

# Dante Alighieri and T. S. Eliot's Interpoetic Relations

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**Dante Alighieri and T. S. Eliot's Interpoetic Relations**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B. A. in English Language and Literature and Italian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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## ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's opus consists of various essays, plays and poems, many of which contain explicit and implicit references and allusions to Dante Alighieri. For the most part, Eliot was in accord with Dante's opinions on poetry and language and the theoretical background serves as the starting point of this paper. The religious component of poets' works – interpretations of divinity, spirituality and salvation is another key element that is explored before delving deeper into specific imagery and other poetic devices.

This paper is by no means a comparison between the two poets, nor does it aim to provide comprehensive analyses of the interpreted poems. It aims to analyse Dante's influence on Eliot in terms of common elements that can be found in his works, whether they come directly from Dante, or from another shared influence. In particular, the paper delves into themes and imagery present in *The Divine Comedy* that Eliot reworks in his poem *The Waste Land*.

**Keywords:** Dante Alighieri, T. S. Eliot, poetry, language, religion, divinity, spirituality

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## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Stearns Eliot is known for his allusive, imagistic, highly intellectual poetry. His poems never allow the reader to focus only on a specific piece of writing. Instead, the reader should understand that, by creating their individual works, all writers contribute to the entirety of all literary works ever created. Eliot's poetry aims to uncover universal truths that exceed a particular context. Because of this intention, the meaning in his poems is layered and interpretation of his images requires probing into secondary meanings hidden behind specific images.

Among many Eliot's literary influences, Dante Alighieri remains the most consistent one. His ability to transfer various feelings to the reader without relying solely on his personal experiences and the capacity to combine seemingly simple elements into whole, detailed imagery are what Eliot valued in a poet and hoped to achieve himself. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an example of the complexity of meaning that can be achieved by using clear imagery and by choosing the words carefully and effectively. For Eliot, Dante proves that poets have the task of finding the right words to express the inexpressible, thereby revealing something new to the reader and contributing to the language itself.

Eliot admired Dante's universality, his influence on the Italian language and the religious spirit that emanates from all of his poetry. The aim of this paper is thus to first explore Dante's influence on Eliot's ideas on poetry, language and religion in order to clarify their application of these ideas to specific poems, and in particular in terms of the common themes, imagery, references and allusions found in *The Divine Comedy* and *The Waste Land*.

## 1. VIEWS ON POETRY AND LANGUAGE

### 1.1. Dante Alighieri's *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*

In his *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante chooses to write in Latin in order to create a work about vernacular language. Vernacular language is viewed as superior to Latin because it is natural. It is the spontaneous language of thought and everyday communication. Latin, on the other hand, is an artificial, invented language, available only to the educated, who were a minority during Dante's time.

*De vulgari eloquentia* is intended to be more than a simple critique of Latin language or a glorification of the vernacular. Dante tries to establish the characteristics of a vernacular language illustrious enough to become a common Italian language of poetry. He distinguishes between 14 different '*lingue volgari*' or, in other words, dialects that were spoken throughout Italy. None of these languages was illustrious enough to become a standard, literary language. This new, ideal language should be 'cardinal', 'stately' and 'curial' (it should have stable, clear rules, it must be used by the ruler and in official institutions and spoken in court). It should be suitable for writing about love, arms and virtue, i.e. rich with expressions that are suitable for these topics and concepts related to them.

Dante also distinguishes between tragedy and comedy, stating that tragedy is the more elevated form, used to write about heroes and grand gestures (the *Aeneid* is provided as the ultimate example of a tragedy), whereas comedies are about common people and everyday events. This is also why his greatest work is entitled *The Divine Comedy* (originally *The Comedy*) – the word relates to the style that he used and its protagonist is not an idealized hero, but a flawed human being.

Up to this point, tragic tone was seen as suitable only for epic poetry. Dante, however, describes it as suited for lyrical poetry as well. He proceeds to develop his views on styles and genres by recalling the concept of *convenientia*, first introduced by Horace. According to this principle, the author should always adjust the style that he uses to the work that he is creating. A principle that, Dante believed, can be followed only by the greatest poets. (Bellomo, 124-130)

The concept of *convenientia* is easily detectable in all other Dante's works that followed – for example, his *Convivio* contains abundance of Latinisms and technical terms since it is a deliberately difficult text with a primarily didactic purpose. In *The Divine Comedy*, the language changes gradually as the protagonist travels from the *Inferno* to the *Paradise* – initially, the language is “impure” in order to contribute to the general atmosphere, it becomes gradually refined as one purges himself from his sins in the *Purgatory* and, eventually, in *Paradise*, becomes “lighter” and the beauty of Dante's expression reaches its peak.

In his *Convivio*, Dante confirms his views on language, claiming that vernacular language is ‘the new light’, ‘the new sun’ that will eventually substitute Latin as the language of education, but that will also be understood and spoken by everyone. Dante's insistence on a more natural, accessible language aligns with Eliot's ideas of writers being “servants” of their language – our language is what governs our thoughts and writing should therefore conform to it.

Apart from demonstrating that he sees great potential in vernacular language, *Convivio* is a text in which Dante delves deeper into characteristics that a great piece of writing should display. He mentions four ‘senses’ of writing: *literal* (that which inspires the poet to create, the starting point for the interpretation of a text), *allegorical* (the truth hidden behind the literal sense), *moral* (the message, or rather, the lesson that one is trying to convey) and *anagogical*,

which directs a reader to the spiritual truths, present also in the Sacred Scriptures. The Sacred Scriptures, however, are also true in their literal sense.

*Convivio* consists of three poems that Dante had previously written, which serve as a basis for further philosophical discourse, written in prose. The main emphasis of the work is philosophy and reason in general, which is crucial for further analysis of Dante's works and ideology. Dante believes that those who deal with philosophy, art and science have a moral obligation to share their knowledge with others and to contribute to a creation of a society guided by reason and righteous moral principles. He even chooses the audience that he addresses using an ethical criterion – he speaks to those who, by choosing to follow reason, choose to be closer to God. (Bellomo, 103-107)

## **1.2. T. S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and *What Dante Means to Me***

The starting point for Eliot's literary philosophy is his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, his most famous piece of critical writing. In this essay, he argues that critics are mistaken when attributing value to a work of art based on its originality. He feels that the best (and the most individual) aspects of a poem are those that carry a strong reference to the works of the past. Eliot proposes a much broader definition of tradition, claiming that what makes a poet traditional is not repetition, but an awareness of both history and present and of the relations between the two. A traditional poet is capable of finding universal elements in other pieces of writing, applicable to and valid in all time periods. Works of art are never interpreted in isolation, but compared to one another. However, an artist should be aware of the fact that art does not allow comparison based on the relation of inferiority and superiority. Art does not



improve, but the material of art changes. All works of art ever created interact with each other and change the relations between them. The true difference between the past and the present is that present is capable of placing the past into context, of being aware of it in a way that the past itself cannot. We develop and, with time, come to understand the past with newly acquired knowledge. Therefore, art as a whole constantly undergoes a process of development.

Another important process of creating art is that of depersonalization. A mature poet is not mature because of his personality that comes out of his poems, but because he perfects the skill of being a medium for different feelings and emotions, which are not necessarily and exclusively his own. Creation is separated from one's own personal emotions and sufferings. A poet uses, to lesser or greater extent, his experiences as the basis for his works, but he must be capable of transforming them into works of art. This argument proves that Eliot valued skill and intellect above all else – a poet has a more important role than simply transferring his emotions to others. In order to support this argument, Eliot provides the example of *Inferno*, Canto XV, claiming that the desired effect is achieved by the complexity of details, not by strong emotions that Dante gets across. A poet subconsciously stores in his mind many images, phrases, feelings and emotions, but chooses to use them only when he can properly combine them into a new compound. Essentially, Eliot emphasizes the conscious process of creation. Art is not meant to create new emotions, but arrange those that are already known in a new and complex way, revealing something new without inventing it. Emotion of art is impersonal and it must serve the poem, it is “*an emotion which has life in the poem and not in the history of the poet*”. (Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, 2017, 4)

Another key text for understanding Eliot's view on poetry and language, which becomes especially important in the context of this paper, is *What Dante Means to Me*. Dante is described as the most persistent and deepest influence on Eliot's poetry. He writes about the problems he encountered while writing ‘*Little Gidding*’, the final poem of *Four Quartets*, in which he tried

to imitate, both in style and in content, what Dante imparts in his *Inferno* and *Purgatory*. He had trouble obtaining the same effect that Dante achieves by using '*terza rima*', since English has less rhyming words than Italian and rhyme draws more attention than the content. He eventually opted for "*a simple alternation of masculine and feminine terminations*". (Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me", n.d.) Eliot explains that Dante, as a native speaker of Italian, *thought* in '*terza rima*' and therefore, something would always be lost in translation. Eliot emphasizes Dante's directness, as well as the simplicity of his imagery and the precision of his expressions, labelling them the crucial parts of his works. Because of this, Eliot tries to remain as literal as possible when translating Dante – every expression is a result of a careful consideration and no other word would have the same effect. Eliot chooses to focus on the 'thought form', rather than the actual form of the poem because Dante teaches us that a poet should be the servant of his language, not the master of it. In order to achieve this, a poet should always search for expressions that align with his thoughts, but must do so in a way that does not seem forced. Being a servant of one's language means finding words that function best not only for a particular purpose, but in a particular language. Accordingly, Eliot rejects '*terza rima*' in English, since a modern English reader does not think in '*terza rima*', but in blank verse.

Dante has had a strong influence on the Italian language and left those that would come after him with a more refined, precise and elaborate language – the greatest accomplishment that a poet could achieve. Poets should be superior to others in their perception of reality and more sensitive to their surroundings, capable of sensing that which others cannot. Only with their help could others hope to become aware of these sensations. Since the poets' task is to make the reader comprehend the incomprehensible and since language serves as the essential tool in obtaining this goal, their relation to their language is crucial. In other words, their role in society is inseparable from their contribution to language as such.

Dante measured up to all the standards that Eliot believed make a truly great poet. This point is not proven only by explicit essays and comments on Dante, but also by Eliot's poetry itself. Intertextuality present in many Eliot's works demonstrates that Dante's poetry dealt with problems that never ceased to be important. For example, the epigraph to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, taken from the *Inferno*, sets the tone for a poem that is considered to be one of the most emblematic poems of Modernism. By reminding us of an episode from Dante's *Inferno*, Eliot establishes a connection between the Medieval and modern society, implying that people conceal their true nature and intentions. Prufrock, like Guido da Montefeltro from the abovementioned canto of the *Inferno*, fears infamy and his constant doubt and hesitation leave him in a perpetual state of personal hell. Essentially, what Eliot proves by this, and many other allusions in some other works, is that Dante succeeded in creating something universal. His poetry surpasses the specific social, spatial and temporal context and contains the 'impersonal emotion' of art. Additionally, Dante is for Eliot the most religious poet, since he treats the whole subject of poetry in a religious spirit. Not all of his works deal with divinity and spirituality, but his religious beliefs are detectable in all of his works.

## **2. DIVINITY, SPIRITUALITY AND SECULARIZATION IN DANTE AND T.S. ELIOT'S POETRY**

### **2.1. Dante and Religion**

There are a few concepts that are essential to Dante's religious philosophy. Firstly, everything humans do stems from love – good deeds stem from charity and sins originate from a perverted sense of love or from excessive love for worldly things. Charity, i.e. God's love for man, which is then reflected in human acts of kindness, is seen as the ultimate virtue. Controversially for Medieval times, he also believed that we can come to know God's love through earthly love and through reason. Reason is one of the greatest gifts from God and it represents our resemblance to him. Secondly, despite the significance of free will and the consequent responsibility, the Providence governs all events on Earth. Thirdly, Dante's political ideas are essentially secular – the Church and the state should be two distinct organs with distinct roles in society.

Dante opposed the prevalent opinion that everything on Earth stands in sharp contrast with the spiritual and that one should never focus on the mundane. Instead, he interpreted this world as an opportunity for intervention offered to a Christian. This is also why he often used simile, a rhetorical figure that his contemporaries avoided precisely because of the idea that it places focus on worldly things. Dante, on the other hand, believed that using everyday concepts would help readers understand the divine, especially if we take into consideration that many of these readers were a part of the newly emerging class of the time, i.e. middle-class merchants. Dante viewed life on Earth as a proof of God's existence and presence. (Luperini et al., 374) William Franke labels this "secularization of religion through literature". More precisely, he claims that Dante secularizes religious revelation through his artistic imagination. The idea that

a secular understanding of the world can be a proof of faith is not originally Dante's. He was certainly influenced by Aristotle, Moses Maimonides and Tomas Aquinas. However, he expressed this ideology through his literary works. Since Dante modelled his *Divine Comedy* on the Sacred Scriptures, which means that he represents the events as both historical and allegorical, he demonstrates the revelation of divinity in humanity. (Franke, 1-6) In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante foregrounds an individual (his love interest is the very embodiment of theology, he frequently mentions his friends, enemies, etc.), thus implying that divinity reveals itself in ordinary men. (Von Balthasar, 30-32) Every individual is important and continues Christ's task on Earth, but God's will, or the transcendent order is still what governs the events and what gives the characters their true value. (Franke, 6)

Men pursue two different goals, temporal and spiritual, and it is only after the first one is obtained that the realization of the latter becomes possible. These two spheres of human life are understood and expressed differently – the best example is, perhaps, Dante's spiritual experience in *Paradiso*, which cannot be properly expressed through language, whereas the temporal sphere of life can be understood in human terms alone. Paradoxically, the incomprehensibility of divine experiences can only be conveyed in words of our language, and specifically through metaphoric expression. (Franke, 9) Dante's poetics is aligned with negative theology – we can only know what God is not and an objective representation of God is impossible. This understanding gives Dante a prophetic licence, which Franke equates with poetic licence. He understands his role as prophetic and speaks on behalf of the entire humankind through his poem. Since there is no objective image of God, he can allow himself to be completely free with his poetic expression and the metaphorical becomes the only adequate tool in expressing the ineffable. (Franke, 11-13) Furthermore, the accentuated elements are those of sensations that left a strong impression on Dante, such as passion that he

felt during his transcendent experience. He explicitly states that he builds the poem on recollection of sensations, since he cannot remember the experience objectively. (Franke, 16)

Another element that proves Dante's positive opinions on secularism is the importance he places on reason. At the entrance of the *Inferno*, Virgil explains that they are about to encounter those who have lost "*il ben dell'intelletto*". It is no coincidence that this expression offers two seemingly different interpretations. The phrase can be interpreted as the loss of reason or as the loss of the ultimate wisdom, i.e. God. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive. God, as the ultimate wisdom, gave humans the gift of reason, traces of his own wisdom that they should pursue in order to be closer to him. Dante's guide through the *Inferno* and the *Purgatory*, Virgil, allegorically represents reason itself, which implies that it is through reason that one comes to understand the horrific consequences of sin and the importance of penitence. Reason is essential in human revelation of the knowledge given by God. However, one must always keep in mind that men only *reveal* this knowledge, rather than invent or develop it. (Franke, 8) Additionally, fraud is seen as one of the most foul sins in *The Divine Comedy* precisely because it presupposes misuse of one's reason, which is our connection and resemblance to God.

Apart from reason, love is also an earthly experience that helps us understand God. In his *Vita Nuova*, Dante compares Beatrice to an angel thereby elevating her to a state of a transcendent being. In *The Divine Comedy*, Beatrice is found next to God and assumes the role of his guide through *Paradise*, which implies that she possesses the wisdom and purity to be worthy of this task. This is because allegorically she represents theology itself and reveals knowledge for which human reason (and Virgil as a guide and as the embodiment of reason) is insufficient. For the first time in religious literature, earthly love is not seen as something negative or something that had to be sacrificed in order for one to get closer to God. On the

contrary, it had to be pursued and helped Dante understand the true extent of God's power and grandiosity. (Von Balthasar, 30-32)

Despite being a deeply religious man, Dante firmly believed that the Church should not meddle in state affairs. He kept highlighting the need for a firm ruler that would unite Italy and end its internal conflicts. The Church and the ruler are two equally important authorities, but should be in charge of different matters. The ruler should provide prosperity and stability, whereas the Church should direct the citizens to the right moral path. Dante followed Christ's ideas when claiming that the Church should not be in charge of the mundane, even though God governs our world as well as Heaven. The beauty of the Church does not come from the fact that it is an earthly organ, but from its humility and its invisible accomplishments. (Von Balthasar, 19-20) This is also why there are so many popes and other members of clergy in his *Inferno* – they were blinded by greed and power and forgot about what the Church should represent.

Another key notion present in *The Divine Comedy* (and *The Waste Land*) is the concept of salvation. Dante was deeply troubled by this issue. He agreed with the idea that the moment of genuine penitence is what differs those that are to be punished from those that will ultimately be saved. However, according to the orthodox beliefs of the time, the criterion for one's salvation is his faith in God, and Dante finds this problematic. He sees the possibility of those who behave righteously as being predestined for salvation. Analogously, Virgil, as one of the most positive characters in *The Divine Comedy*, is placed in the Limbo, along with the rest of those who lived before Christ's birth and could not have followed the teachings of Christianity. (Inglese, 75)

## 2.2. Religious Aspects of T. S. Eliot's Poetry

The way in which Eliot implements biblical elements and transcendent experiences in his poems is crucial for understanding his interpretation of the Bible. Eliot views the Bible as an authoritative witness to religious truths. Some critics have argued that the literary reading of the Bible is a common ground for theologians and others who seek to interpret it. Some have even compared its expression to the *Iliad* or Shakespeare's works, claiming that the Bible, just like any other form of literature, conveys its message through the general atmosphere and style. Eliot does not agree with these theories since the Bible was not written as a single piece of literature and therefore lacks the frame of a singular story and cannot be placed in a literary category. Instead, its unity is a result of a purely religious intention, of uniting various texts "as the report of the word of God" and this intention is where its literary influence stems from. (Warner, 4-9) According to Ramsey, Christianity is not a religion of the Book because its central figure is not the Bible, but a person – Jesus Christ. In turn, Jesus is described as "the word of God", as someone who has been sent to Earth to spread God's word. Correspondingly, "[T]he authority of the scriptures ... lies in their relation to Jesus Christ who is the truth." (Ramsey, 1, 6) Eliot's understanding of the Bible as the "report of the word of God" therefore aligns with this interpretation. (Warner, 14)

Like Dante, Eliot struggles to find the words to express the divine in his religious poems. This struggle, present in the first two poems included in the *Four Quartets* - *Burnt Norton* and *East Coker*, eventually grows into a struggle to comprehend transcendent experiences (in *The Dry Salvages*, the final meditation). (Warner, 15) In any case, Eliot's reworking of biblical elements seems to be more imagistic than verbal. For instance, the motif of the desert in *Burnt Norton* represents temptations, i.e. functions as an image, the metaphorical meaning of which then offers the starting point for its interpretation in the context of the poem. It is not meant to



echo the words we find in the Bible, but to reimagine what they report. In other words, Eliot's poetic response to the Bible lies in taking certain images from the Scripture, but the Scripture serves only as the basis for their growth and development in a poem. (Warner, 16-17)

Eliot did not understand religion as simply or primarily a set of beliefs, but rather as a combination of beliefs, rituals and related social practices, as culture. (*The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, 80). In his magazine *Criterion*, Eliot expressed positive opinions on Karl Barth, one of the greatest Protestant theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even though Barth emphasized the difference between the human and the divine, which is the opposite of viewing religion as culture. (Domestico, 1-3) Despite the fact that critics do not believe Karl Barth to be a direct influence on Eliot's works, his poems show similar ideas. As a critic, on the other hand, Eliot was closer to neo-Thomism (the belief that nature is perfected by grace). Barth firmly believed that religious liberals were wrong and that there is no such thing as harmonious connection and similarity between earthly and heavenly life. Only by becoming aware of this discrepancy can we know God for what he is. He argued that by focusing on emotional and individual experiences we ignore the true goal of theology, which should be dynamic and ever-questioning, resulting in more questions than answers. (Domestico 3-5) The first element that Eliot has in common with Barth is a sense of fragmentation that inevitably comes out of his poems. Critics believe that this sense of fragmentation and catastrophic descriptions of the world in Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* and in Eliot's works stem from the same source – WWI (Domestico, 9).

*"At one point in his Epistle to the Romans, Barth claims that theological discourse is "twice-broken" (521). Stephen Webb glosses this phrase thus: "It is about a reality broken by God, and it is itself broken, a shattered mirror reflecting a shattered world" (145). Eliot's poetry is likewise twice-broken: it is both about a fractured world and an example of the fracturing this world has brought about. For Eliot and for Barth, difficulty is largely the result of stylistic*

*fragmentation, and stylistic fragmentation is the only honest way to write in a broken world.”(10)*

Secondly, Eliot and Barth both seem to view transcendent experience as a singular and sudden event that stands in sharp contrast with the surroundings in which it occurs. It is an intersection of time by the timeless, that gives true meaning to temporal existence. God’s revelation interrupts and makes time, gives meaning to everything on Earth and makes possible our journey towards faith. However, these revelatory moments are described as “hints and guesses”, which are only “half-understood” by men. (Domestico, 18-19)

Apart from implementing religion into his poems, Eliot establishes a correlation between religion and literary criticism in general. In his essay *Religion and Literature*, he argues that the connection between the two is, among other things, the fact that religion and literature both affect the way we treat others and our behaviour in general. He believes that literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint, claiming that there should first exist an ethical and theological consensus, since literary criticism cannot be self-sufficient.

Eliot generally opposed the belief that every individual should have his own idea of righteousness. He claimed that Christians should have their own moral code to follow, which would remain stable regardless of the prevalent opinion. Eliot witnessed religion becoming less and less influential in the modern society and blamed secularism for people not being aware of the gap between natural and supernatural life. He recognized a gradual secularization of literature in the modern society, but claimed that literary judgements can never be completely separated from religious judgements.

Even though religious experience in Eliot’s poems more resembles Karl Barth’s ideas of suddenness and contrast than Dante’s ideas of harmony and symmetry, Dante is still named

the representative of unconsciously Christian literature that Eliot strives for. He does not write exclusively about religious themes and biblical events, but treats the whole subject of poetry in religious spirit. To put it differently, all of his works echo his religious beliefs and his devotion to God.

### 3. DANTE'S IMAGERY IN T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*

In his *Notes on The Waste Land*, Eliot presents a list of explicit references that he makes in the poem. However, their exact meaning and value in the context of his poem remain for the reader to decipher, along with many implicit references. As a result, *The Waste Land* remains one of Eliot's most complex poems. Intertextuality and fragmentation make it difficult to interpret and analyse in a coherent manner. Dante is also known for incorporating numerous figures from other literary works and mythologies into his poems. He and Eliot both use concealed metaphors and specific references in order to make their readers more attentive. The motive behind this is the importance they place on the didactic purpose of literary works. In the *Purgatory* VIII, Dante explicitly warns the reader of the possibility of missing the obvious and reminds him to remain observant: *Sharpen your eyes here, reader, see the truth / Because the veil at this point is so thin / It's all too easy to look through the cloth. (Purgatory, VII, 19-21)*

Didactic intention is more obvious in Dante's case, since his *Divine Comedy* provides solutions to moral and political issues that hindered Italy from progress. In *The Waste Land*, on the other hand, the reader is presented with the task of deducing the meaning behind implicit and explicit references in order to become aware of the rapid cultural decline. In general, Dante's *Divine Comedy* presents clear moral guidelines and virtually guarantees salvation if

one chooses to follow them, whereas Eliot concludes his poem on a less hopeful note and conveys more questions than answers. This dissimilarity is partially a reflection of different temporal contexts: Dante strives to achieve perfect harmony and symmetry - for every sin, there is a corresponding moral virtue, for every circle of hell, there is a sphere of *Paradiso*. Eliot's writing mirrors the fragmentation of a modern world that has endured a war of unimaginably devastating consequences.

The first obvious influence deductible in *The Waste Land* is the theme of moral decay of society, depicted through gruesome imagery and a barren landscape. Since the primary focus of *The Waste Land* is the catastrophic state of humanity and the absence of spirituality, the parallels are mostly made with Dante's *Inferno* and the *Purgatory*.

### 3.1. Setting

One of the most obvious connections of *The Waste Land* with *The Divine Comedy* is the setting, which represents the moral state of the characters. Dante's portrayal of the *Inferno* as a dark and godforsaken place corresponds to the state of the trapped souls, and represents a part of the punishment for their sinful lives. Eliot's landscape of *The Waste Land* mirrors the internal state of its spiritually deprived population. The barrenness of *The Waste Land* is a consequence of the lack of spirituality, which makes life substantial. Since people have forgotten about the higher purpose of their lives, their surroundings became infertile and the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* have essentially inflicted their own punishment, just like the sinners in the *Inferno*. By constantly emphasizing the nothingness, Eliot achieves the same effect that he so much admires in Dante – he creates a general atmosphere of despair and despondency. The didactic

purpose of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and the *Inferno* in particular, is to direct the reader to the righteous moral path by depicting the gravity of consequences that await all sinners, and it is because of the didactic intention that Dante uses gruesome imagery and vivid portrayals of punishments, all the while accentuating their eternal aspect. *The Waste Land* has a similar exhortative message and uncovers similar social problems following Dante's example of evoking distress: "*What Eliot does is exposing the harsh realities to shock his reader into a kind of awareness.*" (Hamman, 1152)

It is unlikely that it was only Dante's *Inferno* or *Purgatory* that influenced the way in which Eliot draws his reader into a desolate landscape. "*The dead tree*" that "*gives no relief*" (I, 23) represents an antithesis to the biblical Tree of Life, which provides fruit of eternal life. Additionally, the desert always represents punishment or temptation in the Bible (exemplified by the Israelites being punished for worshipping false gods). (Bellour, 424)

The image of people hurrying to work across the London Bridge reminds of the souls at the gate of the *Inferno* (*Inferno*, III). In Dante's case, bridges symbolise transitions from one level of the *Inferno* to the next, whereas Eliot uses the image of the London Bridge to represent the transition of people towards worldly things, such as money. Eliot, like Dante, expresses shock upon realizing how many people have lost the right moral path: "*And after it there rang so long a line / Of people that I never would have thought / That death had gathered such a number in.*" (*Inferno*, III, 55-57) almost identically corresponds to Eliot's: "*A crowd flowed over the London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many.*" (I, 62-63) There is also a correlation between auditory imagery: "*From this point, sighs, laments, and piercing groans / Were echoing throughout the starless air.*" (*Inferno* III, 22-23) and "*Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled*". (Eliot, I, 64)

Another important element of *The Waste Land* is the motif of water or the lack of it. Water is a symbol of fertility, meant to bring spiritual rebirth. Its allegorical meaning is crucial

for the message of the poem, since everything stems from spirituality, just like water is the source of all life on Earth. In the *Purgatory*, Dante's physical thirst is a result of his longing for spirituality and for further knowledge:

*"That seemed to end the subtle argument  
My teacher had presented: he was searching  
My face to see if I appeared content  
While I, provoked by yet another thirst,  
Was silent outwardly but sad within:  
"He may find all my questionings a pest." "(Purgatory XVIII, 1-6)*

The idea is further developed in Canto XXI, where, by recalling the Gospel of John, it is made clear that this type of thirst can only be satisfied by the truths of Christianity (...*The natural thirst, always unsatisfied / Without that water the Samaritan / Woman wanted and for which she prayed...*). (*Purgatory*, XXI, 1-3)

Eliot reworks this idea in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and creates a Waste Land, where people are either not longing for spirituality, or are unaware of their longing. Instead, they choose to focus on trivialities while their surroundings indicate their spiritual degradation. The entire second section of the poem is entitled *Death by Water*, which alludes to baptism. It is believed that baptism provides one with the opportunity of being born anew. The people in *The Waste Land*, however, are afraid of death by water and avoid it. (Bellour, 427). In order to gain salvation, one must first admit to his sins and endure the consequences of his wrongdoings, but the Wastelanders would rather have their lives devoid of meaning than face their shortcomings. The little water that *is* present is polluted, which perhaps suggests that "death by water" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would not result in salvation or rebirth. (Bellour, 428) In some other Eliot's poems, salvation is precisely what water represents. For instance, Prufrock wishes to ride the green

waves, which would liberate him from his internal conflicts and paralysis (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*), Mr. Apollinax draws his strength from the sea (*Mr. Apollinax*) and Gerontion, in his decayed house, longs for the rain (*Gerontion*). (Bellour, 426)

Dante also uses the motif of water as a symbol of purification and illumination. The three rivers that he mentions in the *Inferno* eventually pour into a frozen lake at the deepest level, symbolizing the loss of all hope for salvation. In the *Purgatory*, after having reached Earthly Paradise, or The Garden of Eden, Dante passes through the river Lethe, which erases all memory of sin (*Purgatory*, XXXI) and drinks from the river Eunoe, which brings back good memories before proceeding his ascent to Heaven. (*Purgatory*, XXXIII)

In *The Waste Land*, the lyrical subject sits by the Thames, one of the last remaining sources of water, and asks it to run until he ends his song (Eliot, III, 176). However, the river, which commonly occurs as a motif in the English poetry, is now polluted due to the habits of the modern world. It is full of litter and the nymphs, who traditionally bring fertility and joy, have departed. (Eliot, III, 177-179) The lyrical subject therefore cannot find comfort that water is supposed to bring, as he is constantly reminded of the overall infertility.

The motif of infertility relates to people, as well as their surroundings. For example, the conversation between two friends that takes place at the end of *A Game of Chess* reflects infertility and the overall decadence of modern society:

*You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.*

*(And she only thirty-one.)*

*I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,*

*It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.*

*(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)*

*The chemist said it would be alright, but I've never been the same.*

(Eliot, II, 156-161)

The conversation illustrates some important issues as it demonstrates the predominant set of values in the modern society. The physical appearance of people, which is probably a reflection of their internal state, appears to be more important than morality or spirituality. The speaker does not express concern or disapproval of the overall amorality, but recognizes the problem only on a superficial level. The pills allude to abortion and to the perversion of the modern world, i.e. to the Darwinian principles of eugenics, which discouraged procreation among the working class and which Eliot considered anti-Christian. (Havlat, 2-4) However, Havlat interprets abortion in *The Waste Land* as social, rather than voluntarily induced infertility or failure. The speaker demonstrates lack of information on the subject and the entire situation is portrayed as something that has been forced on her by her doctor and the society, rather than a thoughtful, conscious decision. (5-6)

The image of The Fisher King, who fishes in a “*dull canal / On a winter evening round behind the gashouse*” (Eliot, III, 189-190) further exemplifies infertility of *The Waste Land* and its people. Fish traditionally represents fertility and is one of the symbols of Christianity, but fishing in a polluted canal would bring no results. The image could therefore imply that men seek spiritual salvation and fulfilment in the wrong places, that the land is ruined to such an extent that there are no places left in which men could seek salvation, or that the man lacks religion and spirituality and will remain unsuccessful until he first changes himself. The image presumably implies all these things, since they represent a string of consequences – individuals are spiritually deprived, seek fulfilment only on a superficial level, refuse to redeem themselves and eventually create a Waste Land, where there is little hope of salvation. (Bellour, 427-429)



### 3.2. Moral Decay

As previously mentioned, the central theme of *The Waste Land* corresponds to that of *The Divine Comedy* – moral decay of a society. Eliot seems to place emphasis on two of the sins mentioned in the *Inferno*: sloth and lust (or desire in general). Since these two wrongdoings are at the very entrance of the *Inferno* (the slothful are in front of the gate, in the so-called Antinferno, whereas the lustful are punished in the second circle), Dante judges them as some of the least harmful sins. Eliot does the exact opposite, which implies that in the modern society, these two sins have become some of the most destructive human faults.

His allusions to the gates of the *Inferno*, explained in the previous section, do more than emphasize the number of the sinful. They refer to a very specific group of sinners – the slothful, who do not cause harm, but do not follow God and his commands either. Their lives have no true purpose because they are reduced to mere existence. These people rejected the gift of free will, thereby failing to fulfil their moral duty of choosing to act scrupulously. Their lives are characterized by a state of paralysis because taking action would require courage that they lack. Instead, the office hours, which end with “*a dead sound on the final stroke of nine*” (Eliot, I, 68) govern their everyday routine and trap them in a string of repetitive, meaningless actions (whereas Dante’s sinners in the Antinferno, rejected by both Heaven and Hell, are condemned to forever walk in circles). (Panzera, 67-68) Their state could best be described as “death in life”, due to the meaninglessness of their spiritually deprived lives. One of the best examples is Sybil, who asked for eternal life, but forgot to ask for eternal youth and is therefore condemned to a miserable life that left her asking for death. (Eliot, the epigraph to *The Waste Land*) The souls in the *Inferno* also ask for death, but for them there is no hope – they are trapped for eternity and all they can do is mourn the death of their spiritual selves. (Panzera, 70) The people

of *The Waste Land* have become spiritually blind and had buried their spiritual selves long time ago. (Bellour 424-425)

The phenomenon of paralysis and alienation, already expressed in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, remains one of the main issues of the modern society. By choosing to live in isolation and by limiting their lives to habitual actions, the people of *The Waste Land* fail to fulfil a higher purpose. (“*We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each conforms a prison*”) (Eliot, V, 413-414) Every person is trapped in his own mind but refuses to take action to liberate himself. These lines also refer to Dante’s character of Ugolino da Pisa, trapped in a tower along with his sons. One day, around the time they would usually get food, all they could hear was a key turning in the lock and realised they would be left to starve. (*Inferno*, XXXIII, 46) Eliot uses this episode in order to demonstrate the general lack of empathy and self-involvement. In a world where God has become “*a heap of broken images*” (Eliot, I, 22), men amuse themselves with trivialities and are afraid to change their ways. For example, Marie, the first speaker in the poem, explains that she used to enjoy the sled rides in the mountains and the sense of freedom that they provided, but now reads “*most of the night*” and goes “*south in the winter*” (Eliot, I, 19). These lines imply that she now rather follows her everyday routine and prefers to avoid all potentially unpleasant or scary situations. People do not know what to do with their time so they pass the days in meaningless activities.

““*What shall I do now? What shall I do?*”

*“I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street*

*“With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?*

*“What shall we ever do?”*

*The hot water at ten.*

*And if it rains, a closed car at four.*

*And we shall play a game of chess,*

*Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.*" (Eliot, III, 131-138)

They wait for someone or something else to give their lives meaning, not realizing that every person must give his own life meaning and strive for spiritual fulfilment. Their unwillingness to change consequentially brings to the absence of the Hanged Man in Madame Sosostris's pack of tarot cards, which symbolizes spiritual rebirth. There is, however, a drowned Phoenician sailor, with pearls instead of eyes. Eyes are "*a window to the soul*" and if they have turned into pearls, it means the soul is "hardened" and empty. The allusion is to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, to a drowned man who has been dead for so long that his eyes turned into pearls. (Shakespeare, 45) Eliot interchanges important messages with banal actions and conversations, such as using the last call at a bar ("hurry up, please, it's time") in the midst of a superficial conversation about physical appearance to indicate that men should finally wake up. The characters, however, do not understand the allegorical sense of the words. They interpret the words only on a literal level (they eventually leave the bar) while the density of their conversation suppresses the moral message of the phrase. (Eliot, II, 165-172)

April as "*the cruellest month*" (Eliot, I, 1) likewise serves as a proof of the collective insensitivity in *The Waste Land*. Winter kept people warm (Eliot, I, 5) because nothing is supposed to bloom during the winter, which allows people to ignore the devastating consequences of their actions (and inactions), and to remain ignorant of what they lack. With spring comes hope of nature reawakening and it is only when the land remains equally infertile in April as it was in winter, that they realize how empty their lives are. (Hammad, 1153)

The thirst for spiritual truths, present in both *The Divine Comedy*, as well as in *The Waste Land*, links to the concept of human desire. When Dante and Virgil encounter one of the angels in the *Purgatory*, he explains that control of one's desires is what guarantees blessing: "*And said that those directing their desire / To justice are the blessed, and his words / Had got as far as thirst with nothing more.*" (*Purgatory*, XXII, 4-6) The episode alludes to the Gospel

of Matthew (*"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled"*) (Nichols, 270) and emphasizes one's capability of channelling his desires, or aspirations, toward moral righteousness, instead of subjecting to them. One of the common sources of *The Divine Comedy* and *The Waste Land* is Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which the concept of (uncontrolled) human desire is also explored. In the same canto of the *Purgatory*, Dante paraphrases a part of *Aeneid*: *"Why is there no control, O cursed lust / For gold, upon the appetites of mortals?"* (*Purgatory*, XXII, 40-41)

Dante notes that all sin results from "love gone astray" (Bellioti, quoted in Panzera, 47). Sins are a result of a perverted sense of love – when people demonstrate excessive love for worldly things or physical sensations, when they wish to see others fail or suffer, they distance themselves from God. In fact, love is the driving force that governs all our actions:

*"Neither what is created," he began,  
"Nor the Creator, ever lacked for love,  
Innate or chosen, as you know, my son.  
While innate love is always free from error,  
This other love can err with evil objects,  
Or with too great or else too little fervour.  
When it's directed to the Primal Good,  
And lesser good things in due moderation,  
The pleasure that it gives cannot be bad;  
But when it turns to ill, or else with greater  
Or less care than it ought, to what is good,  
The creature then opposes his Creator.  
So you can comprehend, by definition,*

*Love is in you the seed of every virtue*

*And every deed that merits retribution.” (Purgatory, XVII, 91-105)*

Virgil proceeds to explain that men are instinctively drawn to the objects of their desire and to everything that gives them pleasure, which is fundamentally neither good nor bad, but men have been given the gifts of reason and free will that they must use in order to control and properly direct their desires. The desires of the soul are never satisfied, until a soul “*rejoices in the thing it loves.*” (*Purgatory*, XVII, 32-33) This is why not all kinds of love deserve praise. Virgil tells Dante that he cannot properly explain love and that he has to ask Beatrice for further explanations because human reason can never truly comprehend the concept of selfless love. God’s love is exclusively a spiritual experience.

In *The Waste Land*, the sensual triumphs over the spiritual because people are unable (or unwilling) to control their bodily cravings and instincts. Their compulsiveness and uncontrolled emotions drive them into a disastrous state of existence without spiritual guidance. (Bellour, 423) Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*, whose character opens *A Game of Chess*, serve as a warning, an example of catastrophic consequences that can arise when one is not able to control his desires. (Bellour, 427) The entire third part of the poem focuses on the idea of misusing love and of subjecting to desire. The section is entitled *The Fire Sermon*, alluding to Buddha’s *Fire Sermon*. The main idea of the sermon is that one must first detach himself from his sensations and focus on the spiritual in order to detach himself from his sufferings. (Bellour, 427) The people in *The Waste Land* do the exact opposite, which is why they keep distancing themselves from salvation.

Even though Beatrice is one of the central figures of *The Divine Comedy*, and earthly love plays an important role in the poem, Dante hopes to demonstrate the righteous idea of love, i.e. that God’s love should always remain a priority and charity must always be pursued, as it

is the ultimate virtue. In *The Waste Land*, “Love itself is a quest for belonging in which spiritual satisfaction is paramount to physical gratification: otherwise, love will turn into mechanical sensuality exactly like prayers without belief. It is Providence that orders the cycle of the seasons in equal proportions with human devotion and readiness to perform the required rituals and, by the same token, love of God leads to spiritual peace and genuine love among human beings.” (Hammad, 1152)

Apart from people not being able to control and govern their desires, Dante saw an enormous problem in the Church becoming corrupt by its desire for greed and power, and many members of the clergy can be found in his *Inferno*. In 1920, Eliot published a poem entitled *Hippopotamus*, in which he portrays the materialism of the modern secular society, as well as hypocritical materialism which has crept into the Church, condemning the latter more dangerous. The poem delves into fallibility of men in general, but it expresses a stronger judgement towards the Church gone astray, since the Church should be a “rock”, stable and strong when ordinary men become weak. Accordingly, individuals have a better chance of redeeming themselves and reaching Heaven (Hammad, 1150) In the final part of *The Waste Land*, ‘the empty chapel’ (Eliot, V, 388) the speaker walks by is the proof that people have abandoned the Church and religion in general. The symbol of the cock on the roof of the chapel reminds of Peter’s denial and suggests that the Church and religion have been disowned or even betrayed.

Despite the imagery that refers to the overall state of Church and religion, Eliot mostly highlights the necessity of each individual purging and ultimately saving himself, as proven by several aspects of the poem. Firstly, every speaker tells his own story and, despite having similar moral issues, they are presented individually, rather than collectively. Furthermore, the final part of the poem, in which Eliot proposes answers to moral crisis most explicitly, he writes: *I*

*sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?* (Eliot, V, 424-426) suggesting that resolving the crisis begins with each individual.

Shifting the focus to an individual reflects Eliot's personal religious and moral crisis. At one point in his life, he was searching for a firm set of principles that would align with his worldviews. He eventually turned to religion, after having experienced a personal wasteland, a life deprived of spirituality and characterized by the struggle with his wife's mental illness. - *"The poem thus reflects not only the modern man's (mental) state of existence but also Eliot's state of mind and spiritual collapse. Before his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, Eliot experienced a long process of spiritual torment and struggle which culminated in "The Waste Land".* (Bellour, 430)

The way in which Eliot foregrounds the individual is considerably different from Dante's and it is unlikely that *The Waste Land* is modelled on *The Divine Comedy* in this respect. *The Divine Comedy* focuses on a specific individual, who encounters his friends and enemies, is instructed by poets that Dante personally admired and who finds God by pursuing his love interest. For Dante, the journey of an individual serves to instruct others and demonstrates that there is no objective understanding or experience of God. Even though Eliot also emphasizes the need for each individual to seek spiritual fulfilment, the spiritual experience and the absence of it in *The Waste Land* are much less personal.

There is, however, a common source that both poets were familiar with, which explores personal sufferings as a consequence of a spiritual crisis. St. Augustine's *Confessions* are one of the explicit references that Eliot himself clarifies to the reader, as well as one of the models of *The Divine Comedy*.

*Confessions* appealed to Dante primarily because of the idea that experiences of an individual – his trials, shortcomings and sufferings – can serve as an example to others. St.

Augustine also uses the image of the forest to represent the earthly life, filled with sin. Dante recreates the same imagery at the beginning of *The Divine Comedy*, when he finds himself in a dark forest, before descending to *Inferno*. (Inglese, 12) The idea that sinners are punished by their own sins originates from St. Augustine as well, and so does the highlighting of humility as one of the crucial virtues and, analogously, pride as one of the most dangerous sins. In *The Divine Comedy*, pride is personified in the form of a lion that Dante encounters in the abovementioned forest (*Inferno* I) and it is viewed as the source of all other sins, which is why it is purged at the lowest terrace of the *Purgatory*. (*Purgatory*, XI) Additionally, the beginning of Canto XI of the *Purgatory* is a paraphrase of ‘Our Father’ that foregrounds humility.

Eliot’s references to St. Augustine are intertwined with references to Buddha’s *Fire Sermon*:

*“To Carthage then I came  
Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest  
burning” (III, 307-311)*

Carthage is a place mentioned in Book III of *Confessions*, where St. Augustine came to indulge his excessive sexual desire when he was young, a place characterized primarily by immorality. In Carthage, St. Augustine was “burning” with “jealousy, suspicion, fear, anger and strife”. However, the burning he felt was nothing more than a consequence of misdirecting his desires, while he was not yet aware that the only thing that can satisfy his desires is God, or spirituality. (Riano, “T. S. Eliot’s “The Fire Sermon: Of Memory & Salvation”, 2017) The synthesis between eastern and western culture (or, as Eliot puts it, between “*these two representatives of eastern and western aestheticism as the culmination of this part of the poem*” (*Notes on The*



*Waste Land*, 309)) is intentional, but never explained by Eliot. It may imply the universality of human longing for spiritual guidance and fulfilment.

In finding answers to spiritual and moral crisis, Eliot turns to Dante and St. Augustine as the bearers of the so-called reversible poetic memory that occurs in fragments, images, echoes and sounds. Eliot invites the reader to evoke his memory – of classical works of art, myths and places in order to remember and understand events and feelings they imply – and this memory is heavily reliant on sensory experience.

*““This music crept by me upon the waters”  
And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.  
O City city, I can sometimes hear  
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
The pleasant whining of a mandoline  
And a clatter and a chatter from within  
Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls  
Of Magnus Martyr hold  
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.” (Eliot, III,  
257-265)*

The juxtaposition of the polluted Thames and the sound of the Church of Magnus Martyr is meant to make the reader perceive the moral decay of society, as well as *“remember and contemplate something transcendent of which the church is a vestige, even if the present use of Magnus Martyr no longer bears a connotation of Ionian splendor.”* (Riano, “T. S. Eliot’s “The Fire Sermon: Of Memory & Salvation”, 2017) The reader is expected to understand that, rather than satisfying his desires that contribute to moral and physical decay, he should use his senses to recall a symbol of salvation. Therefore, the answer to moral crisis cannot be to “burn away”

our senses, as Buddha proposes, because senses are the basis on which memory is built. Instead, men should channel their desires to spiritual experiences and fulfilment, since their pursuing of worldly passions is essentially a misdirection of longing for spirituality.

Lines 309 and 310 reference The Tenth Book of *Confessions*, which deals with power and importance of memory. Augustine does not limit the notion of memory to his personal recollections, but emphasizes the significance of collective memory. Even though Eliot's *The Four Quartets* provides a deeper insight into his philosophy on collective memory, *The Waste Land* expresses a similar idea. Collective memory is neglected (the river, which is polluted and "sweats oil and tar" (Eliot, III, 266-267) may even be a symbol of it), therefore Eliot constantly reminds the reader of the potency and moral lessons of our collective culture, which must be kept alive through our memory. (Riano, "T. S. Eliot's "The Fire Sermon: Of Memory & Salvation", 2017)

### **3.3. The Concept of Salvation**

References to salvation can be found in the final section of the poem, *What the Thunder Said*. The landscape, dominated by rock and sand, alludes to the *Purgatory*. In the *Purgatory*, the sound of thunder signifies that a soul has been purged and can thus commence its ascent to Heaven. In *The Waste Land*, thunder is distant over the mountain, but it may imply a consequence of personal and artistic purgation, a promise of something more than the wasteland. (Berlin, 76-79) Mountains are traditionally a symbol of religious revelation (Bellour, 428) and, in fact, the entire *Purgatory* is a mountain. Eliot, however, emphasizes the lack of water even in such a place in *The Waste Land* – there is only "dry, sterile thunder without rain"

(Eliot, V, 341). This serves not to imply that there is no hope for salvation in modern society, but rather foregrounds the discrepancy between mundane activities and spiritual experiences and underlines the fact that men expand this gap as they continue to distance themselves from God. Purification should begin by following the three virtues that the thunder mentions: compassion, giving and (self) control. (Bellour, 429) This is not distant from Dante's view on salvation, since charity is what one should always strive for and it is also of crucial importance for one to remain moderate in his ways.

However, whereas *The Divine Comedy* ends with one's absolute redemption, *The Waste Land* creates a possibility, rather than certainty of salvation. (Hammad, 1152) The journey in *The Waste Land* does not end in *Paradiso*, but in *Purgatory*. The explicit reference to Canto XXVI of the *Purgatory* and to Arnaut Daniel, who needs to purge the sin of lust, serves to show that there is hope for humanity, as all of the souls in the *Purgatory* are ultimately destined for Heaven.

Even though Eliot emphasizes the importance of the teachings of Christianity, the poem attributes great value to teachings of other cultures and religions, as they all fundamentally hope to achieve the same goal. As previously mentioned, Hindu and Christian beliefs both include control and directing of desire as one of the central prerequisites for obtaining a spiritually fulfilled existence. (Hammad, 1149) Accordingly, when it comes to spiritual restoration, Eliot implements parts of the *Upanishad* as values that should be cherished.

Unlike Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which achieves perfect symmetry of form and ideas, Eliot's *The Waste Land* is fragmented and uses different speakers to portray the moral crisis. He even keeps some of the references in their original language (Latin, French, German, Sanskrit), thus creating "a polyphony of compressed literary voices" which then translates into a sort of a cosmopolitan cry in search for redemption. (Cambon, 232) He interchanges the low, mundane voices with the elevated style of his sources in order to achieve a contrast between

the spiritually deprived and their foils. (Cambon, 234) Dante, on the other hand, gradually and consistently moves from low to elevated style as one purges himself from his sins and as his soul reaches its most elevated state.

It is also important to note that both Eliot and Dante mention poets whom they admired in terms of their linguistic and poetic skills. Eliot explicitly dedicates *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, whom he calls “*il miglior fabbro*”, an expression used by Guido Guinizelli to introduce Arnaut Daniel in the *Purgatory*. The term roughly translates to “the best craftsman” or “shaper”, reflecting the ability of these poets to use, shape and develop their language. Throughout *The Divine Comedy*, Dante uses words from different dialects and registers – the Florentine dialect offers the basis, but the poem is characterized by various dialectal and regional expressions, Gallicisms, Provençalisms and Latinisms. Dante chooses those expressions that he feels could depict the scene the best, regardless of their origin, at times even inventing neologisms for the purpose of his images. (Ledda, 136) Arnaut Daniel’s speech, however, is written in his native Provençal dialect as a recognition of his poetic and linguistic influence on all Italian writers that would follow. (Nichols, 293)

In Eliot’s opinion, Pound possessed “critical genius” and he trusted him with the original manuscript of *The Waste Land*, which Pound shortened significantly. His edition of the poem was eventually published, proving Eliot’s faith in Pound’s judgement. (Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S.Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, n. pag) Additionally, the expression refers to Pound’s partiality for Provençal poets and *stilnovisti* (whose works he often translated and discussed) due to their “*verbal concision, visual clarity and metric resourcefulness*”. (Cambon, 226)

### 3.4. The Ineffable

As already explained while analysing Dante's displays of religious experiences, he struggled with the inexplicable due to the impossibility of objective representation. The inexpressibility *topos*, commonly explored in the Middle Ages, was generally accepted by the Modernists, but they mostly struggled with expressing the overwhelmingly hopeless emotional experiences in the modern world. Accordingly, Eliot reworks the imagery of Dante's Beatrice in his *The Waste Land* to express the opposite of what she represents in *The Divine Comedy*.

The image of the "hyacinth girl" (Eliot, I, 36) with wet hair and arms full of flowers could symbolise sexuality and fertility and therefore allude to several female characters from *The Divine Comedy*. In the final cantos of the *Purgatory*, Dante encounters a girl plucking flowers by a clear stream. The girl reminds him of Proserpine, whose kidnapping resulted in the end of eternal spring and in the beginning of the interchange of seasons. She lives in Eden, where the water flows from a spring generated by God himself, in a place that humans lose through their sins and where they can retrieve their salvation. Both the river Lethe and the Eunoe originate from this stream. (Nichols, 299) Additionally, Dante encounters Leah, one of Jacob's wives, who symbolizes the active life (and she is also found gathering flowers while walking across a meadow). (Nichols, 294) Even though, given the infertility of the Waste Land, the "hyacinth girl" may represent what is left of the women that embody fertility and life, her character most closely corresponds to Beatrice. In addition to fertility, she represents divinity, since the speaker, by looking at her, looked "into the heart of light" (Eliot, I, 41) and failed to articulate the experience. Similar imagery used by Dante to describe Beatrice alludes to an opportunity, or rather, a means that would bring the protagonist to the highest state of transcendence one could hope to achieve, since she would bring him to God. Furthermore, the

motif of the girl's eyes is crucial in both poems, and foregrounded in *The Divine Comedy* only when the speaker refers to Beatrice. The following lines depict Dante's first encounter with her:

*So on the Godly chariot arose  
A hundred men, ad vocem tanti senis,  
Eternal life's servants and messengers.  
All of them cried: "Benedictus qui venis",  
Scattering flowers up above them and around,  
"Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis!" (Purgatory, XXX, 17-21)*

The hundred angels that accompany her welcome her the same way that Christ was welcomed when entering Jerusalem. Line 21 is taken from the *Aeneid* – it alludes to the death of Marcellus who, like Beatrice, died young and Dante uses it to express rejoicing when meeting her again. Beatrice is clothed in a white veil (faith), a green mantle (hope) and a bright red dress (charity). She also has an olive garland on her head, which symbolizes peace and alludes to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. (Nichols, 319) By incorporating so many symbols and allusions to other works and mythologies, Dante manages to surpass the issue of the ineffable. A series of suggestive, interrelated images enables Dante to express a complex experience and an entire range of seemingly inexpressible emotions.

In Eliot's poem, this memory is distorted and partially lost, in a world that offers little hope for salvation and where love has been reduced to a physical sensation. Given that the people in *The Waste Land* know God only as a "*heap of broken images*" (Eliot, I, 22) they "*cannot say, or guess*" (Eliot, I, 21). Whereas Dante is too overwhelmed with the power of his transcendent experience to put it into words, they are unable to guess and communicate the meaning of life precisely because of the *lack* of the spiritual. (Panzera, 84-89)

The ineffability present in *The Waste Land* more closely corresponds to Dante's *Inferno* XXXIV, 124, where he expresses the state of being neither dead nor alive (just as Eliot does with lines 39-40: "*I was neither / Living nor dead*") when encountering Lucifer at the deepest level of *Inferno*. In this canto, it is the horror of the experience that provokes paralysis in the speaker. (Panzera, 90) Canto IX of the *Purgatory* is rich with symbols and metaphors that help Dante express the ineffable, such as the myth of Ganymede, the keys that allude to the keys of the kingdom of heaven, St Lucy as the embodiment of God's illuminating grace, three steps that represent realisation and admission of sin, remorse and penance, seven P's on Dante's forehead that stand for seven capital sins, etc. (Nichols, 207-210) Among these symbols, there is also a mention of Philomel: "*In that hour when the swallow starts to sing / Her sad songs, when the morning's very near / Mindful perhaps of her old suffering...*" (*Purgatory*, IX, 13-15) She is an example of the impossibility to properly express the horror of an experience and is therefore also mentioned by Eliot, as an example of the inexplicable violence and cruelty of an experience in *The Waste Land*. (Panzera, 91-92) Eliot also points out that no one in *The Waste Land* responds to her sad cries:

*"As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
"Jug Jug" to dirty ears."* (Eliot, II, 98-103)

Both Dante and Eliot overcome the problem of inexpressibility by using clear graphic and auditory imagery and through their metaphoric expression. (Panzera, 94) To be more precise, Eliot followed Dante's example of creating clear images and of achieving the desired

effect through complexity of details. Metaphors and allusions become the only effective tool in portraying the internal and the spiritual.

Dante's use of simile is not characterized by a vertical relation, in which there is a corresponding abstract or transcendent meaning for every earthly concept. Instead, the metaphorical meaning in *The Divine Comedy* is viewed in relation to an entire series of places, events and characters. (Luperini et al., 375) His metaphors are never simply descriptive, but aim to portray an internal state – a longing, a torment, a doubt – gradually revealing the allegorical meaning of the poem. (Mandeljštam, 23) For example, the deepest level of the *Inferno*, which is where Lucifer chews on the heads of the three greatest traitors in history (Judas, Brutus, Cassius), is frozen, thus serving as a visual representation of the frozen conscious of the traitors. (Mandeljštam, 49) However, the transition to a completely frozen environment does not happen suddenly, for the purposes of this image alone. As previously stated, all three rivers of the *Inferno* freeze progressively and eventually formulate a frozen lake in the final cantos. Rivers in the *Purgatory*, on the other hand, create a fertile environment and offer illumination of the soul. The motif of the rivers can therefore be properly interpreted only after reading the entire poem.

Time is another important concept for Dante's use of metaphor and simile. Time is viewed as a single, synchronic act, which is why the occurrences cannot be interpreted individually. (Mandeljštam, 35) The events do not carry allegorical meaning only in themselves, but also serve as anticipation of other events, as a part of God's plan. In his *Epistola a Cangrande*, in which Dante explains how the poem should be read, he provides *In exitu Israel da Aegypto* as an example, and states that in this biblical episode Moses does not represent an abstract concept, but anticipates Jesus Christ, who would sacrifice to save the entire mankind. (Baldi, 546)



The language, the form and the imagery in Dante's poem gradually develop as a whole because they all conform to the concept of the progressiveness and consistency of the journey towards salvation. Eliot follows Dante's example by creating a poem in which the fragmentation of the form is a consequence of a fragmented society and fragmented thoughts. Instead of recreating a physical journey that Dante undertakes in *The Divine Comedy*, Eliot focuses on the internal change in each individual. From the hopeless *Burial of the Dead* and *A Game of Chess*, Eliot hints at possible answers to the moral crisis in *The Fire Sermon*, proceeds to note that *Death by Water* is necessary for redemption and eventually reveals *What the Thunder Said*, unfolding the three fundamental virtues.

The language and the form in both poems are a consequence of the ideas the poets try to impart. Mandeljštam argues that for Dante, the concept is the starting point and everything else in the poem conforms to it. He "squeezes" the form and appropriate expressions from the idea and the content. (21) Whether or not this principle is recognized specifically in Dante's poetics and deliberately followed by Eliot, his poem is fragmented in form in order to reflect the fragmentation of both modern society and his own thoughts (*I can connect / Nothing with nothing*. (Eliot, III, 301-302)).

Eliot found the answer to his search for a language that could express complex thoughts with the least words in the simplicity and clarity of Dante's language, or his "common idiom", thus achieving the ideal of linguistic clarity, typical of Modernism. "*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.*" (Panzer, 12)

## CONCLUSION

Dante Alighieri's and T. S. Eliot's poetic works follow the principles they present in their theoretical works. Eliot found that Dante's linguistic importance and grandiosity lie in his proneness to a more natural language, since it is more understandable and reflects our thought pattern most faithfully. Thought is the starting point for the choice of style, form and language, which must conform to the thought, i.e. to the concept that poet wishes to express.

Both Dante and Eliot emphasize the process of creating poetry, which is conscious, guided by reason and realised through the skill of being a medium for different emotions. The goal of the process is a faithful recreation of an event - not of personal emotions, but of feelings that are relevant for the poem itself and for its moral message. Both Eliot and Dante highlight the exhortative role of poetry, since they view poets as more sensitive to reality, capable of recognizing nuances that remain concealed to others. This ability provides them with the possibility, as well with a moral obligation to transfer their knowledge to others, in order to contribute to the creation of a society that is morally sensitive and aware of its faults.

A just society cannot be based on each individual conducting in accordance with his personal moral beliefs, but on a collective ethical code. Christian values are crucial to a moral society, which becomes lost and hopeless without spiritual fulfilment. However, both poets hold that other cultures and religions complement Christian ideas of righteousness – Dante chooses a pagan figure as his guide in the Otherworld, whereas Eliot references Buddha's sermon, and both poets incorporate the moral teachings of various myths into their poems.

Dante's displays of religious experiences stand in contrast with Eliot's, since Dante believed everything on Earth to be a proof of divinity, implying that it is through mundane activities that we come to understand transcendent concepts. Eliot, on the other hand,

emphasizes the discrepancy between the mundane and the spiritual, trying to express the divine by highlighting how different it is from the temporal sphere of existence.

When delineating religious experiences, Dante foregrounds the harmony and symmetry that surround the experience, whereas Eliot recounts the event as singular and sudden – it occurs in the surroundings that display moral deterioration and spiritual depravity. Both poets, however, view the occurrence as ineffable and find that metaphorical expression is the only adequate tool in rendering transcendent experiences. Eliot follows Dante's example of resorting to evocative imagery that alludes to sensations, rather than concrete events. The principle applies both to harmonious, idyllic imagery, as well as to the horror of an experience, which disables objective representation of an event and forces the speaker to focus on sensations. Eliot's rendition of ineffable experiences is mostly restricted to the latter, since modern surroundings are more often horrific than idyllic.

In *The Divine Comedy*, as well as in *The Waste Land*, the images are only the starting point for an interpretation, which requires probing into meaning beyond the relation of symbols and individual corresponding concepts. The meaning is layered and the simplicity of imagery allows for its gradual development, achieving its true meaning only in the context of the entire poem.

Every theme or image found in *The Waste Land* that Eliot takes from *The Divine Comedy* is reworked in the context of the modern society and adapted for an English reader. Eliot thereby confirms Dante's universality and the constant interaction between works of art, emphasizing the importance and magnificence of our collective culture.

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