recognition of the emerging self' (Heaney 1985, p.19). The Florentine felt himself to be a poet-seer whose voice should announce the truth and prepare mankind for judgment. He used 'the powerful weapon of his poetry' (Croce 1922, p.151) in order to describe reality, but primarily, to reach human hearts. Likewise, Heaney knows that 'poetry works as positively as the gun, but on a different level' (Curtis 1982, p.115). In *The Redress of Poetry*, he states:

Poetry [...] has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. The *Divine Comedy* is a great example of this kind of total adequacy. (Heaney 1995b, p.8)

Following the example of his forebear, at the end of *Field Work*, Heaney commits himself to become the spokesperson of the afflicted through his poetry. Repeating the master's words in *Inferno XXXII*, he says:

Is there any story I can tell  
For you in the world above against him?  
[...]  
I will report the truth and clear your name. (Heaney 1979, p.61)

This elucidates the scope of the poet in Ireland: namely, to report the truth. This collection affirms the intention of the poet to take a new approach in his poetry and to give the victims of the Northern Irish conflict a voice. He will consume the reality

of violence in Ulster and work towards a vision that counteracts the intensity of the tragedy around him. However, he will deal with the situation in Ireland using images out of his own artistic vision, basing his poetry (just as Dante did), on humanitarian principles. Dante is for Heaney exactly what Virgil was for Dante: 'the poet who had envisaged in an eclogue the world of allegory and encyclical' (Heaney 1985, p.5). He is the supreme master, emblematic of the more universal vision that Heaney intends to attain in his poetry.

### ***Station Island: A Journey into the Self***

Heaney's desire to rise out of a cultural detachment to create an art based on the recovery of his past attains its most evident expression in *Station Island*, a collection divided in three parts which, due to its structure and contents, represents a 'sort of miniature of the *Divine Comedy*' (Fumagalli 2001, p.131). Following Dante's decision to make 'the dead poesy revive again' (*Purg.* I, 1.7), Heaney continues his symbolic journey to the underworld in order to seek personal purification, and become an independent artist with his own autonomous vision. Like Dante, the modern poet engages in dialogues with shades from his private past to display and give voice to the affliction of the people around him, thereby affirming his own artistic commitment. The opening poem, "The Underground", introduces the theme of the whole book: a journey to the underworld in order to retrace 'the path back' (Heaney 1984, p.13), and to rediscover a prior self: as Heaney says, 'I felt I had come on myself' (Heaney 1984, p.13). He recognizes that only by looking back to his own personal and cultural past, can he prepare the basis for a better future. The underground motif is a further development of Heaney's earlier 'digging' motif as set out in his collection *Death of a Naturalist*, in which the downward movement

represents a journey into memory. Heaney has to descend into memories and examine them in order to arise. As mentioned in chapter 5, the poem "Sandstone Keepsake" displays the poet's reflection on the internment camp at Magilligan prison, near Limavady, County Derry. While walking on a 'beach on Inishowen' (Heaney 1984, p.20) in County Donegal, he finds a piece of sandstone, and imagines the stone as having come from 'Phlegethon' (the river of blood in *Inferno* XII). Through this comparison, Heaney envisages the suffering of those interned without trial in the prison. For the poet, the cruelty of those torturers in the camp is similar to the brutality that 'Guy de Montfort' (Heaney 1984, p.20), and the other perpetrators of violence punished in the river, used against their neighbours. The river of blood is linked in the mind of the poet to the blood that men shed on earth. Heaney's preoccupation with atrocity and hostility is a dominant thematic motif in the opening section of *Station Island*. However, Tobin suggests that the entire structure of the book shows a progression, 'the movement from one kind of vision and mode of expression to another, the new mode emerging from the purgatorial examination of the former' (Tobin 1999, p.198).

The theme of the journey is at the core of the eponymous "Station Island" sequence, located at the structural centre of the collection, which is Heaney's most accomplished purgatorial figuration. Here, the sense of expiation of his guilt and anxiety is paramount, as is his search for a suitable position to adopt in relation to social, religious, and political circumstances. The section is formed by twelve poems, each detailing an encounter with a shade from Heaney's past. This journey among familiar ghosts allows the poet to make 'changes and developments in himself' (O'Brien 2002a, p.63). Heaney's pilgrimage to the island of Lough Derg,

also known as St. Patrick's Purgatory, is formulated on the idea of Dante's *Purgatorio*. As he confesses:

I would not have dared to go to Lough Derg for the poem's setting had I not become entranced a few years ago with *The Divine Comedy* [...]. With Dante's example [...] I was encouraged to make an advantage of what could otherwise be regarded as a disadvantage. (Heaney 1985, p.18)

The legend tells that Patrick established the forms of penance required of pilgrims when they visited the island; these involved a three-day fast, an all-night vigil, barefoot walking on stones, and the continuous repetition of prayers. For Heaney, this 'pilgrimage is to the island of the unconscious within his own mind: he is in search of himself as opposed to anything else, and specifically in search of the answerability between his art and his culture' (O'Brien 2002a, p.65).

In the first section, the speaker meets the ghost of Sweeney the Sabbath-breaker, who was Heaney's nemesis as a child, and who reminds the character of *Sweeney Astray* in Heaney's translation of the Irish poem *Buile Shuibhne*. Sweeney disagrees with the poet's intention to make the pilgrimage and warns him to 'stay clear of all processions' (Heaney 1984, p.63). As Henry Hart suggests, 'Sweeney is a guardian of a dark wood, an accuser who threatens to trap the potential pilgrim and prevent his journey toward redemption'. He also personifies the poet's 'doubts and fears that Dante scored into the opening scene of *The Commedia*' (Hart 1993, pp.164; 165). However, like Dante, Heaney overcomes his fears, and starts his journey, joining the 'crowd of shawled women' (Heaney 1984, p.63), who will lead him towards the underworld, just as Virgil directed Dante. Andrew Murphy points out that 'Sweeney provides the first signal of an interrogation of Heaney's religious sense of self' (Murphy 1996, p.65). Dante also had to explore the wilderness of his

own soul and fight against oppositions both from within and without. 'The Divine Comedy is precisely the drama of the soul's choice' (Sayers, in Dante 1950, p.10), an exploration into the self, a journey of experience that will lead the poet towards the beatific vision. Likewise, Heaney's pilgrimage is towards the redemption of the belief in his creative and spiritual sense of self.

In section VI, the poet imagines a young girl who used to play with him as a child. She arrives 'Like a wish wished' (Heaney 1984, p.75), and embodies both spiritual and sexual desire. He admires 'her honey-skinned / Shoulder-blades and the wheatlands of her back' (Heaney 1984, p.76). The girl's radiance and the poet's happiness are compared to Dante's restored inspiration in *Inferno* II, after Virgil tells him that his journey is wanted from above, and that Beatrice has intervened to rescue him from Hell. As Andrew Auge states, that 'Dantean ray of celestial radiance hovers in the background of Heaney's account of how he was "translated, given" (*SI*, 76)' (Auge 2013, p.133). Like Dante's sense of joy and renewal at the mentioning of his beloved in fact, Heaney feels like a flower rejuvenated by the girl's luminosity:

As little flowers that were all bowed and shut  
By the night chills rise on their stems and open  
As soon as they have felt the touch of sunlight,  
So I revived in my own wilting powers  
And my heart flushed, like somebody set free. (Heaney 1984, p.76)

The choice of the sonnet form allows Heaney to sing his love in the same way in which Dante wrote for his beloved in his *Rhymes (Rime)*. However, whereas Dante never had a relationship with Beatrice in reality, and his representation was solely based in his mind and in his ideals, Heaney writes about a truer, more authentic love and relationship. Nevertheless, the vision of the girl represents a moment of joy in both poets' journeys. Just like Eliot's meeting with the 'hyacinth girl' in "The Waste

Land" (Eliot 1963, p.54), and Montale's imaginary encounter of Clizia in the "Motets" (*The Occasions*), Heaney confides in the girl in order to bring him hope and comfort. She provides spiritual illumination in a moment of sorrow. Her blissful apparition paves the way for the continuation of his journey.

The culmination of Heaney's self-accusation occurs in section VIII of "Station Island", where his cousin Colum McCartney (already mentioned in "The Strand at Lough Beg", in *Field Work*), accuses him of paying a greater fidelity to the world of poetry than to the reality of his death. The poet's apparent detachment in the face of political outrage is what McCartney reproaches. He reminds Heaney that his ritual of purification performed in *Field Work*, was a contemptible surrogate of art for reality: 'You confused evasion and artistic tact', he says (Heaney 1984, p.83). McCartney would have appreciated a more vigorous poetic response to the murder. His words force Heaney to reconsider his responsibilities, and coerce him into asking himself whether his attempts to save his art, are only a way to avoid dealing with the reality of Ulster's problems. However, in the next poem there is a sense of relief on the part of the poet, as he realizes that after the purgation underground, he is finally reaching a new light and a new life.

In section XII, James Joyce takes on the role of Virgil, and guides Heaney away from the meaningless, ancient practices of Lough Derg. He instructs the poet not to be 'so earnest' and to let 'others wear the sackcloth and the ashes' (Heaney 1984, p.93). The encounter with Joyce is reminiscent of Dante's meeting with his forerunner Cacciaguida in *Paradiso XVII*. As Glauco Cambon points out, the confrontation with father figures is 'a test of maturity' in Dante's poem (Cambon 1982, p.102), and the same is true in Heaney's verse. Cacciaguida predicts that

Dante will be exiled from Florence, and encourages him to write his poem and 'show [his] vision in its fullness' (*Par.* XVII, 1.128), urging him to make 'a party of [himself] alone' (*Par.* XVII, 1.69). Likewise, Joyce advises Heaney to 'strike [his] note' (Heaney 1984, p.93), and to think of art as a reunion with the self because 'the main thing is to write / for the joy of it' (Heaney 1984, p.93). Joyce proposes that art needs to be detached from the engagement with the particularities of political situations, because, as he says:

"You lose more of yourself than you redeem  
doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.  
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim  
out on your own and fill the element  
with signatures on your own frequency,  
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,  
elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea". (Heaney 1984, p.93)

These words are strictly connected to the words Heaney speaks at the end of "Casualty", in *Field Work*, a poem that could be considered a forerunner of the final lines spoken by Joyce in "Station Island". In "Casualty", the speaker had 'tasted freedom':

Dispraise the catch, and smile  
As you find a rhythm  
Working you, slow mile by mile,  
Into your proper haunt  
Somewhere, well out, beyond Field. (Haney 1979, p.24)

In both poems, the imagery of the sea is symbolic of a sense of poetic freedom and a new transcendent perspective. This new outlook allows the poet to achieve another form of vision, discovering, as Joyce once said, 'the mode of life or of art whereby your spirit could express itself in unfettered freedom' (Joyce 2000, p.267); a vision

that stresses the importance and value of the individual artistic experience of the poet as a single voice as opposed to being a voice of the tribe.

In "Station Island", as Auge suggests, it:

seems inevitable that Heaney's quest to extricate himself from what he referred to as "the penitential sub-culture of Irish Catholicism" [and culture] would culminate in an encounter with Joyce's ghost. In his escape from the nets of family, nation, and religion woven so tightly in Ireland, Joyce epitomizes the ideal of artistic freedom. The fact that he gives voice to this freedom in this sequence's most fully realized version of Dante's terza rima identifies that earlier master as a kindred spirit. (Auge 2013, p.137)

In fact, Joyce also seems to suggest that it is time for Heaney to experiment with what Dante taught him, just as he himself did in his own time. The Italian poet's literary and linguistic theories helped shape the radical narrative techniques of Joyce's last novel *Finnegans Wake*. Dante's striking development of the vernacular was justified by the fact that he wanted to go beyond immediate perceptual realities in order to express 'that which has never been written' (VN XLII, 2) by anyone before, namely, the 'novum, the Divine, the ineffable' (Boldrini 2004, p.4). Arguably, Joyce's innovative method was also informed by a poetics of the *novum*, which allowed him to forge the 'uncreated conscience of [his] race' (Joyce 2000, p.253). Dante and Joyce both experimented with something new; Heaney's spiritual search is also a kind of experiment, the result of which will enable him to fly by himself into a new realm of perspective. The figure of Joyce represents the final liberation from the sense of failed responsibility that the poet has in the context of the Troubles. At the end of *Station Island* Heaney has, as he says of the *Divine Comedy*, 'an overall sense of having come through [...], of faring forth into the ordeal, going to the nadir and returning to a world that is renewed by the boon won

in that other place' (Heaney 1985, p.14). Cavanagh states that 'the whole purpose of the Dantean endeavour is to turn random life into purposeful art, to turn one's own life to art' (Cavanagh 1999, p.123). By the end of "Station Island", Heaney is able to release his work 'from the foundational beliefs of his culture in quest of an unforeseeable transcendence' (Auge 2013, p.138). Heaney's restorative journey enables him to increase his attraction to the transcendent at the expense of the political by following Dante's example of placing 'himself in an historical world yet submit[ting] that world to a scrutiny from a perspective beyond history' (Heaney 1985, p.18). Dante's universality provided the key to artistic transcendence, which culminated in Heaney's establishing his literary credentials outside of Irish political and cultural struggles.

### ***Seeing Things: The Power of Poetic Imagination***

*Seeing Things* is a collection of transformations that enunciates Heaney's desire to reassess the visionary powers of poetry. It is framed by the poet's renderings of two excerpts of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Inferno*. Their placement at the beginning and at the end of the volume is suggestive of the intimate and communicative design of the collection (Dunn 2001, p.207), while, at a broader intellectual level, it suggests that Heaney's own later work will be framed in the cultural context of the great European intellectual tradition. The theme of the journey that the classic tales contain reflects Heaney's will to continue his exploration of the underworld. The poet undertakes a pilgrimage to his past through memory; however, his recollections are transfigured by his adult imagination. The poems emphasize the importance of experience and visionary impulse, without necessarily presenting feelings of guilt and anxiety characteristic of the previous works. After the Dantean purgation of

*Station Island*, the poet is freed from the old sense of darkness, and is now able to create verses imbued with new brilliances. Poetry is no longer seen as earth but as air; he no longer seeks a door into the dark but rather a door into the light. The volume is infused with an all-encompassing serenity and delight that 'recalls the peace and luminosity of "Paradise"' (Fumagalli 2001, p.225), and with Heaney's ability to balance real experience and transcendent vision.

The translation of Virgil's excerpt from *Aeneid* VI (ll.98-148), opens the collection and 'serves as an oblique prologue' (Dunn 2001, p.207). Aeneas begs the Sybil of Cumae for one meeting with his deceased father in the reign of Dis: 'I pray for [...] one face-to-face meeting with my / dead father' (Heaney 1991, p.1). His determination to descend to Hell is symbolic of Heaney's intent in this collection: to descend into memory and meet with his father one more time, to go 'Across the grid and texture of the concrete' (Heaney 1991, p.65). Heaney's affinity with the Greek hero – which started in *North* – continues in *Seeing Things*. The Sybil explains to Aeneas:

“[...] No one is ever permitted  
To go down into earth's hidden places unless he has first  
Plucked this golden-fledged tree-branch out of its tree”. (Heaney 1991, p.3)

Aeneas must find the 'bough made of gold' (Heaney 1991, p.3) in order to 'go beyond the limit', and see what no 'one is ever permitted' to behold (Heaney 1991, p.3). Similarly, Heaney expresses his desire to enlarge his vision to the invisible aspects of life. Due to the poet's increasing employment of Virgil's metaphors in his later verse, many critics argue that Heaney has become more Virgilian than Dantean. However, *Seeing Things* abounds in illustrations taken from the *Comedy*. The image of the golden bough that grows back again 'when it is plucked' (Heaney 1991, p.3)

had already appeared in *Field Work*; however, Heaney employed the Dantean, not the Virgilian representation of it. The poet referred to *Purgatorio* I (ll.114-8), where Virgil plucks a pliant reed with which he girdles Dante. Similarly, in *Field Work*, 'With rushes that shoot green again', Heaney intertwined 'Green scapulars to wear over [his cousin's] shroud' (Heaney 1979, p.18). The scene suggests the close relationship that Heaney has created with Dante, as he appropriates his images and transforms them to convey his own message. The continuation of Dante's intertextual references in *Seeing Things* demonstrates his 'Dantean frame of mind, and [...] his conversion (in)to himself by means of assimilating and re-elaborating [the master's] lesson' (Fumagalli 2001, p.156).

The first poem of the collection, "The Journey Back", continues the theme of the journey and contains another Dantean translation. Heaney presents the figure of Philip Larkin, a British poet who was 'a man whose labours were [...] of the nine-to-five kind' (Heaney 2008, p.337). Larkin quotes Dante:

*"Daylight was going and the umber air  
Soothing every creature on the earth,  
Freeing them from their labours everywhere.  
I alone was girding myself to face  
The ordeal of my journey and my duty". [italics original]* (Heaney 1991, p.7)

In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney affirms:

if Larkin were to write an *Inferno*, it would begin not in a dark wood but in a railway tunnel [...], his Mount Purgatory would be a hospital tower block [...]. Larkin died in 1985, before Christmas [...] the season when the magi were traditionally believed to have set out on their journey, so I make his shade set out for the land of the dead on a bus in a pre-Christmas rush hour. (Heaney 2008, p.337)

Contrary to Aeneas's and Dante's quest, Larkin however, is already on his:

[...] journey back  
Into the heartland of the ordinary.  
Still my old self [...]  
A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry. (Heaney 1991, p.7)

Heaney has the British poet have 'his own epiphany of himself – "A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry"' (Heaney 2008, p.337). These lines express his view of Larkin's lack of visionary imagination. In his essay "Joy or Night", Heaney states that Larkin's poetry uncovers a poet in a condition of restrained vision (Heaney 1995b, p.157). Mostly preoccupied with the void, he cannot see the resources that human beings possess in order to fill that void (Heaney, in Cavanagh 1998, p.63). Heaney's vision instead mirrors that of W. B. Yeats, which, although infused with pessimism, offers 'spiritual illumination', as it advances the idea 'that there exists a much greater, circumambient energy [...] in which we have our being, and suggests that in our minds we can find the power to fight against the desolations of natural and historical violence' (Heaney 1995b, p.149). Larkin's presence in *Seeing Things* symbolizes Heaney's desire to create a poetry different from that of the British poet. He seeks to offer a resistance to 'the void, the absurd, the anti-meaning' (Fumagalli 2001, p.237), in which the 'ordinary' and the 'concrete' are transcended, and the 'old self' is replaced by a new poetic identity, eager to trust the power of poetry to transfigure vision (Guite 2010, p.201). Larkin's restrained vision could be compared to Montale's impossibility of redemption. Although the Italian poet sought to transcend the 'material' and to fight the 'void' of reality in his poetry, he could never attain a higher dimension. Heaney achieves his 'spiritual illumination' as he is able to reject and to go beyond the givens of his own society and culture. Conversely, Montale, like Larkin, remains trapped in his meaningless existence, without any

hope of liberation. This is affirmed by the fact that, like Heaney's poems, Montale's lyrics continuously draw attention to gates, thresholds, borders; however, he is unable to transcend those boundaries. On the contrary, the Irish poet overcomes them, and tries to see their particularities in a new light.

In "Field of Vision", the limits of the 'ordinary' are transcended through perceptions of the imagination, opening the door to the sublime. The poet remembers a 'woman who sat for years / In a wheelchair, looking straight ahead / Out the window' (Heaney 1991, p.22). She looks at 'ordinary' things: 'The same small calves [...] / The same acre of ragwort' (Heaney 1991, p.22). However, by looking closely and constantly at ordinary reality, the woman ends up 'seeing things' beyond that reality. The persona comprehends that 'Face-to-face with her was an education' (Heaney 1991, p.22); from her he learns to look beyond the 'gate' and see:

Deeper into the country than you expected  
And discovered that the field behind the hedge  
Grew more distinctly strange as you kept standing  
Focused and drawn in by what barred the way. (Heaney 1991,  
p.22)

Both the poet and the woman attain the sublime or the 'distinctly strange' after first having had their vision impeded by the monotony of 'The same' reality and by 'a well-braced gate' (Heaney 1991, p.22); common reality is made 'strange' by the power of their contemplative gaze. For Heaney, poetry is a realm without boundaries, able to liberate from all constraints. In *Crediting Poetry*, he explained that his need to detach himself from the immediate reality of Northern Ireland went side by side with his new aspiration for 'walking on air' (Heaney 1995a, p.11), originated as a reaction against his 'temperamental disposition towards an art that was earnest and devoted to things as they are' (Heaney 1995a, p.12). The gift of

poetic vision and its imaginative transcendence can no longer speak for a community. Heaney places poetry at the centre of his life (O'Brien 2002a, p.62) because, as he says of Dante's verse, 'Great art is comforting [...]. If I read the *Divine Comedy*, the "Purgatorio" is in the highest, widest, deepest sense *comforting*' (Heaney, in Haffenden 1981, p.68). Fumagalli suggests that Heaney's reference to *Purgatorio* is due to the fact that, being 'dynamic and time-bound, [this canticle] is more in the image of our own world, and can be regarded as a dramatization of our predicament as human beings' (Fumagalli 2001, p.164). This reference demonstrates the power that Dante's work has on Heaney's artistic imagination, not only for his sense of mystical vision, but also for his intense representation of humanity. On approaching the shore of *Purgatorio*, Dante realizes that 'Leaving behind [...] a cruel sea' allows poetry to 'revive again' (*Purg.* I, ll.1; 7). Departure from Hell lifts his spirit and signals the beginning of a new kind of vision for the poet. Similarly, leaving the conflict behind, represents the beginning of Heaney's rebirth, and the creation of a poignant poetry out of 'a dream of loss / and origins' (Heaney 1975, p.52). Both, the modern and the medieval author believe in the regenerating potential of poetry, which even among horrible realities, is able to envision another world (Williams 1943, p.294).

The possibility to go beyond limits and attain an 'extra-vision' assumes a significant dimension in the title poem, "Seeing Things". Composed of three sections, it forms 'a triptych-like juxtaposition and interrelationship, in which each panel-poem comments on and interprets the others' (Corcoran 1986, p.171). In Section I, the poet recalls a boat-trip to Inishbofin, where: 'One by one we were being handed down / Into a boat that dipped and shilly-shallied / Scaresomely every time' (Heaney 1991, p.16). The speaker remembers the feelings of fear he had, an

early understanding of human mortality. Henry Hart suggests that 'the boat ride [...] has all the terror of a "crossing" to hell's waters' (Hart 1994, p.38). The images of panic recall the final poem of the collection, "The Crossing", Heaney's rendering of *Inferno* III. Here, the 'lost souls [...] / Changed their colour and their teeth chattered; / [as], one by one' (Heaney 1991, pp.111-2), they are compelled by the ferryman Charon to go into the boat which brings them to the realm of death. The comparison elucidates the intimate drama of the mind that the poet suffers in the face of actual experience. However, his imagination is able to transfigure that experience. He envisages watching himself from above: 'It was as if I looked from another boat / Sailing through air, far up, and could see / How riskily we fared into the morning' (Heaney 1991, p.112). Fear triggers Heaney's visionary impulse; he sees himself 'as a god loving himself and his comrades from a sublime altitude' (Hart 1993, p.33). From the world of the visible, the speaker is transposed to the realm of the invisible. This dual perspective of the boat on the sea being observed from the boat in the air underlines Heaney's new sense of transcendence, which always derives from the real world.

The second section of the poem presents the speaker contemplating a cathedral's façade, portraying John the Baptist pouring water on Christ's head. The poem begins: '*Claritas*. The dry-eyed Latin word / Is perfect for the carved stone of the water / Where Jesus stands up to his unwet knees' (Heaney 1991, p.17). The 'dry-eyed Latin word' '*Claritas*', meaning glory, brightness, splendour and clearness (*OED* 2014), is symbolic of Heaney's desire to see the unclear world with a new and luminous clarity. The 'carved stone' depicting the baptismal scene is but a hint of what that scene really represents. Heaney suggests that we can see beyond the cathedral façade because 'the vision of reality which poetry offers should be

transformative, more than just a printout of the given circumstances of its time and place' (Heaney 1995b, p.159). The water imagery, which in the first section represented a frightening element, here becomes an icon of illumination. Seen from this perspective, the association of water with drowning and fear in section III, assumes another dimension. The speaker recalls how 'Once upon a time' (Heaney 1991, p.18), his father escaped death by drowning. In the extremity of this event, he is able to see him 'face-to-face', echoing Aeneas's words in the opening translation. The poet says:

[...] he came to me  
With his damp footprints out of the river,  
And there was nothing between us there  
That might not still be happily ever after. (Heaney 1991, p.18)

This moment is one of 'self-revelation and mutual recognition between father and son [...]; an image [...] of redemptive and consolatory memory' (Corcoran 1986, p.167). The three sections are united by the imagery of water that originates the beginning of a vision of possibilities that go beyond ordinary experience. The poem affirms the role of Heaney's new poetry: to find new insights into the visionary in order to see things, not only on the surface, but also deeply within the imagination.

Heaney's new-found vision can be compared to Dante's empowered sight in *Paradiso XXX*, in which he describes humans' ability to see the invisible. The pilgrim is approaching the fulfilment of his desire, which is to behold the ultimate revelation of the Trinity. Suddenly, his human sight is endowed with supernatural power and a new force penetrates him: 'I felt fresh virtue mounting high within me, / And a new power kindled in my eyes' (*Par. XXX*, ll.52-3). 'Then I saw light' (*Par. XXX*, l.56) in the form of a river, flowing between flowery shores, from which arise 'living sparks' (*Par. XXX*, l.59). However, Beatrice explains to him that these

stupendous beauties are but 'shadowy preludes' (*Par.* XXX, l.72) of what he will next behold. When Dante then bends over the stream, filling his eyes with its water:

[...] the gems and flowers  
Changed to a more exceeding festal state,  
And manifest to sight before me lay  
Both courts of Heaven. (*Par.* XXX, ll.85-8)

Dante's spiritual faith allows him to see what is beyond the perceivable. Similarly, Heaney's renewed inspiration in *Seeing Things* makes him see the 'invisible' in order to find the truth beyond the 'visible'. The water imagery in both poets serves as prism of insight, through which transformation takes place.

In "Fosterling", Heaney recognizes that the path to achieve the visionary was long and difficult. The image of the 'windmills' (Heaney 1991, p.50), and their downward and upward movement, evokes past memories in the poet, when, oppressed by public and social obligations, he experienced 'the lowlands of the mind' and poetry was 'Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens' (Heaney 1991, p.50). Heaney realizes that he had to wait 'till [he] was nearly fifty / to credit marvels', wait 'So long for the air to brighten, / Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten' (Heaney 1991, p.50). This new penchant for metaphors of light and bliss, leads Fumagalli to suggest that *Seeing Things* recalls 'the atmosphere pervading "Paradiso"' (Fumagalli 2001, p.236). Significantly, Dante himself had to go through similar 'lowlands of the mind' before achieving the pinnacle of poetic imagination; in the third canticle these conflicting aspects are integrated and brought at last into harmony with 'The love that moves the sun and all the stars' (*Par.* XXXIII, l.141). Similarly, in 'the middle of his life' ('I was nearly fifty'), Heaney redefined his

personal and poetic identity, achieving a more mature lyric voice and visionary quality (Collins 2010, p.155).

Heaney's image of the windmills and their movement is a metaphor for the motion of his new visionary imagination. If in *North* the downward movement was driven by 'the appetites of gravity' (Heaney 1975, p.43), here going down creates a paradoxically opposite force that pushes toward the upper air. The poet wants to permit himself 'the luxury of walking on air' as a reaction to his 'temperamental disposition toward an art that was earnest and devoted to things as they are' (Heaney 1995b, p.7). This old attitude is explored in "The Skylight", where Heaney recalls his early cherishing of darkness and confining spaces: 'I liked it low and closed, / Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof / Effect' (Heaney 1991, p.37). The poet opposes his wife's decision to put a skylight in the roof of their house in an attempt to preserve 'the old boundaries, the old repressions' (Hart 1993, p.39). As Heaney admits in *Stepping Stones*: 'I used to very much like claustrophobic conditions – facing the wall with a low-set ceiling' (Heaney 2008, p.326). However, later in the poem, he illustrates the extraordinary effect that light had on him: 'But when the slates came off, extravagant / Sky entered and held surprise wide open' (Heaney 1991, p.37). 'Cutting into the [...] pitch pine' roof constituted 'a tremendous change', and the poet felt as if he 'lifted up [his] eyes to the heavens' (Heaney 2008, p.326). The new cherishing of light symbolizes Heaney's imagination; the sense of revelation that enters the room when the limits are crossed is sublime and so is the poet's new found poetic. 'Heavy, repressive occlusion has led to its antithesis to an access of light and vision' (Hart 1993, p.37). His description of the impact the skylight had on him resembles Dante's feelings in the luminescence of *Paradiso*, in which 'his mind and soul are represented as growing more exalted the higher he

ascends' (Reynolds 2006, p.372). He compares this experience to a freedom of the mind:

As fire the cloud can keep concealed no longer  
Sets itself free, streams forth, and strikes the earth  
Against its very nature; so my mind  
Dilating to take in delights of heaven,  
Went forth beyond itself. (*Par.* XXIII, ll.32-6)

He passes from a state of 'slavery [...] / Into the land of liberty' (*Par.* XXXI, ll.83-4), the implication being that once the mind is freed from all oppression, both Dante and Heaney can celebrate the glory of their vision.

*Seeing Things*'s visionary lyrics accompany new experiments in language. The collection is characterized by a fragmented style, in which 'events and objects dwelled upon are arranged with apparent randomness' (Hart 1993, p.36). Such linguistic freedom reflects Heaney's spiritual freedom. Referring to "Squarings", the second section of the collection, the poet states: 'When I was writing the twelve-liners, I experienced [...] a stiffening of linguistic resolve and a dissolution of it. Many of the lines just wafted themselves up out of a kind of poetic divine right. "The music of the arbitrary"' (Heaney 2008, pp.319-20). While in *North*, language was a 'place of struggle', through which the poet tried to find his voice in his own past and culture, in *Seeing Things*, it becomes the means by which he affirms the power of the imagination and his determination to go beyond the impositions of culture and society. The sequence is composed of four sections: "Lightenings", "Settings", "Crossings", and "Squarings". Heaney chooses the twelve-line form for individual poems and twelve-poem units for each of the four sections. He explains that such form 'felt given [and] operated for me as a generator of poetry' (Heaney 2008, p.321). He continues: 'as I kept the twelve-line form, the word "squaring" suggested

that I might aim for a total of 144, but in the end I settled for 48, a four-square twelve twelve-liners' (Heaney 2008, p.321). Heaney's accuracy with the numerical arrangement of his sonnets mirrors the carefully planned structure of Dante's *Comedy*. Here every aspect – the number of Cantos, the realm of the dead, and the form of the verse – is centred on the number three and its multiples: 33 Cantos to each of the three main sections, plus one opening Canto, bringing the total to 100, the perfect number. Moreover, the poetic form adopted by Heaney in these poems is the tercet, a transformation of Dante's *terza rima*, through which the poet reinforces the theme of the crossing of boundaries. This geometrical balance suggests 'the equilibrium of mind and heart [that both poets] seek [...] to find and inhabit by balancing time and stillness, mourning and joy' (Vendler 2000, p.136), and demonstrates the combination of knowledge and genius in both Heaney and Dante.

In "Squarings", Heaney continues his endeavour to 'credit marvels' (Heaney 1991, p.50). As Fumagalli suggests, 'marvels to credit can [...] be ordinary things seen in a different light' (Fumagalli 2001, p.237). In "Lightenings" VIII, the poet recounts the story of 'the monks of Clonmacnoise', who experienced the sublime vision of a flying ship. While they:

Were all at prayers inside the oratory  
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep  
It hooked itself into the altar rails  
And then [...]

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope  
And struggled to release it. But in vain.  
"This man can't bear our life here and will drown,"

The abbot said, "unless we help him." So

They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back  
Out of the marvellous as he had known it. (Heaney 1991, p.62)

Heaney displays his belief that 'marvels' and 'ordinary' things are interchangeable; they represent 'two orders of knowledge [...], the practical and the poetic [...], the frontier between them is there for the crossing' (Heaney 1995b, p.203). Seen in a different light, ordinary reality can be marvellous, and vice-versa. Just as an 'angel's world would seem miraculous to us, so our world seems miraculous to a heavenly person' (Vendler 2000, p.136): in many ways, it is a matter of perspective. The crewman's boat sailing over the oratory is a sublime sight for the monks. However, the lines 'the man climbed back / Out of the marvellous as he had known it' (Heaney 1991, p.62), suggest that, from the crewman's perspective, the monks and their world are equally 'marvellous'. The heavenly boat in this poem is reminiscent of the image in the poem "Seeing Things", where the poet's looking down from a boat in the air was emblematic of his boundary crossing, the movement from heaviness to lightness, and the acquisition of a new sense of transcendence. For Heaney, whatever is beyond known boundaries may be magnificent.

The theme of crossing over limits and borders, and the passage from life to death is the subject of the third part of "Squarings", entitled "Crossings", which echoes Heaney's translation of *Inferno* III, "The Crossing". It refers to the 'movement [...] from one state to another' (Corcoran 1986, p.182). In section XXVII, the figure of the poet's father returns, and we assist in his transfiguration from a 'solid man / A pillar to himself and to his trade' (Heaney 1991, p.85) into a Hermes figure, who 'Can sprout wings at the ankle and grow fleet / As the god [...] / Guardian of travellers and psychopomp' (Heaney 1991, p.85). A psychopomp refers to a mythological figure who guides the newly dead to the world beyond, and

Heaney explains that the association of his father with Hermes was inspired by the idea that, being the 'god of travellers and marketplaces [he] was connected with cairns at crossroads' (Heaney 2008, p.293). As the patron of boundaries, Hermes helps the dead to find their way to the afterlife. By identifying his father with the god, Heaney seems to be requesting the assistance of his father in his journey to the other world of *Seeing Things*. Moreover, it is interesting to point out that in Greek, a herm is a stone object, while Hermes, as god, takes flight, reflecting that movement from ground to air that is often seen as a crucial stylistic marker of Heaney's later poetry. Like Aeneas and Dante, Hermes is employed by the poet in order 'to achieve a new perspective on his own situation so that he can write about issues that affect him deeply' (O'Brien 2002a, p.114). This father/Hermes figure guides Heaney towards the end of the journey of "The Crossing".

Heaney's final translation of Dante's *Inferno* III continues the preoccupation of the volume with the transition of the living into the underworld. The pilgrim is reprimanded by Charon for entering the realm of the dead. The ferryman advises him: 'By another way [...] / You shall reach a different shore' (Heaney 1991, p.111). These lines symbolize the development of Heaney's work: the passage from an initial concern with tradition and politics, to a later poetry that questions them (O'Brien 2002a, p.114). As he declares in *Preoccupations*: 'if you have managed to do one kind of poem in your own way, you should cast off that way and face into another area of your experience until you have learned a new voice to say that area properly' (Heaney 1980, p.110). This statement echoes Dante's belief that the writer has 'to make strenuous effort to develop his inborn genius' (Reynolds 2006, p.59). The message inscribed in "The Crossing" is significant, as it affirms the desire to abandon the old path and to experiment with new ways of writing poetry. Heaney's

newly acquired tone of confidence in *Seeing Things* has been hard won, but the difficulty of the task brought about a resurgence of his literary powers. As he said at the Fourth Annual Human Rights Lecture, in 2009, this newly acquired tone makes revive what 'Montale once called "the second life of art", something he equated with arts' "obscure pilgrimage through the conscience and memory [...]. Its entire flowing back into the very life from which it took its first nourishment" (Heaney 2009b, p.8). Like Montale, in his poetry Heaney illustrated 'the reality of that obscure pilgrimage of poetry through memory and conscience and the way it flows back into the life from which it arises and takes its nourishment' (Heaney 2009b, pp.8-9). Following Dante's example, Heaney has achieved the ability 'to sing of the highest subjects in the highest style' (Reynolds 2006, p.60); his crossing of boundaries has opened the door to new lyrical possibilities. The guiding spirit of Dante provides *Seeing Things* with powerful metaphors that suggest that Heaney has accomplished his own journey. The poet's confrontation with the troubled reality of his earlier collections is replaced by a focus on the extraordinary power of the imagination to go beyond the limits of average experience. Vision becomes the conscious essence of poetry, and reality is re-imagined by the poet's mature trust in the marvellous, the luminous and the immaterial.

## Conclusion

This thesis examined the influence that Dante had on the works of Thomas Stearns Eliot, Eugenio Montale, and Seamus Heaney at two different levels: stylistically and culturally. It established the ways in which this influence occurred, and unearthed the reasons behind the poets' decision to confer upon Dante the status of literary guide. Through the influence of a literary master of the past, the poets attain an original perspective, and their works acquire a new poetic style. Their consistent intertextual allusions to Dante's themes, and their use of his poetic techniques, allowed the three poets to achieve both authority and creativity in their works.

Dante is a living voice among the three poets, and each of them approaches him in various different ways. However, a common denominator in their decision to draw on him was the affinity that they felt with his writing. His identity as an exile who loses everything in life, and his envisioning of the eternal suffering of human beings in a divided society, echoes the personal and social circumstances of the poets, and is fundamental in his growing authority in their lives and works. As noted in the introduction, Heaney says that 'when poets turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs' (Heaney 1985, p.5). This dictum is valid for all three authors. Although culturally and temporally distant, the poets share with

Dante the same preoccupations with language and style, and with the search for peace in times of war, and in their poetry they display these concerns. In Dante's works, they found adequate means of representation through which they illustrated the suffering they saw around them, without depicting the devastation and the violence. Furthermore, their way of using the medieval poet's sources is never merely imitative. Indeed, this study has demonstrated that Dantean images are appropriated, and often modified, by the contemporary authors in order to display their own communicative message. Each writer takes from Dante what is relevant to his own poetic needs, and like him, they combine private experience and artistic influence from a classic forebear, in order to enhance their aesthetic expressiveness.

Alongside their poetry, this study has also scrutinized the three poets' critical writings, especially those about Dante, as these also outline their attention to the relations between stylistic structures and the poetic impulse for artistic creation. The main aspects of Dante's life and works have been examined in the first section of this thesis, in order to identify the poet's artistic and philosophical credo. The reading of his minor works and of the *Divine Comedy* emphasized his immense spirituality; his articulation of intricate ideological and cultural systems; his use of an immense range of genres; and his employment of different stylistic and linguistic techniques, with particular focus on his aesthetic conception of the allegoric mode. These features, alongside the poet's modern view of the world, are the main characteristics that inspire the contemporary poets to draw on him. He provides an example of the poetic style that they seek to achieve in their works.

The stylistic influence that Dante had on the three poets was examined in the second section of this study. The first chapter outlined the importance of literary

predecessors, as exposed in Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". The comparison of this essay with Kristeva's theory of intertextuality highlighted the importance of literary tradition in the modern poets' *oeuvre*, and illustrated how, through the employment of implicit and explicit allusions to Dante's works, Eliot, Montale, and Heaney display their message, and acquire new insights into their own works. The intertextual relationship that Eliot has created with Dante regards his adoption of an infernal phraseology and imagery in his poems "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land". Like Dante in the first canticle of the *Comedy*, Eliot explores the gloomy and sinful regions within the self and within all of humanity. Dante's view of the *Inferno* was dictated by the suffering that he saw around him in a Florence devastated by civil war, and the harsh language he uses mirrors his distress in the presence of such suffering. Similarly, Eliot's infernal language describes the wreckage and the moral recklessness of individuals in the modern world, and his personal feelings of inadequacy in the face of such desolation. This preoccupation with the chaotic atmosphere of the early twentieth century, which brought to the fore the sense of emptiness in modern humanity and the crisis of religious belief, is encapsulated in the description of a failure of speech experienced by the characters in both poems. Prufrock's inability to express his feelings, and Tiresias' similar difficulty in "The Waste Land", convey the modern incapacity to describe evil, suffering, and the self. This sense of ineffability is an intertextual allusion to Dante's *Paradiso*, where the pilgrim laments his incapability to describe God and his blessedness. Both Eliot and Dante explored the powerlessness of language to express ultimate meaning. However, for Eliot the *Divine Comedy* is 'a constant reminder to the poet, of the obligation to explore', and of the obligation to find words to articulate feelings (Eliot 1969, p.134). The poem expresses the most

complex thought through the use of images and symbols. Following Dante's example, Eliot was able to create a language for his poetry based on lucid 'sensory images', which translate thought into feeling (Eliot 1932a, p.250). This allowed him to reject the ornamented language typical of the Romantic period, and to achieve a simplicity of expression distinctive of modernism.

In the next chapter, 'Montale's Allegorical Language', the stylistic influence that Dante had on Montale's poetry was analyzed. Like Eliot, Montale lived through the two World Wars, and in his poetry, he describes human despair and desolation. Dante's *stile petroso* (stony style), characterized by harsh and strong tones, is adopted by Montale to describe the bleakness that he perceived in the world around him. Similarly, the modern poet appropriated an allegorical mode from his ancestor; however, as has been noted, modern allegory is different from medieval allegory. To trace these differences, allegorical theories by Paul De Man and Walter Benjamin have been compared with Dante's *Epistle XIII*, in which the poet describes this exegetic method as the means through which individuals can achieve salvation. On the contrary, Montale's (and modern) allegory can only express the loss and the disconnection between individuals, and between men and nature. While Dante describes a conception of reality in which 'human beings find themselves fused with the infinite', Montale's allegory represents 'humanity's real relation to its temporal plight, its helplessness before the devastation of time and failed communion with nature' (Peters 2004, pp.132-3). In the final part of the chapter, however, the use of allegory triggers the poet's reflections on the role of poetry in times of reprisal. The differing elements in the allegorical structure of the two poets' works, demonstrate Montale's craft in appropriating Dante's ideas and symbols and using them for his own artistic purpose.

In the fourth chapter, it was outlined how, through following Dante's example of a plurilinguistic style, Heaney achieved an increasingly heterogeneous mode of poetry. After the eruption of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Heaney's poetry began to be perceived as a symbol of national struggle because of his increasing focus on his symbolic relationship with the Irish soil, and due to his preoccupation with a sense of a lost language. However, this study has demonstrated that, rather than expressing a political idea of literature, Heaney tried to find a middle voice that would express both sides of his culture, English and Irish. Dante's example of the unification of different languages and styles, played a significant role in the Irish poet's ability to transcend ethnic boundaries and create an increasingly cosmopolitan poetry, in which the specifics of public and personal history would be considered alongside those of world culture. *Electric Light* communicates this universal stance, as here the poet enters into conversation with different literatures and languages, thus acquiring, like Dante, a 'perspective beyond history' (Heaney 1985, p.18). This chapter also examined the role that translation played in Heaney's acquisition of such stylistic richness and complexity. Through translation, the poet was able to engage with his local concerns without addressing them directly. His version of the "Ugolino" episode, from *Inferno* XXXII-XXXIII, confirms this statement. In Dante's character, Heaney found 'images and symbols adequate to [his] predicament' (Heaney 1980, p.56), and by exploring the particulars of Northern Ireland through another author's lens, he gradually developed a more universal perspective.

The third section of this study has looked at the specific cultural influences that Dante had on the modern poets, using the motif of the journey, through which, themes such as society, religion, poetic function and politics are examined. The first

chapter of this section explained how Eliot's intertextual engagement with Dante allowed him to investigate his personal and cultural realities, and to achieve an increasing spirituality, while at the same time evolving a new artistic craft. His poetic and spiritual development in his works could be paralleled to Dante's similar growth in the *Divine Comedy*. Like the medieval author, before attaining ultimate understanding, the contemporary poet has to go through the desolation of "The Waste Land", which resounds with hellish echoes, similar to the imprisonment of souls in the *Inferno*. Then Eliot experiences a period of purification in "Ash Wednesday", which depicts his uncertain steps towards a tentative faith. The theme of hope however here is predominant, and the tone assumes a more purgatorial nature, echoing Dante's *Purgatorio*. Finally, in "Little Gidding", the poet achieves divine understanding through the ineffable contemplation of God's light, affirming a rebirth of lost spiritual values, in a manner that parallels Dante in the *Paradiso*. Eliot's vision of the world progressively changes due to an increasing Christian ardour, and through his engagement with Dante's works, he is able to display his own spiritual message.

Chapter 6 addressed the Dantean theme of the journey in Montale's collections of poems *Cuttlefish Bones*, *The Occasions*, and *The Storm and Other Things*. The poet himself stated that his three books should be read as 'three canticles, three stages of human life' (Montale 1976, p.604). However, in contrast to Dante's (and to Eliot's) crossing, Montale's journey does not bring him to a spiritual understanding. In fact, renewal seems impossible in a world where human solitude and selfishness, and the atrocious actuality of history and the war predominate. Although he yearns for some hidden transcendental meaning 'that will finally lead to the heart of a truth' (Montale 1998, p.9), this meaning can never be seized by

Montale. *Cuttlefish Bones* depicts the individual's disharmony with a barren and Godless world, and, like Dante's *Inferno* and Eliot's "The Waste Land", the collection highlights his existential despair. The poet is rejected by the infinity of nature, and his quest for an epiphanic moment that would put him in touch with 'another dimension' (Montale 1982, p.302) remains unfulfilled. A more hopeful tone is found in *The Occasions*, which could be seen as a 'close counterpart of Dante's purgatorial process' (Cambon 1982, p.92). Through brief 'occasions' of illumination, Montale hopes for some form of transcendence that would free him from the temporality of his life. This hope is represented by Clizia, a figure who parallels the Dantean Beatrice, through whom the poet can try to escape the boundaries of his life and thereby achieve salvation. However, in *The Storm and Other Things*, Montale shows that the dark essence of the conflict predominates. Among the agony of the war, and of the cruelty of Nazism and Fascism, the hope represented by Clizia fails. Unlike Beatrice, the Montalian muse does not guide the poet to a religious rebirth, as the humanistic values that she represents are no longer valid among the ruins of the modern world. The hope of a liberating salvation disappears together with the woman-angel; Montale's religious scepticism does not allow him to progress, and he remains imprisoned in a frustrating and grey reality with no hope of change.

Finally, chapter seven displayed Heaney's own journey to a more mature understanding of poetry and of himself. In his collection *North*, the poet describes the concern about the situation in Northern Ireland through the depiction of images of bloodshed, divisions, and hopelessness. Heaney develops a historical model of violence that connects the ancient victims of Iron Age people with those who have died in contemporary Troubles, using history and myth to depict the universality of violence. This 'hellish' imagery mirrors his feelings of fear and confusion, like those

which Dante set out in the vision of the *Inferno*. However, just like the *Comedy*, Heaney's poetry illustrates a gradual evolution of poetic imagination from *Inferno* to *Paradiso*, symbolic of the development that occurs in the poet's consciousness. Although a sense of guilt and abandonment for leaving the Northern Irish situation behind is still present in the poet, this move allows him to understand more clearly his objective: to look into himself, using his poetry as a form of redress and communication between self and other. Heaney's attempt to trust poetry as a means of attaining moral freedom was explored in the analysis of *Field Work*. Here, although the bloodshed and a sense of loss are still major concerns for the poet, the poems reflect on more personal themes such as art and love.

Heaney's spiritual progress however, is emphasized in *Station Island*, where, like Dante, he undertakes a pilgrimage in order to purge his soul. His self-analysis allows him to be more at ease with himself, and enables him to cast new light on the artistic objectives, which had become clouded by the demands of his community. Through his communication with the dead, the poet can answer his own questions and assert his commitment towards his art. Finally, the last collection examined, *Seeing Things*, arguably epitomizes the zenith of Heaney's artistic achievement at this stage of his development. Ordinary and concrete things are transcended and the old self is replaced by a new poetic identity, eager to trust the power of poetry to transfigure the ordinary, achieving insights into truth through his own imagination. Heaney continues his dialogue with Dante through a revisiting of the journey into the past, by exploring his personal memories. His passage to the underworld, and the crossing of thresholds and borders, allow him to come to a higher awareness of himself and of the world around him. His aspiration for air and light described in

these poems brings the poet to his final liberation from the 'gravitational pull' of land and history, in order to lift his spirit and restore his vision.

Eliot's, Montale's, and Heaney's choice of Dante is a stylistically and culturally oriented venture. The Dantean sources, namely his texts, his life and the implied contexts, allow the modern poets to address problems that are at the core of their personal and artistic experience: problems of exile, pilgrimage, purification and liberation. The medieval poet represents the foundation of promising solutions: he functions as a poet guide, a truth teller, a source of suggestions and a revered master. Although, each writer is attracted to a different feature of Dante's poetic world and techniques, they share the common desire to create, through his lessons, a socially and imaginatively responsible poetry open to the contemporary world. As displayed in the works examined, Heaney's deepest desire to express publicly a marvellous poetic vision, away from social pressures and violence, is masterfully achieved through his engagement with Dante. His experience is similar to that of Eliot, who, in the midst of modern senselessness and uncertainty, embarks on a journey towards illumination and towards the pure essence of his true self, just as Dante did before him in another time and place. Similarly, Montale aspires to the infinite; his search for salvation through love parallels Dante's experience. Even if only for a moment, through his forebear's example, he was able to achieve some brief 'occasions' of illumination, as symbolized by the figure of Clizia-Beatrice. However, while in Eliot's and Heaney's journey, a distinct path through an infernal, a purgatorial and a paradisiacal stage, can be discerned, Montale reverses that journey and, in his last collection, he returns to Hell; he cannot achieve the final spiritual vision. His religious scepticism and the drama of historical strife, causes a failure of the transcendent, and a return to a real and concrete existence in the here and now of

quotidian life. The complete vision of Dante cannot be achieved in the fragmented world of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Dante constitutes a vital presence in his poems, generating different approaches and affirmation in each of them.

The dialogue with Dante was the model that Eliot, Montale, and Heaney required to give voice to the essential part of themselves, and it helped them to give form to their moral sense of the value of poetry in society and culture. However, their homage to their medieval predecessor is too vast to be represented in full. A comprehensive reading of Dante's influence on the three modern poets is beyond the scope of this thesis. I have concentrated on some of their artistic creations, and on some of the aspects of this relationship. Nevertheless, intertextual allusions to Dante are scattered throughout the poets' works. For further research, it would be interesting to investigate Heaney's and Eliot's use of allegory, as well as Heaney's relationship with the religious aspect of Dante's poetry. Furthermore, there is much evidence that Heaney's later collections of poems, such as *The Haw Lantern*, *The Spirit Level*, and *District Circle*, and Montale's *Xenia* and *Satura*, contain Dantean elements. The analysis of these works might observe how the poets continue to use their master's sources and discover the motivations behind this usage, giving a complete picture of the importance of the modern poets-Dante relationship.

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