THE DIVINE COMEDY AS A SOURCE
FOR THE POETRY OF T. S. ELIOT

APPROVED:

M. D. Shockley
Major Professor

Marian de Shaps
Minor Professor

E. L. Kelifton
Director of the Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School
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Charles Ramos, B. A.

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Few contemporary writers have had as much attention from the literary world as T. S. Eliot; no writer of the past century has dominated the literature of the English language as has Eliot. And, reminiscent of the effect that Baudelaire's volume of poetry, Les Fleurs du Mal, had on subsequent French and English Symbolists, Eliot has accomplished this domination with a relatively small collection of poems.

In spite of the large amount of criticism written about him, no attempt has been made to point out the great debt that Eliot owes to Dante Alighieri, and the pervasive influence of The Divine Comedy on Eliot's poetical works.

This thesis endeavors to illustrate the extent of that debt and influence.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Il n'y a de livres que ceux où un écrivain s'est raconté lui-même en racontant les moeurs de ses contemporains--leurs rêves, leurs vanités, leurs amours, leurs folies.

--Remy de Gourmont.

It is difficult to realize that anyone who is familiar with La Commedia Divina and who has read the whole of T. S. Eliot's poetical works, beginning with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and ending with the Four Quartets, can doubt that there are three historical periods in Eliot's life and works corresponding to the three canticles of La Commedia: L'Inferno, Il Purgatorio, and Il Paradiso.

There are critics who maintain that Eliot's writings should not be taken autobiographically, and although this statement undoubtedly contains some truth, I am inclined to think that a poet can hardly write any amount of serious poetry without injecting into it his own feelings, tastes, and opinions.

Some poetry is manifestly confessional; other poetry is more subtle, yet still autobiographical; and still other is doubtful and open to speculation. Eliot, who does things
"not with a whimper, but a bang," may be said to write poetry that falls into all three of these categories. Not all of Eliot's writings are autobiographical, of course, but there are three distinct historical divisions into which his major poems may be naturally and autobiographically separated: 1917-1930; 1930-1936; 1936-1942.

These years are significant ones in the life of Eliot. Before 1930, he was regarded as an agnostic; in 1930, he became an Anglo-Catholic, and from 1936 to 1942 he manifested acceptance of definite Christian dogma, which he propagated in philosophical discourses on the virtues of Christianity. It is therefore these periods in Eliot's life with which I am concerned, and with the major works that correspond to these periods: "Prufrock," "Gerontion," The Waste Land, The Hollow Men; Ash Wednesday; Four Quartets.

Historically, there is a paucity of information concerning Eliot; gaps must be filled with conjecture. We know certain facts about him: his ideas on religion, literature, philosophy, and politics; we are acquainted with his family background; his birthdate, his birthplace, his parents and grandparents. But here the relationship between the Eliot of fact and the Eliot of fiction ceases; facts about the intimate life of this poet, who for the past forty years has exercised a more powerful control over the literature of the English language than any other living man, are difficult to find; they may remain hidden to us for many years. Up to the
time of this writing, there has been no biographical work written concerning Mr. T. S. Eliot.

Still, we do possess information about this man which coincides with that which he gives us and with the intent of this thesis. That is, when Eliot first began writing poetry, his religious outlook was of a certain nature; and that outlook is manifest in his early poems. About 1930, we have certain knowledge that his religious outlook took a definite turn, and his poems of that time express that turn.

It is at this point that the critic intervenes to warn that despite what may appear in Eliot's poetry, we should not read it as autobiographical, for we shall be swimming in deep water. But I am prepared to refute this interruption: The material is there; should we ignore it? According to the critic, we should; but can we ignore it; can we turn away and say, "That is not it at all, that is not what he meant, at all"? I believe not. I cannot agree with the critic when he tells us that Eliot "is not writing in his own person: The situation of Gerontion is even farther from his own than that of the middle-aged Prufrock had been when Eliot created him while still in his early twenties."

I suspect that Eliot's self-expression and his own self-realization in the characterization of Prufrock transcends the mere difference in age. Certainly Eliot grew toward, not away from Prufrock as he reached Prufrock's age.

I do not mean that elements of Eliot’s own experience, of his own thought and feeling, do not enter into these characters. . . and. . . as a result, Eliot’s rapier thrusts have full play with no risk of becoming clumsily involved in purely personal associations.2

Certainly he does not indulge in writing only personal experiences: the poet does not claim to be Prufrock, but neither does he claim not to be. If there are evidences in some of Eliot’s works that he is not the subject intended, there are no evidences that he is not the subject intended.

Besides, my concern here is with certain poems of Eliot and how they bear resemblance to The Divine Comedy; also how Eliot’s life is included in this resemblance.

That there is an influence of Dante on Eliot has, as far as I know, not been denied by any critic. All writers, when explicating the poems of Eliot, cite allusions to Dante in those works; but many of the critics go no further. To them, Eliot has borrowed from Dante, and the critics feel satisfied that they at least were able to recognize and identify the phrase or line as coming from some place in Dante’s poem. Other critics go a bit further. They admit that there is some sort of relationship between the two poets; that Eliot is borrowing for some reason other than expediency.

But to state a definite relationship between the poems of Eliot and La Commedia no critic has done—or at least has done merely casually and superficially.

2Ibid.
In my readings of contemporary literary critics—both the New Critics and the conventional ones—I came across only one statement that coincided with the thought behind this thesis; and even this statement was not in complete accord with my topic. Philo Buck observes:

Like Dante's great poem, *The Divine Comedy*, Eliot's poetry, from *The Hollow Men* to *Murder in the Cathedral* and his latest *East Coker*, *Burnt Norton*, and *The Dry Salvages*, is a single poem and comment on the poet's life, his path that led from the error and confusion of the world through Hell and Purgatory to the blessed vision.  

But Buck qualifies his comments:

No, Eliot has not caught all the faith and hence failed to see to its final vision his *Divine Comedy* that is the allegory of human nature. So there is no *Heaven* in Eliot's poetry; he sees the triumph of the church, and by its agency the discipline of human nature, but of what nature shall be the fruits of this triumph, here he remains discreetly silent.

I find only one critic who has stated agreement with my thesis, and that agreement only partial.

Let us review briefly a set of coincidental facts:

the parallels in the lives of Dante and Eliot. If we stop to think, we shall notice several periods in Dante's life that correspond to periods in Eliot's life. In his youth, Dante, as Eliot, "took delight in being solitary and would stay away from society, so that his contemplations might not be interrupted. . . ."  

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3 Philo Buck, *Directions in Contemporary Literature*, p. 275.  
4 Ibid.  
We know nothing of the home-life of either man; we know that during their early adult years their companions were among the poets, philosophers, and artists of the time. Each of these men had a worldly-minded teacher: Dante was taught by Brunetto Latini; Eliot, perhaps, could call his greatest teacher Ezra Pound. Among the Italian's friends was Guido Cavalcanti, reputed to have been an atheist.\(^6\) Eliot, in his years at Harvard, was much influenced by one of his teachers, Irving Babbitt, a man whose religious outlook was not exactly Christian. And finally, each man was involved in political exile; Dante by force, Eliot by wish.

Dante never was a sceptic or a non-Christian.\(^7\) Eliot, as far as we know, never has been known to express directly his religious beliefs; but in one period of his life he manifested sceptical tendencies. His earliest poems will bear this out. And as for being a non-Christian, Eliot would probably deny it, for I do not believe that he ever left the Christian faith, regardless of how tempting other religions were to him.

Not in an instant but little by little, a man changes his ideas, his conceptions, his direction, whether in politics, philosophy, morals, or religion. Hence in the psychological history of the individual, we do not speak of change (since only a man's character suddenly changes his direction on a given occasion), but of unfolding or development. Dante even did not pass at one step from simple faith to doubt founded out of philosophical speculation, but gradually and almost without knowing how. Neither was his transition sudden from doubt to enlightened faith. It, too, was gradual, full of struggles and eternal conflict.\(^8\)

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\(^6\)Ibid., p. 35.  \(^7\)Ibid., p. 60.  \(^8\)Ibid., p. 203.
Scartazzini wrote this of Dante, but almost without any revision it can be applied to Eliot.

Although these two men lived about 625 years apart, they are separated only by time; for Eliot is a medievalist in spirit; had he his way, he would have lived during the Italian's era. Yet time has not affected the power of Dante over Eliot; this nobody, not even Eliot himself, can deny. There is one poet—past or present—who has had a tenacious hold on the brain of Eliot, and it is Dante. Throughout the poetry of Eliot are found direct and indirect allusions, translated lines, and verbatim borrowings. Any reader will acknowledge this readily. Eliot himself assures us of his debt:

I do no think I can explain everything, even to myself; but as I still after forty years, regard his poetry as the most persistent and deepest influence upon my own verse, I should like to establish at least some of the reasons for it.  

But no critic will acknowledge anything further than that. Matthiessen says,

It would be glib to say that in "The Hollow Men" Eliot wrote his "Inferno", and that since then his poems represent various stages of passing through a "Purgatorio"; still such a remark may possibly illuminate both his aims and achievement.

Later, in 1946, Matthiessen, writing in The Literary History of the United States, apparently feels in a glib mood, for now he states:

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9 T. S. Eliot, "A Talk on Dante," The Kenyon Review, XIV (Spring, 1952), 178-188.

10 Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 9.
Eliot could envisage the modern metropolis as an Inferno more affectingly than Pound could in the Cantos, since, as he observed, Pound's "is a Hell for other people, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one's friends." This complicity, this lack of feeling implicated in the struggle with evil, necessarily rendered much of Pound's observation of human beings "trivial and accidental." Eliot's peculiar intensity comes from his conviction that poetry must spring out of suffering.... Few recognized sufficiently, even when Eliot reached the pit of his Inferno in "The Hollow Men" (1925), how terrifying an exposure he was making to the emptiness of life without belief, or that his main theme was how much of modern life is merely death. That his overwhelming sense of the need for redemption must finally transform Eliot into a religious poet was not apparent to many at that time.

Matthiessen admits that there is an Inferno in Eliot's early writings. As for the Purgatory, he continues:

Eliot's later poems, from Ash Wednesday (1930) through the Four Quartets, which were inaugurated by "Burnt Norton" in 1935, must be judged like any other poems, not on the basis of whether we accept or reject their theology, but of whether they have conveyed in moving rhythms the sense that, whatever the author's final beliefs, he is here reflecting perceptively and persuasively on human nature as we know it. By any such test, Ash Wednesday may well prove to be his most integrated long poem, as it certainly is a remarkable musical whole. Its themes are not calculated for popularity. They do not give voice to easy affirmation. Their realm is that of a Purgatorio, where suffering is made more acute by doubt, by "Stops and steps of the mind" between skepticism and assurance. But their integrity to actual experience allows them to fulfill what Eliot believes to be one of the most valuable services that belong to poetry, its power to make us "a little more aware of the deeper unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly an evasion of ourselves."12

12Ibid., p. 1356.
Earlier, Matthiessen had written, "Sufficient warning to critics against the direct reading of a poet's life (or the critics own prepossessions) into a poet's work is furnished by Eliot himself. . . "13 And he quotes a paragraph:

"I admit that my own experience, as a minor poet, may have jaundiced my outlook; that I am used to having cosmic significances, which I never suspected, extracted from my work (such as it is) by enthusiastic persons at a distance; and to being informed that something which I meant seriously is vers de société; and to having my personal biography reconstructed from passages which I got out of books, or which I invented out of nothing because they sounded well; and to having my biography invariably ignored in what I did write from personal experience; so that in consequence I am inclined to believe that people are mistaken about Shakespeare just in proportion to the relative superiority of Shakespeare to myself."14

Matthiessen has overlooked or ignored the last part of the paragraph: "... and to having my biography invariably ignored in what I did write from personal experience." At least, Eliot admits that there is a part of him in his poems.

Leonard Unger, in commenting on the Dantesque line, E'n la sua volontade à nostra pace, cites this passage from Eliot:

"And the statement of Dante seems to me literally true. And I confess that it has more beauty for me now, when my experience has deepened its meaning, than it did when I first read it. So I can only conclude that I cannot, in practice, wholly separate my poetic appreciation from my personal beliefs."15

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13 Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 71.  
14 Ibid.  
It is no wonder that critics are reluctant to state their true feelings of Eliot’s life and works. Many of these men vacillate to the point of contradiction. One of them has remarked:

But it is with Baudelaire that we are to compare Eliot and “The Waste Land,” rather than with Dante, or Virgil, or Milton. The vision is of the underside, from the underside. This may be called, not a vision of truth itself, but of truth as it looks from a false position.16

Before that, the critic had been satisfied that the atmosphere of The Waste Land is Dantean:

Our poet-hero-commentator sits on the shore fishing, is still casting for the holy fish of truth, as he was at the beginning. The arid plain is behind him; perhaps this means that we have got out of Dante’s upper hell and are now only in purgatory... Our hero-author-victim asks his good lady to remember him as she climbs toward heaven, while he dives back into the purgatorial fire that refines him.17

And later,

Our hero has been buried alive in the underworld, fried in the lava of the burned-over land, tossed sizzling into the deepest sea, struck by a triple thunderbolt from the highest heaven. Still he neither succumbs nor triumphs. The heroic simply won’t come off.18

There is certainly a difference between a hell of Dante and a hell of Baudelaire, and it is obvious that only from a Dantean hell can one emerge into the flames of Purgatory. Clearly, Eliot has spoken of el foco che gli affina, not of a fire that burns them.

Then a critic, who stands firmly by those who do not wish to speak critically of Eliot, has taken another step to

16Ibid., p. 137.  17Ibid., p. 132.  18Ibid., p. 133.
protect the poet from being stripped of his literary disguise and exposed to the vulgar world. He declares:

Some people have suggested that Prufrock is really Mr. Eliot. In the sense that Eliot collected him and riveted him together, he is bound to be the final manufacture of Eliot, but it is unnecessary to assume that Prufrock is more than a combination of varied observances coupled with imagination.\(^{19}\)

Matthiessen goes further and identifies these observances with what he considers to be their original sources.\(^{20}\)

Returning to Stephenson, we note that he asks: "If the question is put, 'For what audience does Mr. Eliot write?' The answer would be emphatically--'None.'\(^{21}\)

Yet Stephenson has written a book entitled T. S. Eliot and the Lay Reader.

Then there are those writers who either give Dante no credit for influencing Eliot, or who admit that the influence is there but that, in reality, it is not an influence. Of the latter kind we can cite Theodore Morrison:

We know that Eliot has read Dante and thinks him a great master of the art of poetry. . . . Ash Wednesday, moreover, seems to have been composed when Dante was much in Eliot's thoughts. The poem contains allusions to the Divine Comedy and quoted and translated phrases from it. . . .

But we may take these facts into account without pressing them too far. Eliot's published remarks on Dante emphasize in the main two points of practice which have evidently impressed and attracted him: the value of allegory as a means to "clear visual images," and the simplicity of style of which he regards Dante


\(^{20}\) Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 58.

\(^{21}\) Stephenson, op. cit., p. 11.
as a master. To judge by his own remarks, we should expect Mr. Eliot, in so far as he might be influenced by Dante's example, to cultivate 'clear visual images in his own right, and simplicity in his own style, not to make his figures appendages to those of another poet. It has been proposed to regard the stairs mentioned in the third canto of Ash Wednesday as a counterpoint of the Purgatorial Mount in Dante. No doubt the stair mentioned by Arnaut Daniel was present in Eliot's mind as he composed this part of his poem, and the recollection of the passage by the reader will of course enrich the poem with a train of literary and religious association. But the experience recorded in this canto is not a purgatorial experience at all; it is not the slow refining away of measured iniquities proceeding by clearly understood law. It is the more obscure and surprising experience of conversion, of passing from the outer darkness of despair to the humility of belief. If Eliot had never heard of Dante, an image of ascent in some terms would at this point have been natural or inevitable. Again we must work with the view that the image grows from the elements of experience which is being expressed, although it may be enriched and deepened by bringing along with it some associative plunder.22

Nevertheless, the "plunder" of which Morrison speaks comes from the canticle which Dante himself named Purgatory. It is a purgatorial experience, not because of the critic's "plunder," but in spite of it. "It is evident," Unger perceives, "... that Ash Wednesday is uttered, so to speak, from el foco che gli affina."23

Frank Wilson sets Eliot apart from his poetry, making the poet an omniscient, non-participating being:

I have suggested that the purpose of the "Waste Land" was to present in an impersonal, and thus a more universal, form, those ideas which went to form the "Poems, 1920," and I feel that the poem has completely


22Unger, op. cit., p. 349.
succeeded in this, its immediate object. "What the thunder said" reads as an impersonal statement of the difficulties which beset Gerontion, brought to a conclusion which the old man himself could not reach, but which was well within the poet's reach when he wrote "Gerontion."\textsuperscript{24}

This last statement is true: Eliot could have reached a conclusion when he wrote "Gerontion," but the fact is that he did not reach it. As Savage has noticed,

It is a curiously notable fact that poets seem irresistibly impelled to give themselves away in their work: are driven, it seems, to make explicit not merely their inmost thoughts and emotions, which indeed they may effectively disguise, but their inner and private assessment of their own achievement.\textsuperscript{25}

And thus we have The Waste Land, Ash Wednesday, and the Four Quartets, three chapters in the achievement, and consequently in the life of Eliot.

T. S. Eliot is still quite commonly thought of as an individualistic, self-centered lyricist of the "Ivory Tower" genre, isolated from social current and preoccupied with the minutae of strictly private sensation. This is strange, for it is of course the precise opposite of the truth. Eliot is first and last, in orientation, a man of society, acutely conscious of the social problems of his day, with a pronouncedly democratic bias.\textsuperscript{26}

If Eliot is not himself personally represented and included in his poetry as suffering an Inferno, experiencing a Purgatory, and rejoicing in a Paradise, then the above quotation is false; and a careful study of his poetry with relation


\textsuperscript{25} Unger, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 154.
to the Divine Comedy will reveal that Eliot is the man whom Savage has described, although there may be some question of Eliot's "democratic bias."

Stephen Spender also agrees with the idea that Eliot the man is to be found in his poetry. Of "Portrait of a Lady," he writes:

This poem is particularly interesting because it is one of Eliot's few attempts to enter into the position of another person in the modern Inferno. But even here the lady is only interesting because of the question about the narrator himself which she suggests in his mind. And her situation is only compared with his because the thought has occurred to him that it may be possible to identify it completely with his own. The seriousness of Eliot's earlier poetry is conveyed by the impression it forces that there is indeed only one problem: is the soul of the individual capable of being saved, damned or in any way morally judged? It is a question that applies to individuals, so it is no egotism of the author's that makes him search deeply for the answer in himself; the answer will be found in him as much as in anyone. His is the one soul that it is his responsibility to save.27

Dante, when he found himself nel mezzo del cammin di la vita, sought to find a way to salvation. He found it in Il Paradiso, and he gave himself heart and soul to the Church. Eliot, Unger says, does not appear to have the same religious fervor that Dante had, for Eliot's "... religion ... lacks all strong emotion; a New England Protestant by descent, there is little self-surrender in his personal relation to God and to the soul."28

27 Ibid., p. 268.  
28 Ibid., p. 288.
In his essay on Dante, Eliot says that one need not believe what poetry he reads, as long as he enjoys the poetry.29 To Elizabeth Drew, the

... Four Quartets are religious poems, but as Eliot said of other great religious poetry, the poet is not persuading us to believe anything, he is revealing what it feels like to believe his religion. And to believe it not only intellectually, but with the whole personality.30

Eliot would have to believe it with his whole personality, for were he to believe it only intellectually, he soon would not believe. After Dante has been dismissed by Vergil in the closing cantos of the Purgatorio, Eliot explains to us that

... Dante has now arrived at a condition, for the purpose of the rest of the journey, which is that of the blessed: for political and ecclesiastical organizations are only required because of the imperfections of the human will.31

And Eliot, in order to assure his salvation, must admit himself to these organizations; hence, his Royalist and his Anglo-Catholic positions are to him justified.

Mario Praz, who has written a study of Eliot's relation to Dante, has acknowledged that "Eliot's indebtedness to Dante ranges from the quotation and the adaptation of single lines or passages to the deeper influence in concrete presentation and symbolism."32

29T. S. Eliot, Dante, pp. 42-43.
31Eliot, Dante, p. 47.    32Unger, op. cit., p. 307.
The whole of this essay by Praz contains conclusive evidence that Eliot owes much to Dante. Praz is content to topple his argument by concluding without making any reference to the similarity of Dante's Divine Comedy and the poetical works of Eliot. As I have said before, other writers also find this stopping place before they acknowledge a more significant Dante-Eliot relationship.

Not only by comparing similarities of imagery, situation, and verse of Eliot's poetry to that found in La Commedia (I could say that here Eliot borrowed from canto number so-and-so of book so-and-so of the Paradiso; that this line in Eliot is verbatim as Dante wrote it in the Purgatorio; these are important, but they do not constitute my final aim) but also by placing Eliot himself, by examples of his poetry, into the Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, can we see that there is something more than just a coincidental and casual resemblance between Dante's 13th century Commedia and Eliot's 20th century Comedy.

Because, in the words of Eliot, "the Divine Comedy expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity's despair and the beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing," I feel that Eliot's poetry has uttered those same emotions; and his model is the Commedia.

After he has given the best-known of The Waste Land explications, Cleanth Brooks speaks for the critic in these

33 Eliot, The Kenyon Review, XIV (Spring, 1952), 187.
words: "Much which the prose expositor must represent as
though it had been consciously contrived obviously was
arrived at unconsciously and concretely."34 This is a
statement that can be applied to almost any genre of art;
but one thing that we must not forget is that there are
those passages before us—passages that, although borrowed,
have been borrowed for a purpose—which the author set down,
not to deceive, but to reach us.

Certainly I have borrowed lines from him, in the at-
ttempt to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader's
mind the memory of some Dantesque scene, and thus es-
tablish a relationship between the medieval inferno
and modern life.35

To this we may add, "and to modern man," of whom Eliot is
part.

We may add that last line without feeling that we are
taking too much for granted. Eliot himself has given us
the hint:

I think I have already made clear, however, that the
important debt does not lie in a poet's borrowings,
or adaptations from Dante; nor is it one of those debts
which are incurred only at a particular stage in
another poet's development. Nor is it found in those
passages in which one has taken him as a model. The
important debt does not occur in relation to the num-
ber of places in one's writings to which a critic can
point a finger and say, here and there he wrote some-
thing which he could not have written unless he had
Dante in mind. Nor do I wish to speak now of any
debt which one may owe to the thought of Dante, to
his view of life, or to the philosophy and theology

34 Unger, op. cit., p. 343.
which give shape and content to the Divine Comedy. That is another, though by no means unrelated question.36

And that is the question which we shall now undertake:

Is there a relationship between Eliot's life and works and La Commedia Divina? The following chapters endeavor to answer this:

Let us go then, you and I. . . . 37

36Ibid., pp. 185-186.

37Throughout this thesis none of Eliot's poetical quotations will be footnoted; instead, specific reference within the text of the Chapter to the poem from which the lines originate will be made. The collection of Eliot's poems to which the reader may refer is The Complete Poems and Plays, 1952 edition.
CHAPTER II

INFERNO

Lo giorno se n'andava, e l'aere bruno
toglieva li animai che sono in terra
dalle fatiche loro; e io sol uno
m'apparrecchiva a sostener la guerra
ai del cammino e ai della pietate,
che ritrarrà la mente che non erra.
Inferno II, 1-6.

On September 26, 1888, the seventh and youngest child
was born to Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Chauncy Stearns.
After spending an infancy and boyhood in St. Louis, Missouri,
which only the memories of this child could evoke, he pre-
pared for college at Smith Academy in St. Louis, and spent
one final year at Milton Academy.

In 1906, he entered Harvard. He was editor of the un-
dergraduate literary magazine The Harvard Advocate. After
finishing his studies in three years, he continued his study
in philosophy at the Harvard Graduate School.

The years 1910-1911 found him at the Sorbonne reading
French literature and philosophy. In the summer of that
year he decided to return to America, where, beginning in
the autumn of that latter year, he passed three more years
at Harvard, extending his studies of metaphysics, logic, and
psychology to include Indic philology and Sanskrit. In
1913-1914 he was appointed as an assistant in philosophy.
At the end of the year he was awarded a traveling fellowship and was in Germany during the summer before the outbreak of World War I. In the following winter he was at Merton College, Oxford, reading Greek philosophy. He began contributing reviews to *The International Journal of Ethics*. His first mature poems to appear in print were "Prufrock," "Preludes," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," "Aunt Helen," "The Portrait of a Lady," "The Boston Evening Transcript," and *Hysteria*.

In the spring of 1915 he married, and during the next year was teaching French, Latin, lower mathematics, drawing, swimming, geography, history, and baseball at Highgate School near London. Then he changed to banking.

In 1918 he registered for the United States Navy, but his poor health kept him out. He was assistant editor of *The Egoist* from 1917 to 1919 and contributed frequently to *The Athenaeum* from 1919 to 1921. His range of contributions extended from *Lloyd's Bank Economic Review* to *Vanity Fair*.

Next, he became editor of a quarterly review magazine, *The Criterion*. He assumed a directorship of the publishing house of Faber and Faber; and in 1927, he became a British subject and declared himself an Anglo-Catholic.¹

The foregoing biographical sketch which ends at the time with which we are concerned in this chapter, 1888-1927, is known to many literary critics; there are many other

¹F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*. The whole of this sketch was taken from pp. xiii-xv.
facts in the life of Thomas Stearns Eliot which few people, other than Eliot himself, know. Much of the material needed to fill in the blanks found in this man's life will have to wait for a few more years; some of it can be gleaned from Eliot's writings.

As we noted in the sketch of his life, Eliot was doing more studying than writing before 1917, when "Prufrock" was published. We gather from both his essays and poetry and from his education that Eliot is erudite. His knowledge of European literature manifests itself everytime Eliot writes a poem or an essay. Eliot was not studying in vain, for in 1920 he produced The Sacred Wood, a collection of essays on literature that would stir the world of criticism just as his later poems stirred the world of poetry. In these essays, and in many more to follow, Eliot discussed, always with unbounded confidence and erudition, Western literature from Babbitt to the Greek playwrights. In fact, by 1929, Edmund Wilson could say, "T. S. Eliot has now become perhaps the most important literary critic in the English-speaking world."2

The above paragraph will show that Eliot, by sheer intellectual force, has progressed from academic distinction to literary dictatorship, "the American dean of British letters."3 In his wake he has left definite, personal

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dogma, which here and there reveals to us aspects of Eliot's mind during the times that he was forming opinions.

And, to reiterate, Eliot's opinions are definite. One need only read his "London Letters" to be informed of what Eliot thought of the United States, of American literature, of Jewish celebrities, of British literature, of the fine arts, and of many other topics of conversation that were rife in the early 1920's. With these and other essays, he gained the admiration of the group of critics who make it their business and practice to obey their leader's literary pronunciamentos, whether or not they agree with Eliot's embittered feelings—a practice which Eliot himself has followed in his relation to Ezra Pound:

I have, in recent years, cursed Mr. Pound often enough; for I am never sure that I can call my verse my own; just when I am most pleased with myself, I find that I have only caught up some echo from a verse of Pound.5

He continues,

This brings us to the second problem about Pound. I confess that I am seldom interested in what he is saying, but only in the way he says it. That does not mean that he is saying nothing; for ways of saying nothing are not interesting.6

4Most of these letters appeared in Dial, especially in LXXI (August, 1921), 215-217; LXXI (September, 1921), 452-455; LXXII (May, 1922), 510-513; LXXIII (July, 1922), 94-96; LXXIII (December, 1922), 659-663.


6Ibid., p. 6.
And,

I know that Pound has a scheme and a kind of philosophy behind it; it is quite enough for me that he thinks he knows what he is doing; I am glad that the philosophy is there, but I am not interested in it.\(^7\)

Eliot was admired by many critics, but he was not so well-received by others. Wilson noticed that "T. S. Eliot . . . finds it difficult to accept contemporary America."\(^8\) He has "gone to England and evolved himself an aristocratic myth out of English literature and history."\(^9\) And one critic, at least, has endeavored to explain and destroy that myth.\(^10\)

In addition, there are other men who find "disdain for life, loneliness of soul, the sardonic gesture, the mysterious sorrow . . ."\(^11\) in his poetry. "Eliot apparently today regards 'Evil' as some sort of ultimate fact, which it is impossible either to analyze or to correct."\(^12\)

The literary world does not often take as much interest in an individual as it did in Eliot, who, of course, was no ordinary individual:

He went away a republican; he goes back a monarchist. He went away an American citizen; he goes back a British subject. He went away an agnostic; he goes back a believer in Anglo-Catholicism. He went away

\(^7\)Ibid.  
\(^8\)Wilson, op. cit., p. 283.  
\(^9\)Ibid.  
\(^12\)Wilson, op. cit., p. 349.
unknown and without responsibilities, he goes back famous as a poet, a critic, and an editor; he is furthermore a director in a rising house of London publishers. Yet his position has never been exactly defined, and outside those who know him intimately no one could define it.13

Ezra Pound had faith in Eliot. As early as 1917 he wrote, "Confound it, the fellow can write—we may as well sit up and take notice."14 E. K. Brown, on the other hand, argued that "Eliot has no great poems. Not even The Waste Land is a great poem. But he has a large number of great lines and many great stanzas."15 That was in 1930, after much of Eliot's work had been available to the public.

Eliot complained that the world did not understand for what his soul was desperately searching. The poems had put him on a pinnacle; yet he suffered from his success, for no one understood him. They thought of him as a pagan; they thought that he had no morals and that he sneered at all religion. And yet behind his irony, behind his wit, behind his oddness, his spirit, quietly intent and serious, was looking for an ultimate truth that would satisfy both his longing for beauty and love and satisfy his moral instincts.16

Thus, Eliot's literary, political, and religious positions, and especially religious, suffered from constant attack. Because he renounced his American citizenship he was criticized; because he wrote poetry that did not conform to

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13 R. E. G. George, "Return of the Native," Bookman, LXXV (September, 1932), 423-431.
16 George, op. cit., p. 428.
conventional styles (although his style was by no means unique or novel) he was called a minor poet with "many great stanzas"; and because he gave himself over to the Anglican Church he was called, in effect, a pseudo-religious man; After he had been converted to the Anglican Church, Eliot wrote,

Unless by civilization you mean material progress, cleanliness, etc. . . . if you mean a spiritual and intellectual coordination on a high level, then it is doubtful whether civilization can endure without religion, and religion without a church.17

To this Wilson remarked: "One recognizes a point of view which is by way of becoming fashionable among certain sorts of literary people."18 He added:

If the salvation of civilization depends on such religious fervor as the present literary generation is capable of kindling—if it depends on the edifying example of the conversion of Jean Cocteau and the low blue flame of the later Eliot—then I fear that we must give up hope.19

This was written before Eliot composed Ash Wednesday or the subsequent ecclesiastical poetry.

Essentially, Eliot was religious, at least in his poetical tone, not only after he became an Anglo-Catholic, but even before that. This, of course, is only a conjecture, for no one but Eliot himself knows the Eliot mind. Through heredity, however, he should be religious:

17 Quoted in Wilson, op. cit., p. 283.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
. . . he is in some ways a typical product of the New England civilization. He has all of the Puritan fastidiousness, scrupulousness, prudence and preoccupation with moral questions. . . .

His choice of topics for his essays—even his early ones—reveal that his mind was not occupied with little religion. Even his earliest poems contain theological matter.

But perhaps during his earlier years of composition, he was still weighing, still contemplating the question of religion. He said in 1928, "We demand of religion some kind of intellectual satisfaction—both private and social—or we do not want it at all." By now he wanted it; he had thought enough about it with relation to him personally, and he had thought about it in relation to the Church. By 1927, he had made the decision that the Anglican Church suited him and that he suited the Anglican Church.

During the years before entering the Church, Eliot was depicted as a soul wanting in theological belief. He

. . . longed intensely for something that his world does not always give. Despair had clutched at substitutes for things intensely craved, and the substitutes led to intenser despair, mingling with intenser supplication. Such was the mood of The Waste Land. The last part of it was written in Switzerland, in a pension, after a nervous breakdown. It is a pathological document; it portrays a poet, sick in body as well as in soul, who yet kept the tough reasonableness and the lyric grace which he had already noted in Marvell.22

20 Ibid., p. 343.


22 George, op. cit., p. 427.
Eliot, as we have seen, was coming in contact not only with various languages and literatures, but also with various theological systems: A man who is exposed to and absorbs Greek paganism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Brahmanism cannot—when he does not adhere publicly to any of them—be expected to escape charges of "pagan," "atheist," "religious snob."

Because, in his early poems, Eliot depicted society as he saw it—and Eliot saw it in its context, not separating the good from the bad—he emerged as a social critic. However, he did not exclude himself from the society; he felt, as Dante felt, that he was part of those who formed this world of evil. Stetson and London are not the only inhabitants and places in Eliot's Inferno; "... the desolation, the esthetic and spiritual drouth, of Anglo-Saxon... society oppresses London as well as Boston." And it includes Eliot as well as Gerontion and The Hollow Men.

Thus by 1915, Eliot's mind was occupied with many thoughts: The first World War was in progress; he had abandoned his native country for England; English poetry was in an undefined position: torn between the Victorian and the contemporary period, it was waiting for Eliot to free it from its standstill. With the appearance of his first mature poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in 1917, English poetry became the vehicle which transported Eliot's

23 Wilson, op. cit., p. 343.
ideas on moeurs contemporains: Eliot could now release the tension that had been building up within him. He could now point out, as Dante did, what the Inferno was; who its inhabitants were.

But, unlike the Italian, who mentally met many famous personages in the Inferno, including former friends of his, Eliot did not give his characters their true names. Instead, one of his creations—whether or not it is his own—stands for a physical or mental state of society, or for both. Prufrock belongs to the latter classification.

As Dante was taken by the hand and led into the Inferno by Vergil, Prufrock wants us to go with him into the Inferno of Eliot's world. In order to retain the thought behind this thesis, I must remind the reader that as we proceed, we shall notice the similarity between Dante's Inferno and those poetical works of Eliot with which we are concerned in this chapter. That we begin our comparison with the Inferno is not accidental; Eliot himself has said that "I began myself with the passages of the Inferno which I could understand, passed on to the Purgatorio in the same way, and only after years of experience began to appreciate the Paradiso. . . ."24

The epigraph to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" holds the key to the whole Inferno:

24 Eliot, Dante, p. 12.
S'i' credesse che mia risposta fosse
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
questa fiamma starla senza più scosse;
ma perché già mai di questo fondo
non tornò vivo alcun, s'i' odo il vero,
senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo. 25

These lines are spoken by Guido da Montefeltro in Dante's
Inferno, but here they are Prufrock's, or, perhaps, Eliot's
words. These lines were not picked at random; Eliot could
visualize the modern--his own--world in the phrase from the
above passage, "di questo fondo," and Guido could be modern
man addressing modern man. The death-in-life motif which
Eliot later expands in "Gerontion" and in The Waste Land has
its beginning here.

Eliot's later poem, Ash Wednesday, has been called a
personal poem; that is, that in it Eliot injected his per-
sonal experiences and feelings. But even Prufrock contains
this personal element:

For poetry... is not the assertion that some-
thing is true, but the making that truth more fully
real to us; it is the creation of a sensuous embodiment;
of course... for some kinds of poetry it is neces-
sary that the poet himself believe the philosophy of
which he is making use... What we find when we
read Lucretius or Dante is that the poet has effected
a fusion between that philosophy and his natural feel-
ings, so that the philosophy becomes real, and the
feelings become elevated, intensified and dignified. 26

25 Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, translated by
this chapter all subsequent quotations from the Inferno will
emanate from this volume, and the name of the volume will be
followed by the canto and line numbers.)

26 Eliot, "Poetry and Propaganda," Bookman, LXX
(February, 1930), 595-602.
Eliot wrote these words in 1930, when he had already been converted, but they apply to the works which he had already created.

In the Inferno, Vergil led Dante through the most terrifying and shocking regions that the Italian poet had scarcely thought existed. In "Prufrock," Eliot leads his reader through some of the most shocking situations which the reader might have thought existed, but of whose existence he thought little and cared less.

"Prufrock" is one of Eliot's most original poems; there are few direct—and even indirect—allusions to Dante. Nevertheless, Prufrock is a definite inhabitant of the Inferno. If the imagery of this poem of Eliot's sometimes seems grotesque and startling, there is a good reason for it:

Proceeding through the Inferno on a first reading, we wend through a succession of phantasmagoric but clear images, of images which are coherent, in that each reinforces the last; of glimpses of individuals made memorable by a perfect phrase...

And when critics speak of Eliot's element of surprise, of the juxtaposition of antithetical figures, such as,

When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;

they speak rightly of that surprise, for, once again, Eliot has an explanation for his actions: Discussing certain parts of the Inferno, he remarks that those episodes

... certainly remain in my memory as the parts of the inferno which first convinced me, and especially the Brunetto and the Ulysses episodes, for which I was

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27 Eliot, Dante, p. 27.
unprepared by quotation or allusion. And the two may well be put together: for the first is Dante's testimony of a loved master of arts, the second his reconstruction of a legendary figure of an ancient epic; yet both have the quality of surprise which Poe declared to be essential to poetry. 28

There have been many analyses of "Prufrock." One critic 29 endeavors to present Prufrock as a psychological study; to affirm that the character debates with himself. Basler, however, fails to point out that Eliot, as a student of psychology, perhaps did not have that science in mind; yet that his intention was not to make a clinical analysis of Prufrock: Eliot used psychology as a means of reaching the reader, who, after a few readings, will understand what Eliot is talking about, and will see himself, not as a complete Prufrock, of course, but as one who has some of Prufrock's characteristics. Prufrock is Eliot debating with Eliot, or the reader debating with the reader: it matters not.

You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!

It is worth pointing out again how very right was Dante to introduce among his historical characters at least one character who even to him could hardly have been more than a fiction. For the Inferno is relieved from any question of pettiness or arbitrariness in Dante's selection of damned. It reminds us that Hell is not a place but a state; that man is damned or blessed in the creatures of his imagination as well as in men who have actually lived; and that Hell, though a state, is a state which can only be thought of, and

28 Ibid., p. 28.

perhaps only experienced, by the projection of sen-
sory images. ...30

We might reverse one line in the above paragraph and apply it to Eliot: How very right was Eliot not to intro-
duce among his imaginary characters more of his personal friends, as did Dante, than historical ones, for, as Eliot feels in the Four Quartets, "Time present and time past/
Are both perhaps present in time future"; and characters in the past are perhaps present in time present.

Prufrock could have been Dante as he began his journey through his medieval Hell, or he could be Eliot as he began his journey through his modern Hell.

The experience of a poem is the experience both of a moment and of a lifetime. It is very much like our intenser experiences of other human beings. There is a first, or an early moment which is unique, of shock and surprise, even of terror (Ego dominus tuus); a moment which can never be forgotten, but which is never repeated integrally; and yet which would become desti-
tute of significance if it did not survive in a larger whole of experience; which survives inside a deeper and a calmer feeling.31

This is the experience that a reader gets when he reads "Prufrock," for that experience originates from Eliot's own life.

As we leave "Prufrock," we embark on our excursion through the rest of Eliot's Inferno. From now on we shall travel quickly; we have overcome the initial shock that greeted us, as it did Dante, at the gates of Hell:

30 Eliot, Dante, p. 32.
31 Ibid., pp. 32-33.
In his visit to the *Inferno*, Dante encountered many important people and many less-important ones. We too shall meet minor characters, but we shall not stop too long to scrutinize them.

Dante often had his characters speak either to Vergil or to him, but until we get to *The Waste Land*, we shall observe that the *ombre* in the Eliot *Inferno* speak little, for here, as in Dante,

*Questi non hanno speranza di morte,*
*e la lor cieca vita è tanto bassa,*
*che 'nvidioso son d'ogni altra sorte.*

Aunt Helen, Nancy Ellicott, the readers of the Boston newspaper, the *Evening Transcript*, Mr. Apollinar——these souls are part of the inhabitants of Eliot's *Hell*, but none of them utters a word.

The first important personage we meet is the old man Gerontion. He is not afraid to address his visitors; on the contrary, he carries on a monologue in which he explains why he is one of the inmates of this world of death-in-life.

In the *Inferno*, the Lascivious were placed in the second circle and were among those who were not suffering too

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greatly, for their crimes were relatively light. Among these we might place Prufrock, Sweeney, and the lady in "Portrait of a Lady." They share places with Cleopatra, Helen, Paris, Tristan, and Francesca da Rimini.

A short distance further down in Hell were placed the Heretics. In the sixth circle, along with Calvacante, Dante's friend on earth, we might place Gerontion, Hakagawa, Mr. Silvero, the protagonist of "Mélange Adultère de Tout," and certainly the author of "The Hippopotamus."

If one reads any one of many cantos in the Inferno, he will see that some of the characters whom Dante and Vergil encounter are allowed to tell their story in nearly the entire length of the canto. "Gerontion" manifests Eliot's application of one of many lessons which he learned from Dante. Observe, in a canto taken at random, how Dante employs dialogue as a means of relating a certain inhabitant's story. One of the ombre is speaking:

'O tu che se' per questo inferno tratto,' 
mi disse 'riconoscimi, se sai;
tu fosti, prima ch'io disfatto, fatto.'
E io a lei: 'L'angoscia che tu hai
forse ti tira fuor della mia mente,
si che non par ch'io ti vedessi mai.
Ma dimmi chi tu sei' che 'n sì dolente
loco se' messa ed a sì fatta pena,
che s'altra e maggio, nulla è sì spiacente.'

Eliot has Gerontion's monologue begin the poem:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates

34 Inferno, VI, 40-48.
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.

In another Dantesque canto, we find these concluding words:

Tre volte il fè girar con tutte l'acque;
alla quarta levar la poppa in suso
e la prora ire in giù, com'altrui piacque,
infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi richiuso.\(^{35}\)

Eliot's Gerontion ends his talk with the same final, definite verses that end many of Dante's cantos:

Tenants of the house,
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

As Eliot goes deeper and deeper into his Hell, his subject matter becomes correspondingly more severe. The sarcastic parody of the False Church, "The Hippopotamus," places Eliot at the lowest depth of his Inferno. This attack on the True Church comes from a man who appears to be the worst kind of sinner and blasphemer. The poem surpasses "Prufrock" in bitterness of tone, although the two works appeared in the same year. Nevertheless, the same man wrote them, attacking man in one and the Church in the other.

The aftermath of the first World War could not brighten the mind of Eliot. Although the War had been over for four years, the peace of mind that might be expected of men was nowhere in sight. Instead, Eliot issued a statement that manifested little evidence that man, by agreeing to end hostilities, had redeemed himself in this poet's eyes. In 1922,

\(^{35}\)Inferno, XXVI, 139-142.
The Waste Land appeared. Eliot was at the pit of his Inferno; he was acquainted with the entire population of that region: The Incontinent, the Violent, the Fraudulent. The war had made that possible.

In this poem, Eliot scans literature and history, and, consequently, his personal past; all that he had written has now been thrown into the melting pot of his brain, stirred, and poured into a mould, which, before it cooled, was shaped into its present form by il miglior fabbro, Ezra Pound. The result of Eliot's labors could not be immediately evaluated; many people thought the opus obscure, unintelligible, and heterogeneous.

Perhaps after the first reading, one is inclined to agree upon those three adjectives; but I find that Eliot is not obscure; he is ambiguous, and, by analogy, the poem becomes intelligible and homogeneous, its meaning depending entirely upon how the reader interprets the poem.

In practice, our literary judgment is always infallible, because we inevitably tend to overestimate a poetry which embodies a view of life which we can understand and which we accept; but we are not really entitled to prize such poetry so highly unless we also make the effort to enter these worlds of poetry in which we are alien.36

Perhaps many people did not care to enter Eliot's world; perhaps they did not care to be part of the Inferno, where Eliot had put them.

36Eliot, Bookman, LXX (February, 1930), 602.
One comment that appeared frequently in critical analyses of The Waste Land was similar to this:

We are always being dismayed, in our general reading, to discover that lines which at least, we had thought, must have been the original creations of Eliot had been taken over and adapted from other writers.37

Eliot, then, was accused of being a second-rate poet because he used whatever quotations entered his mind in his readings of other poets; but perhaps it would be difficult to read any great writer without finding a word, a phrase, a sentence, or even a paragraph which originated with another author. The Waste Land contains, as it has been pointed out by many critics, allusions to many works of art. But interesting as this topic of literary borrowings may be, I do not intend to pursue it any further here unless it is concerned with Dante.

Returning to Eliot’s Inferno, we find him at its pit. There, or close to there, he encounters Madame Sosostris, the famous clairvoyante. Dante’s Hell reveals that the base of that region contains the Simply Fraudulent, among whom are the Diviners. By now Eliot has decided that diviners deserve a worse place that that which he gave to another clairvoyante, Madame Tornquist, in "Gerontion."

Here, also, the poet recognizes the people of his own city of London. It is London, but it could be any other large city in the world.

37Wilson, op. cit., p. 346.
e dietro le vene sì lunga tratta
di gente, ch' io non avrei creduto
che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta.38

It is truly a picture of Dante's Hall, where the Italian
post and Vergil witnessed real dead people. Eliot, too,
finds them alive:

Quivi, secondo che per ascoltare,
non avea pianto mai che di sospi, che l'aura eterna facevan tremare.39

He even recognizes one, as Dante did when he recognized

l'ombra di colui che fece per viltà il gran rifiuto.40

Eliot tells us that

There I saw one I knew,
and stopped him crying: "Stetson!"

Then in a sharp transition, as often happened in

Dante's Hall, we are taken into a woman's boudoir, where she
asks her lover:

"Are you alive, or not?
Is there nothing in your head?"

The scene has changed, but the tone has not: this is still
the Dantesque Hell, where the inmates are not alive.

Next, we are confronted with Tiresias, the bi-sexual
being who also appears in the Inferno.41 He has

... sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.

Then by having one of the Thamea-daughters paraphrase
a quotation from Dante's Purgatorio, Eliot emphasizes the

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38Inferno, III, 55-57. 39Inferno, IV, 25-27.
40Inferno, III, 59-60. 41Inferno, XX, 40-43.
fact that this is not Purgatory:

'ricorditi di me che son la Pia;
Siena mi fè'; disfeci Maremman.'42

Eliot twists the meaning so that it applies to a sexual affair, thereby adding another sin to those who already are in Hell:

"Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe."43

After this, there is a jarring transition from a Western to an Eastern atmosphere, but the analogy between Eliot's Inferno and Dante's Inferno remains. The imagery becomes more and more grotesque, but when this last portion of The Waste Land is read alongside of the closing stanzas of the Inferno, one will notice that even Dante's images seem unreal.

Finally, in not one, but several, bursts of emotion, Eliot attempts to leave his Inferno, as Dante and Vergil left theirs after they had seen Lucifer. Eliot writes:

Dasyachyam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, ethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus
DA

In the Inferno there is a similar passage that relates the fear of some persons who are shut up in a tower. When

43 This is one of many passages which translated verbatim from Dante.
they hear their captives nail up the door to the tower, they realize the horror of being locked in.

The concluding stanza of *The Waste Land* foreshadows Eliot's conversion. No longer is there, as there was not in the last canto of the *Inferno*, any feeling of utter despair in the poet's mind; he has seen the worst of humanity, and he has seen also that there is something good beyond depravity; that the goodness cannot be attained until one has passed through a Purgatory. Eliot, now that he has been terrorized by what he has witnessed, can sympathize with the state of man. He himself has the capacity for salvation, for Dante, who also went through a Hell, emerged to endure a Purgatory in order to see the heavenly vision. Following his master, Eliot can do nothing but jump, like Arnaut,

... nel foco che gli affina.

But before doing so, Eliot has one last poem to write before he becomes an Anglo-Catholic. In *The Hollow Men*, written two or three years before his conversion, Eliot depicted the well-known men of straw. However, there is none of the earlier Eliot here. He has been to the region which he calls "death's other Kingdom," where he saw Charon's eyes, which Dante also saw. Fortunately, those eyes are not in the "dream kingdom," where life finds death; they are only in the death-in-life "other Kingdom."

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

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.

Here the hollow men are gathered on the shore of
Acheron, just as the group of people gathered on the same
shore in the Inferno. These people were to be transported
into Hell and were never to see the sky again. But here,
Eliot's group will not see the sky unless Charon, the pilot
of the boat that carries the people across the river, re-
appears as the "perpetual star" which Dante and Vergil saw
when they left Hell:

e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.45

For Eliot, there will be a "perpetual star." He has
found his kingdom; it is here on earth. And his world will
end not with a bang, but a whimper, for repentence is not
shouted, but whispered.

Thus we have been led thoroughly through Eliot's
Inferno; we have been shocked at the sights we have seen;
we did not realize that so many types of people existed as
we viewed there. And the experience remains firmly in the
mind of Eliot, just as Dante's experience remained with him.

45Inferno, XXXIV, 139.
Both Dante and Eliot were midway in their thirtieth year of life when they began their descent into Hell. They had lived stormy lives—lives filled with political and military adversities. Yet neither man appeared to have lost himself completely to his Hell; in Dante's life we know of nothing that he did which we might label heretical, and Eliot (his "Hippopotamus" notwithstanding) did not endanger his religious future, for he had not expressed his actual religious position. However, both of these men felt that they were not living the best life that they were capable of; and with a final, overwhelming declaration, each dedicated himself to the task of theological messenger; it was up to each man to see that the people were taught that salvation from Hell was not only possible, but also penitently requisite in order that one might have the beatific vision. Penitence, then, was the next step toward that vision.
CHAPTER III

PURGATORIO

Io ritornai dalla santissima onda
rifatti al come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire alle stelle.
Purgatorio XXXIII, 142-145.

When one reads Dante's Purgatorio immediately after he has finished the Inferno, he will at once experience a release of all emotional tension, a mental katharsis; for the terrifying visions of ombre in torment have given way to more pleasant, although still painful, sights. The reader knows that he is no longer in Hell: everyone and everything manifests not a lamenting, futile attitude, but a lamenting, hopeful outlook.

And so it is when one has perused the first verses of Eliot's Ash Wednesday: no longer is the reader made to be aware of unpleasantness, nor is he subjected to the toleration of a world of the living dead; instead, he is made to kneel, to stand, to sit, and to listen as the author chants his tale of purgation, a tale that is uttered not by a defiant infidel, but by a monotonous, soft-spoken repentant, who cannot bend his knee enough to atone for his past life.
At the time that *Ash Wednesday* appeared (1930), the author had been practicing the Anglican faith for two years. Even after two years, critics could not agree on what the true nature of Eliot's conversion really was. Why does a man suddenly embrace that which he has always been able to keep at arm's length? Such a sudden conversion as Eliot's was probably premeditated, for we have seen that his mind had been preoccupied with religion, even in his darkest literary hours.

To some critics, *Ash Wednesday* was a positive statement of Eliot's religious position; to others, it was less than that.

This little book has been received, on the whole, with disappointment by most of Eliot's admirers, for it seems, at first sight, less vigorous than *The Waste Land*, and its subject matter, which is religious, is apparently outside the central current of our time. But I do not think that any careful reader will be able in the long run to agree with this opinion.¹

That the subject matter was apparently outside the central current of Spencer's time cannot be denied—the subject matter goes back 700 years or more to Dante and the philosophy of the Scholastics. Nevertheless, agreeing with the subject matter is one thing, enjoying it is another:

My point is that you cannot afford to ignore Dante's philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passages which express them most clearly;

but that on the other hand you are not called upon to believe them yourself.\textsuperscript{2}

We might easily apply Eliot's suggestion to himself and to his poetry. And "what is necessary to appreciate the poetry of the Purgatorio is not belief, but suspension of belief."\textsuperscript{3} In other words, the poet himself believes what poetry he writes; the reader does not have to believe what the poet writes about. But at least the reader knows that Eliot has a belief, and we as readers cannot afford to ignore it.

During the period that he wrote Ash Wednesday, Eliot was in the process of becoming a British subject and a member of the Anglican Church. Of his political conversion we have indisputable documentary evidence; of his religious conversion, which probably created more attention, we also have such evidence; but it is from Eliot's own writings, as it is in Dante's Purgatorio that we are aware of the Italian poet's religious experiences, that we can perceive the change. After Ash Wednesday there appeared more ecclesiastical poetry: "Animula," "A Song for Simeon," and "Marina" (all in 1930); The Rock (1934); and Murder in the Cathedral in 1935. The only poem written in that period that did not outwardly deal with religion was "Sweeney Agonistes" (1932).

Eliot's essays during this 1930-1936 period consisted primarily of religious topics; Dante (1930) was written in

\textsuperscript{2}T. S. Eliot, Dante, p. 42. \textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 44.
a definite religious tone; *Thoughts After Lambeth* (1931), *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1936) are concerned with ecclesiastical subjects. Eliot the writer and Eliot the man have begun their climb up to the summit of the Purgatorial Mount; from now on Eliot's mind will be concerned with religion and with how he can best serve his Church.

This latter wish was granted him in 1934, when he was commissioned to write a pageant dealing with the troubles which a London church group was having in building a church. Eliot took the opportunity to make use of his newly acquired religious fervor to write *The Rock*, a work that introduces a new Eliot into the literary world—an Eliot who has temporarily abandoned his subtle literary style, which was sarcastic as well, to compose a pageant that approaches with naivete and simplicity the style of the miracle play, the religious pageant play, and the religious sermon.

Two years before *The Rock* appeared, Eliot returned to the United States to hold the Charles Eliot Norton chair as Professor of Poetry at Harvard. His visit created a ripple of excitement both in this country and in England. The man who had left America a "pagan" was now returning a confirmed Anglo-Catholic. Eliot had evidently forgotten, in his new role of representative of the Church, his former spiteful attitude toward his native country. His newly found religion had converted him in many ways.
Being the permeation, within his specific literary experience, of his general view of life, the moral quality in Mr. Eliot is religious. Everywhere . . . he reveals a general and definite attitude toward existence taken as a whole: and this attitude, when logically formed, becomes religion.\(^4\)

Why Eliot dedicated himself to the Church is a matter for speculation. Critics have tried to answer it: "He has seen a generation lost because it has lost the word."\(^5\) And therefore "... this poet has had a burden laid upon his soul to declare to his own generation."\(^6\)

But it seems to me that Eliot's burden does not include his fellow men; in his Inferno it certainly did, but now he is concerned with personal salvation. Eliot's characters who were in his Inferno shall remain forever there; only Eliot has found a way out. "He seems more concerned in his spiritual self, than in the world in which he lives or in the lost generation which he represents."\(^7\)

Mr. Eliot's position is that of a man who has withdrawn from . . . life. He is static, his soul's transfiguration is past, whatever progress he conceives must be a mere consolidation of himself into forms already uttered. His intellectual, spiritual, and poetic "life" is a rationalization of this death deep within him.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Ibid., p. 995.

\(^7\) Brother Cajetan, "The Pendulum Starts Back," The Catholic World, CXL (March, 1935), 650-656.

\(^8\) Frank, op. cit., p. 295.
Nevertheless, this intellectual, spiritual, and poetic life, in order to exist, needed to manifest itself, and the manifestations emerged as beliefs. How sincere or valid these beliefs were is something else. Some critics believed that Eliot affected conversion:

The incense of art and incense of religion mean something less to him than the formulas; and while I do not at all impugn his sincerity in either case, I must deplore in both cases, his guiding principal. It would, besides being tactless, be pointless to disparage Mr. Eliot's religious beliefs, but I cannot help commenting on his thoroughgoing belief in formulas, one of which formulas happens to be the basis of his religion.9

Other critics expressed similar attitudes: Writing of Eliot's early religious poems, Malcom Cowley comments:

Most of them are devotional poems, a fact which many critics might assume to be connected with their indifferent quality as verse. But the connection here, which really exists, is a result of Eliot's personal reaction to his new faith. He has developed into a peculiarly doleful type of Christian, given more to describing the sorrows of this world than to celebrating the joys of the next.10

One needs only to re-read the Purgatorio to note that Eliot would be a perfect specimen of that region; for that is the region that Cowley is describing, and it is the one in which Eliot, as Cowley depicts him, belongs. When this critic contends that


Eliot has simply not sinned enough to make his repent-ance interesting as literature. He writes poems of pity for nobody but himself. ... His Anglo-Catholicism has so far been intellectual rather than emotional or sensuous, with the result that his poems have no more color than a New England sermon. 

he is stepping on Dante's and, as a result, on Eliot's toes. The sins that the Italian poet committed were not sufficient to merit his enduring an Inferno, not to mention his composing one; yet who can deny that the Inferno is, to say the least, interesting as literature? And who can deny that Eliot's poems of his Inferno are interesting, if nothing else? But Cowley is concerned with the poems of Eliot's Purgatorio, which, like Dante's, are not as interesting as those of the Inferno: "Damnation and even blessedness are more exciting than purgation," confesses Eliot. Perhaps what Cowley and other critics did not realize was that "it is apparently easier to accept damnation as poetic material than purgation or beatitude; less is involved that is strange to the modern mind." 

Other writers believed that Eliot's conversion was sincere. Even if they would not state his religious position—for they believed that his works were self-explanatory—they

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11Ibid.

12Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, translated by John Sinclair, Purgatorio, Vol. II, canto XXX. (In this chapter all subsequent quotations from the Purgatorio will emanate from this volume, and the name of the volume will be followed by the canto and line numbers.)

13Eliot, Dante, p. 37.

14Ibid., p. 36.
accepted it. "It may be recalled that hitherto Mr. Eliot's
poetry has not been easy to understand; in 'The Rock' no one
can fail to know what this poet believes."

Dixon Wecter retained no doubts: "Mr. Eliot's conver-
sion was no lip-service to a Church of social and political
standing; his sincerity is beyond cavil." And "it is
plain that he is thrilled, as only a former Protestant can be, by the wedding of piety and beauty."

Eliot himself added a tantalising but, as is his custom,
non-incriminating comment:

... whereas twenty years ago a young man attracted by
metaphysical speculation was usually indifferent to
theology, I believe that today a similar young man is
more ready to believe that theology is a masculine dis-
cipline, than were those of my generation.

Regardless of how Eliot's personal religious life was
interpreted, critics began to feel that perhaps this poet
was not as important as they had once judged him. In 1936,
Cowley felt for the first time that "... Eliot is a minor
poet; that his apparent greatness was forced upon him by the
weakness of his contemporaries and their yearning for a
leader." Four years earlier, Eliot had been the leader:

As for the distinguished position of Mr. Eliot, no
one is likely to dispute the fact who is familiar with

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15Shillito, op. cit., p. 995.
16Dixon Wecter, "The Harvard Exiles," Virginia Quarterly
Review, X (April, 1934), 244-257.
17Ibid., p. 262.  18Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 322.
19Cowley, op. cit.
the English press and knows with what frequency and re-
spect his name occurs. More significant even is his
following among the younger thinking men of England,
especially in the universities.  

But in 1936, his "poems are beginning to seem less cosmi-
cally important than they did in 1925. . . ."  

What we must realize now, then, is that Eliot's impor-
tance as a poet has declined and that his position as
spokesman for his Church begins to manifest itself. Dante's
role as speaker for his Church cannot be denied, nor can
Eliot's similar position; but as the former approached his
task—that is, by slowly presenting his material in the
Inferno and Purgatorio until he could totally unfold it in
the Paradiso—Eliot too has followed the same pattern. He
has shown us an Inferno; he is about to show us a Purgatorio,
but a Purgatorio wherein he cannot be said to be preaching
definite dogma, but rather to be insinuating it symbolically,
as Dante did humbly in his Purgatorio.

For in Ash Wednesday, Eliot, we must remember, is con-
cerned primarily with personal salvation.

One sees in his collected works conscience—directed
toward "things that other people have desired," asking
"are these things right or wrong"—and an art which
from the beginning has tended toward drama. The Waste
Land (1922) characterizes a first period. In Ash
Wednesday and later Mr. Eliot is not warily considering
"matters that I with myself too much discuss too much
explain"; he is in them; and Ash Wednesday is perhaps

of Literature, IX (November 12, 1932), 233-235.

the poem of the book, as submitting in theme and tech-
nique to something greater than itself.\textsuperscript{22}

For in \textit{Ash Wednesday} the element of personal salvation,
although limited to Eliot himself, can be justified in its
limitation:

Those who have power to renounce life are those
whose lives are valuable to a community; one who at-
tains equilibrium in spite of opposition to himself
from within is in a stronger position than if there had
been no opposition to overset; and in art, freedom
evolving from a liberating constraint is stronger than
if it had not by nature been cramped. Indigenous skep-
ticism, also constraint are part of Mr. Eliot's temper-
ament; but at its apex art is able to conceal the
artist while it exhibits his "angel."\textsuperscript{23}

Eliot is now in the process of becoming a valuable asset to
his community—along with those who have gone through his
ordeal—but this poem is Eliot's only, for the others have
written no \textit{Ash Wednesday}.

In this process of conversion, Eliot perhaps experienced
some trying times. When Paul Elmer More once visited the
poet, More recorded this conversation. (More had been dis-
cussing Eliot's conversion in the preface to Eliot's book,
\textit{For Lancelot Andrewes}, wherein the poet had announced his
position as "classicist in literature, royalist in politics,
and anglo-catholic in religion.");

"And now, when you have completed this heroic program
and have returned, as your intention is, to verse,
will your form and style show any signs of this conver-
sion, or will you cling to the old impossible . . .

\textsuperscript{22}Marianne Moore, "It is not Forbidden to Think,"
The \textit{Nation}, CXLII (May 27, 1936), 680-81.

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 681.
manner of the 'Waste Land'?" "No," he exclaimed, los-
ing for a moment his armor of placid irony, and shaking
a defiant fist in the air,—"No; in that I am abso-
lutely unconverted!"

One's personal conversion (or salvation) cannot eradi-
cate the presence of sin or evil that has already occurred;
when Eliot became an Anglo-Catholic, his Waste Land did not
vanish; he could still see it, but he himself had changed.
Yet, as we have seen, some critics were still doubtful.

Meanwhile, the entire literary world was observing him:

The continued series of orchestrations between
Mr. Eliot and Anglicans promise much for those who are
morbidly curious about Mr. Eliot's metamorphoses. Un-
fortunately, that same morbid public must be willing to
endure the unpleasant exhibition of the adjustments of
a private soul while he works out his salvation in fear
and trembling.25

And doubtless this observation did little to please the
naturally shy Eliot.

Nevertheless, let us join the on-lookers and view
Eliot's purgatorial experience. On reading Ash Wednesday,
one can hardly perceive in the poem something other than a
religious tone; and that tone, in spite of Morrison's con-
tention,26 cannot be interpreted as anything other than pen-
itent. If we remember, Eliot, like Dante, was only an
observer in Hell; neither participated as actual sufferers,
although they both witnessed those who were suffering; in


25 William S. Knickerbocker, "Bellwether," The Sewanee
Review, XLI (January, 1933), 64-79.

26 See Chapter I, p. 12, of this thesis.
Ash Wednesday, Eliot, again like Dante in his Purgatorio, is a penitent among the penitents. Yet, as Leonard Unger noted in his essay on Ash Wednesday, we must remember that this poem, and, I might add, Dante's Purgatorio, "... comes to stand for a state of mind, a state of the soul." 27

When we left Dante and Vergil at the end of the Inferno, they had just emerged from the lowest depths of that place; and at the beginning of the Purgatorio, we find them on earth, preparing to ascend the Purgatorial Mount. It is not enough to point out that both Dante and Eliot use religious dates on which to begin their purgatorial experiences—Dante beginning his ascent on Easter Sunday; Eliot, on Ash Wednesday—but we must also note that each date is particularly significant when one considers the thought behind the two works, the Purgatorio and Ash Wednesday.

As a truly religious person, Dante perhaps did not mean to imply any association between his entering Hell on the evening of Good Friday and ascending the Purgatorial Mount on Easter Sunday, and Christ's death and resurrection on the same days of the month; nevertheless, the similarity is there. But instead of making the poem seem forced, the coincidences serve only to strengthen it; for we are able to understand how great were the emotions of the poet in his endeavor to reach Paradise.

In reading Eliot's poem, we find almost from the beginning the analogy between the poem and its title. *Ash Wednesday* introduces a period of humility for the Catholic world; *Ash Wednesday* introduces a period of humility in the life of T. S. Eliot.

Aside from these similarities, we shall find many other such parallels between the two people and their poems. Structurally, however, there is no relation in the purgatorial ascents of these poets that we found in the descent to their Infernos. Dante still has the companionship of Vergil, but Eliot is now alone; the Italian encounters still more historical personages, but Eliot mentions no one other than his Lady: perhaps he knows of no one else, save her and him, who belongs in Purgatory.

Dante went to Hell and ascended the Purgatorial Mount in order to see Beatrice, who had a historical significance in the poet's life. Eliot, although he has no one on earth comparable to Beatrice the girl (at least he has no one of whom we know), follows Dante on his journey in order that he, Eliot, may see the Beatrice which Dante represented in *The Divine Comedy: the Church*.

We shall mention other similarities as we come to them; but let us begin the journey that will culminate in the vision of Beatrice. After reading *Ash Wednesday* and Dante's *Purgatorio*, we become aware that both Dante and Eliot went through a change in their former selves before they began their purgatorial experiences. Dante, in order
that he might not show any effects of his journey through
Hell, was girded with a rush and had his face washed with
dew by Vergil.\textsuperscript{28} These acts were recognized by the poet
as his transformation from one phase of life to another.

Similarly, in the first section of \textit{Ash Wednesday},
Eliot undergoes a transformation, but he does not receive
his with \textit{le guance lacrimose}, as did Dante; rather, he ac-
cepts it with resignation. If he intends to be purged of
his sins—and evidently he does—he might as well forget
his former state of existence.

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?
\end{center}
\end{quote}

Eliot's purgatory has arisen from his own willingness--
after he decides that there is no use to turn back to his
Hell:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
Consequently I rejoice,

having to construct something

Upon which to rejoice.
\end{center}
\end{quote}

Had he decided not to rejoice, his actions would have
proved him cowardly. Dante, too, in the \textit{Inferno} was reluc-
tant and apprehensive to begin the journey that would take
him to Paradise; and when he asked Vergil

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
Ma io perché venirvi? o chi 'l conceder?\textsuperscript{29}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

the latter became angry and replied:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
'S' i' ho ben la parola tua intesa'
rispuose del magnanimo quell'ombra
'l'anima tua è da viltate offesa;
la qual molte fiate l'omo ingombra
al che d'onrata impreza lo rivolve.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Purgatorio}, I. \textsuperscript{29}\textit{Inferno} II, 31. \textsuperscript{30}\textit{Inferno} I, 44-48.
Nevertheless, both Dante and Eliot, after their reluctant beginning, gave themselves wholly to the process of purgation. Whenever Vergil rebuked Dante, the latter realized that the chastisement was just; that he was wrong. Then he followed his leader's advice. Eliot, too, after he has found the need for concentrating on his objective, entreats:

And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And I pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again

Reluctantly, and finally, the poet has begun his purgation.

Early in his ascent, Dante came upon those shades which delayed in their earthly repentance. These sinners, concerned all during their lives with worldly matters, watched and waited until their last hours on earth to repent their negligence. At that last hour

quivi lume del ciel ne face accorti,
si che, pentendo e perdonando, fora
di vita uscimmo a Dio pacificati,
che del disio di sè veder n'accorsa.31

And in like manner does Eliot quietly speak:

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death

Although Dante did not meet his Lady until the closing cantos of the Purgatorio, Eliot introduces his Lady in the second section of his poem. Who Eliot's Lady is could be a

31Purgatorio V, 54-57.
matter of personal interpretation, but to me she signifies the counterpart of Dante's Matilda, whom he met in the terrestrial paradise. Throughout this poem the reader is faced with imagery that obviously was derived from Dante, but he is also faced with imagery that may be Dante's or Eliot's.

The allegory in the Inferno was easy to swallow or ignore, because we could, so to speak, grasp the concrete end of it, its solidification into imagery; but as we ascend from Hell to Heaven we are more and more required to grasp the whole from idea to image. 32

And we too are required to grasp the whole from idea to image. This Lady, whom we just met, Eliot advises us, "need not at first bother us..." 33

The three white leopards correspond either to the three beasts in the Inferno, 34 or to the three animals in the Purgatorio. 35 Lust, pride, and covetousness, for which the three beasts stood, have devoured Eliot to his very bones. But although his flesh has no more life, Eliot still has to worry about his bones: What is to become of them; shall God condemn them? No; for this Lady has prayed in his behalf. Meanwhile, he remains humbled; she

... is withdrawn

In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.

Now, this Lady resembles Dante's Beatrice, who appeared to him,

sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva. 36

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32 Eliot, Dante, p. 41. 33 Ibid., p. 47. 34 Inferno, I. 35 Purgatorio, XXXII. 36 Purgatorio XXX, 31.
Whereas Dante became fearful and bewildered when he first perceived Beatrice, Eliot remains enraptured. Dante turned to Vergil, saying,

"Men che dramma
di sangue me'è rimaso che non tremi." 37

Eliot, passive in his emotions, can only pray to her. These two poets have annoyed their Beatrices, Dante by being untrue to her:

questi si tolse a me, e diesi altrui. 38

and Eliot by writing "The Hippopotamus," "Lune de Miel," "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," and others. Now, each awaits his verdict from la Donna.

This section of Ash Wednesday compares with Eliot's comment on the latter cantos of the Purgatorio: "In a way, these cantos are those of the greatest personal intensity in the whole poem." 39 Anyone who reads Canto XXX can understand this statement, for Beatrice's rebuke of Dante creates more of an emotional strain on the reader than any other single passage in the Purgatorio.

Whoever is even slightly familiar with the Purgatorio cannot help but be struck by the similarity of the stairs in section three of Ash Wednesday and the three steps in Canto IX of the Purgatorio. These are the steps that led to Saint Peter's gate, or the door to Purgatory proper. In

37 Ibid., 46-47.
38 Ibid., 126.
39 Eliot, Dante, p. 50.
this section Eliot does not mention the first step, which

bianco marmo era al pulito e terso
ch' io mi specchiasi in esso qual io paio. 40

But the foregoing section of the poem, which emphasizes the word "white," may be taken as the mirror of Eliot's "true likeness."

Dante's second step

Era . . . tinto più che perso,
d'una petrìna ruvida ed asciocia,
crepata per lo lungo e per traverso. 41

Eliot's second stair has two turns. At the first turn he saw

The same shape twisted on the banister
Under the vapour in the fetid air
Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears
The deceitful face of hope and of despair.

Perhaps his vision is that of himself in Hell, in the "fetid air." His struggle with the devil of the stairs could be a struggle with Minos, the judge of the dead, 42 who could well still any hopes of the poet by sentencing him to perpetual torment; and with the angel who holds the keys to Saint Peter's gate. 43 This latter struggle would not be a physical one, for Eliot's only wish is to convince the angel that he, Eliot, is worthy of being admitted; and admission means the beginning of penitence.

At the second turning, Eliot left the devil and his self battling. This second stair

40 Purgatorio IX, 95-96. 41 Ibid., 97-99.
42 Inferno, V. 43 Purgatorio, IX.
Damp, jagged . . . beyond repair

resembles Dante's, which was:

Crepata per lo lungo e per traverso. 44

Dante's third stair was:

. . . che di sopra s'ammassiccia,
porfido mi parea al fiammeggiante,
come sangue che fuor di vena spiccia. 45

Its color might signify Christ's blood, or love; for the blood, when drunk, signalizes a bond between man and Christ.

But here on this third stair of Eliot's, this love of the poet for God is undergoing a severe temptation: When the poet looks out through the "slotted window," he sees glimpses of images that are not conducive to penitence:

The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green
Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.
Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over mouth blown,
Lilac and brown hair;
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the third stair,
Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair Climbing the third stair.

As long as the vision can fade, Eliot can be strong. But he wonders; he still believes that

Lord, I am not worthy.

If the Lord will

but speak the word only

Eliot will deliver himself to Him.

But before the Lord will speak the word, Eliot has much to undergo. In the fourth section of Ash Wednesday we find him addressing his donna

44Ibid., 99. 45Ibid., 100-103.
Who walked between the violet and the violet
Who walked between
The various ranks of varied green

In no small way does she resemble Matilda in Canto XXVIII of the Purgatorio, who also was

una donna soletta che si gia
cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore. 46

Here in this poem, Eliot is beginning to see his arid Waste Land give way to the freshness of a place where his Lady

... made strong the fountains
and made fresh the springs
Made cool the dry rock and
made firm the sand.

Now he has a reason for living a good life, and he wants to be sure that he does what is right:

Sovegna vos

he reminds his Lady, and he might as well have quoted the entire stanza which Arnaut Daniel addressed to Dante and to Vergil:

'Ara vos prec, per aquella valor
que vos guida al som de l'escalina,
sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor.' 47

Eliot has begun the refining process; after entreatting his Sovegna vos

he

Poi s'asconda nel foco che li affina. 48

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46 Purgatorio XXVIII, 40-41.
47 Purgatorio XXVI, 45-47.
48 Ibid., 148.
The past years in Eliot's life have given way to the present,

bearing
Away the fiddles and the flutes.

His Lady listens to him as he urges her to

Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream
While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.

To explain these latter lines, we must turn to the poet himself, who has written of Dante's pageantry: "It belongs to the world of what I call the high dream, and the modern world seems capable only of the low dream. I arrived at accepting it, myself, only with some difficulty."49

In the last verses quoted above, the poet begs his Lady to let him see the "unread vision in the higher dream," for now Eliot has come to accept the "higher dream," as he said.

The unicorns and the hearse can be compared with Dante's vision in Canto XXIX of the Purgatorio. There, the triumphal car (un carro ... triumfale) was drawn up and out of sight by a griffin. Dante, by stating that this car was more splendid than any other one—even Apollo's chariot—perhaps meant to represent the Ideal Church, his persistent ideal, as the triumphal car. If so, then Eliot's last line can now be understood: the modern Church has to be brought by in a hearse (and nothing but a gilded hearse would do); Eliot would like, however, to see the Church saved—the same feeling that Dante, 700 years earlier, had had.

49 Eliot, Dante, p. 48.
In answer to his supplications, Eliot's Lady bent her head and signed but spoke no word. Eliot must not yet be shown the "beatific vision." Not until the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew will he complete his purgation.

And while his soul is in the flames of refinement, the poet begins to wonder about the rest of the world, which is sinful and ill-fated. He cannot understand why it cannot receive the word of God. There are many who shall not be saved, who "walk in darkness" and "among noise and deny the voice": Eliot himself has stepped out of that darkness, and he comments on the condition of the world. Can it be God's fault that others are not converted?

O my people, what have I done unto thee.

Nevertheless, there are those who will not accept God.

Will the veiled sister pray for them? Eliot becomes concerned over the problem of those who appear destined for Hell. Will she pray for those who are now where he perhaps once was, terrified and cannot surrender although they are near conversion? Between those souls and conversion lies the last desert between the last blue rocks.

There is still hope for them, however, for instead of ejecting a fecund apple-seed, which might be the fruit of Eden,
those in that desert are
spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed.

As for Eliot himself, his doubts on his "turning again"
are not as great as they were at the beginning of the poem;
that is, he can "turn again" away from God.

Although I do not hope
but he will not. He has reached the state of wishing for
worldly pleasures—although he does not "wish to wish these
things"—and refusing them. His conscience now bothers him.

(Bless me father)

Yet his attitude toward the world has also changed.
The world is no longer Gerontion's "rented house"; instead,
it might now take on a new aspect: Eliot would want the
"lost sea smell" brought back,

And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth.
But he finds himself in the same earth, alone, at

The place of solitude where three dreams cross.
He has dreamed of the Lady, the Virgin, and Christ. Dante,
too, had dreams in which he also saw Christ,50 the Virgin,51
and the Lady.52

At the end of Ash Wednesday, just as at the end of the
Purgatorio, we are in a terrestrial paradise; Dante had
reached his Beatrice; Eliot has seen his Lady. Dante had
been plunged into Eunoë, had forgotten, therefore, his evil
memories, and was ready to ascend, with his remaining good memories, to Heaven.

Eliot has a more difficult time, for, as we have said, he is now alone. He has no Matilda to dip him into Bunce, nor has he an Eunoe. Instead, he depends on himself and on God:

Our peace in His will

He has even reached into Dante's Paradieso for that peace, but he is justified for feeling that he is in Heaven; for the end of Purgatory signifies the commencement of Paradise. And although Eliot is now alone, he can rely on the "Sister, mother," just as Dante relied on Beatrice, to lead him to the spirit of the river, spirit of the sea.

Once more Eliot reaches into the Paradiso for that spirit. And to the "Sister, mother" he emotionally urges that they Suffer me not to be separated.

And as he prepares for his ascent to Paradise, he prays to God Himself:

And let my cry come unto Thee.

The tone of this poem is Dantesque throughout. It is an ecclesiastical poem, certainly, and a religious work is going to contain religious allusions. One who reads Dante's Purgatorio can hardly find a page that does not have reference to a religious source; and in this way, as in others that we have perceived, Ash Wednesday and the Purgatorio are similar.

53 Paradiso, III. 54 Ibid.
Also, as the *Purgatorio* is an historical account of the penitent phase of Dante's life, *Ash Wednesday* is an historical account of the purgatorial phase of Eliot's life. We have observed that during the period that Eliot was writing this work, many incidents, among which we may rank his conversion to the Anglo-Catholic Church as the most important, manifested changes in his personal beliefs. That these changes correspond to the thought behind *Ash Wednesday* and *The Rock* is perhaps not coincidental, anymore than are the *Purgatorio's* accounts coincidental with the events which took place in Dante's life during the years that he abandoned his "worldly" life of studying philosophy and concentrated, instead, on reaching his Paradise.

Having recognized his error and returned to the right way, Dante Alighieri wished to exhibit, "for the good of the world that evil lives," not only in his ecstatic visions . . . but also in himself, an example of a fallen man, who, illuminated by the sun of divine light and aided by heavenly grace, rises from his fall, and resumes the true path which he had formerly abandoned.55

And thus the *Purgatorio* was born.

Eliot, perhaps not having a "true path which he had formerly abandoned," and the quality of his sincerity in conversion notwithstanding, nevertheless has taken it upon himself to manifest his soul as a soul that has just seen a "beatific vision," and which will do everything in its power to make itself worthy, not merely of a terrestrial paradise, but of a Heavenly Paradise; hence the composition of the

poem Ash Wednesday began the pious recantation of a man who was not satisfied until he became saturated, and until he saturated his audience, with theological compositions which, he hoped, would allow him and that audience to reach beyond that coveted Heavenly region comprised of Dante's Nine Angelic Circles; and which would allow them to hear the Word, which, hitherto, to Eliot, had been unspoken.
CHAPTER IV

PARADISO

A quella luce cotal si diventa,
che volgersi da lei per altro aspetto
è impossibil che mai si consenta.
Paradiso XXXIII, 100-103.

After the reader has finished the Inferno, he looks forward to the Purgatorio; but when he nears the end of the latter work, he wonders whether he wants to read the next volume, the Paradiso. In the closing cantos of the Purgatorio, Dante’s heretofore rapidly moving story begins rallentando; the subject matter, once exciting, becomes weighty and abstract. The reader loses interest, and he may not even finish his perusal of The Divine Comedy.

Similarly, one who has begun studying Eliot with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" finds that when he comes to the Ariel Poems there is a definite change in the tone of Eliot’s poetry. What had previously been concerned with sin and salvation is now occupied with the search for a Christian paradise; and, as in the case of Dante, Eliot has failed to retain his once-tenacious hold on his reader. The manner by which both poets approach their themes cannot help but be trying to the reader.
These two poets, however, are not the only ones whose Paradise is neglected: Milton's poetry of Hell in the first two books of *Paradise Lost* is more popular than the poetry of the later books in which the scene is laid in Heaven; Racine's *Andromaque*, which could not be called an ecclesiastical work, arrests the reader more than does his ostensible tone of religion in *Esther*. To these two examples we could add other names, but these will suffice for now.

Evidently, then, the Paradise of the Christian religion provides the author with rather dull material; for, as religions go, the Christian Paradise is a solemn, dignified place. In order to make my point clear, I include a brief discussion of Paradise in comparative civilizations.

The most outstanding characteristic of heaven in many religions is its coarseness, simplicity, and candor. In Babylonian literature no reference is made "anywhere to a paradisiacal abode of bliss for the privileged souls of the good. The thought of retribution, or of a judgement in the hereafter ... did not occur to the ancient Semitic mind."¹

We note in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* that the soul merged into Osiris, the ancient god,

... to obtain salvation and be admitted into the fields of Alu (the "Elysian Fields"), where a life without pain or death, an abundant harvest, with six-ells-high stalks of corn under an eternal sunshine and mild zephyr winds, await the blessed toiler.²

²Ibid., p. 19.
The Hindus

... looked up to their gods in heaven as ideal men, hoping to participate in their feasting and drinking on departing hence. ... In his third heaven, Yama sat under a beautiful tree, surrounded by the gods and the fathers ... quaffing the heavenly Soma sap, while streams of milk and honey were flowing in abundance round about. Sensual pleasures, including those of sex, prevailed.  

The Mohammedan Koran depicts Paradise as a region with

... seven compartments, each with a different name, all built up of gold and silver and precious stones. There are also the four rivers, one of pure water ... the other of milk, the third of wine, and the fourth of honey. To these were later on added streams of various spices to be mixed with the water. Black-eyed maidens of perennial virginity ... play a prominent role in the sensuous system of Mohammedan eschatology, alongside of the wives and beautiful youths who serve the faithful sitting under shady trees or reclining on their costly couches in Paradise.  

Compared to the above description of Mohammedan bliss, the Persian Paradise seems mild. Those who arrive at the Zoroastrian Paradise

... are given the food of immortality, consisting of the marrow of the primeval ox, slain by Soashish (the savior) and his helpers in the work of resurrection, fifteen men and women of the immortals, and likewise the drink of immortality, prepared out of the heavenly Soma from the tree of life.  

And the Greek Elysium is well known; there, "... life is easiest for man. No snow falls there, nor any
violent storm, nor rain at any time; but Ocean ever sends forth the clear . . . West wind to refresh mankind. . . ."6

Even the Happy Hunting Ground of the American Indian . . . is only a distant part of this world, which is better than the tribal territory, and in which the departed continue to live in a state of absolutely material comfort and happiness, exempt from all present anxieties, and, so to say, without a thought for the morrow.7

These religions which I have mentioned belong to people whose minds are not temperamentally akin to the Anglo-Saxon mind. But even the Teutonic Paradise, Valhalla, remained essentially different from the Christian Paradise. Valhalla was a warrior's paradise; there the men existed only to eat, drink, and amuse themselves with personal combat.

If we observe the development of the religions briefly outlined above and compare their heavens with the Christian Heaven (as depicted in the Commedia of Dante, for example), we notice that the complexity in the composition of those heavens reaches its pinnacle in the Christian. Hence the difficulty of the reader to grasp readily the poets' messages in the Paradiso and in the Four Quartets.

Too, another obstacle confronts Eliot's and Dante's reader: language. Paradise, as an ultra-mundane region, immediately becomes inaccessible to the senses of ordinary man. Yet poets need words to communicate with their reader, even if those words cannot fully express the poet's true sentiment. Eliot understands this problem when he writes:

6Hastings, op. cit.  
7Ibid., p. 694.
But certainly the "difficult passages" in the *Paradiso* are Dante's difficulties rather than ours; his difficulty in making us apprehend sensuously the various states and stages of blessedness. Thus the long oration of Beatrice about the Will (Canto IV) is really directed at making us feel the reality of the condition of Piccarda; Dante has to educate our senses as he goes along. The insistence throughout is upon states of feeling; the reasoning takes only its proper place as a means of reaching these states.8

Thus, of necessity, Dante, in order to describe to or to permeate the reader with a concept of an ethereal paradise, employs allegory, imagery—but he still has to use words—and "the whole difficulty is in admitting that this is something that we are meant to feel, not merely decorative verbiage."9

Eliot has the same difficulty with the reader. He

... has understood that in an explicit declaration of faith today, a sort of rhetoric, no matter how exalted, inevitably insinuates itself; and to this Eliot has preferred, once again, the humble experience of search and anguish, at least within the ambit of his poetry—which does not prophesy a negation of faith in him.10

This style that Eliot must employ, although rhetorical, retains a simplicity common to Christian writings, including *The Divine Comedy*; that is, simplicity of diction, not necessarily simplicity of tone or thought.

We see the agony of personal uncertainty, of diffidence, of almost crushing humility, still present in his work. But how different in effect and expression from that malaise of his youth. Now it leads him to purer and purer candour in his work, instead of to a

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8 T. S. Eliot, *Dante*, p. 52.  
9 Ibid., p. 53.  
camouflage of book-knowledge and picturesque bitterness.\textsuperscript{11}

For Eliot has now reached the same state in which Dante found himself:

\begin{quote}
\ldots in the third period of his life, he is the man whom the truth hath made free, the man of faith, whose faith, however, is no longer the simple belief of the boy, or of the man who, unversed in study, has neither examined, nor can examine, the grounds of his faith, but an enlightened faith, based not merely upon authority, but upon proofs physical, metaphysical, and historical. He has attained that internal freedom which he has been seeking,—such freedom as in his age was possible.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

How those words echo those of a modern Italian who has written that in Eliot\textsuperscript{13} \ldots there is, without doubt, an ascetic, consecrated to a religion and to its appropriate ritual.\textsuperscript{13} And, as if paraphrasing the last three lines of Scartazzini's statement quoted above, this Italian remarks: "Eliot reminded me that, for us moderns, one must speak of a desire to attain faith rather than its possession."\textsuperscript{14}

That these two poets sought faith in their "third period" of life (we have witnessed Eliot's two other phases) seems a strange, yet natural, event: Each was in exile, his hopes of ever returning to his native land—a land which was not the ideal political place that each hoped it could be—all but shattered; but from these moments of personal

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13]Pellegrini, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 290. \item[14]Ibid., p. 289.
\end{footnotes}
despair arose the desire to attain faith, for that was all
that remained to them.

Eliot's whole life has been a flight from his native
St. Louis, Missouri. He has gone far, and doubtless
if he survives Massey, he will be the next English
Laureate. In America he is so enshrouded with nebulous
divinity that people are shocked, as by blasphemy, at
anything said against him. This is occasioned not so
much by his writings as by the awe for a man who man-
aged to get contemporary America out of his system,
an aspiration of many new poets and critics.15

Most of Dante's life, too, was spent in exile; he wan-
dered through different parts of Italy, "with apparently no
other hope than finally to overcome the cruelty of his
fellow-citizens by the productions of his lofty genius."16

In fact, when the poet was finally told, as an exile,
that he could return to his native city, he refused, not
wanting "to submit to degradation."17 This refusal was a
difficult one for him to make, but he was firm, and he spent
his remaining years of life at Ravenna, where he died.

Eliot, very much alive in his London, also refused to
return to America, except for those times when he could re-
turn as a visiting "dignitary." Then he took advantage of
a few invitations; he would return, apparently as shy as
ever, and bombard his ex-countrymen with his views on
poetry, criticism, and religion. He too was seeking to
overcome his anomalous position "by the productions of his

15 Robert Hillyer, "Treason's Strange Fruit," The Saturday
16 Scartazzini, op. cit., p. 122. 17 Ibid., p. 123.
lofty genius," a phrase whose verisimilitude is still avidly debated today.

In 1936 a piece written by Eliot entitled Burnt Norton appeared. This poem was to be the first of four, together called the Four Quartets. Just as Dante's poetry in the Commedia consisted of cantos, which were to be sung, Eliot retains the musical idea throughout his poetry, even employing, as we shall later see, a Dantesque stanza in one of his poems. Although Eliot's poems are not to be sung, they are to be played: Prelude, "Five-finger Exercises," and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." There is music in his poetry, especially in the Four Quartets; Dante's most musical moments occur in the Paradiso.

There is much in Burnt Norton that reminds the reader of Dante. From the first few lines we are entering a state of speculation--philosophical, perhaps, but more likely theological. Eliot has released himself from the introspection with which he was concerned in Ash Wednesday; now he becomes teleological, undertaking a Dantesque search for the blessed vision: "... the Paradiso is largely dogmatic, with a constant urge to become visionary and lyrical."18

Often that dogma becomes a burden on the reader. Dante's method of ascending to Paradise by using stars as

stepping stones drew this comment from Santayana:

Such a constant dragging in of astronomical lore may seem to us puerile or pedantic; but for Dante the astronomical situation had the charm of a landscape, literally full of the most wonderful lights and shadows; and it had also the charm of a hard-won discovery that unveiled the secrets of nature. To think straight, to see things as they are or as they might naturally be, interested him more than to fancy things impossible; and in this he shows not want of imagination, but true imaginative power and imaginative maturity... In Dante the fancy is not empty or arbitrary; it is serious, fed on the study of real things.

Eliot already had Dante as model; all he needed to do was to avoid much of the ponderous material. And he succeeded remarkably well, for he knew, as he said, that a Paradise could be insipid by virtue of being meaningless: "... the Paradiso is never dry, it is either incomprehensible or intensely exciting." Eliot evidently found it exciting, and wanted his readers to feel that way about his own Paradiso.

When one reads Burnt Norton he feels that Eliot wrote it as a complete poem, not as part of the Quartets. Compared with the form of the Paradiso, Burnt Norton exhibits the ascent and the vision—but not in their fulness: the reader feels that the ascent lacks an ascent: before he realizes it he is in the vicinity of the rose-garden, the same garden that Beatrice pointed out to Dante:

19 Ibid., p. 158.
20 Eliot, Dante, p. 50.
'Perché la faccia mia sì t' innamora, che tu non ti rivolgi al bel giardino che sotto i raggi di Cristo s' infiora?' 21

And the vision is only insinuated; all that we can catch is a coup d'oeil, for we are not yet at the Empyrean, which contains
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle. 22

Nevertheless, we are aware of the Empyrean, which is

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered.

Perhaps this gathering place explains Eliot's belief that

Time past and time future What might have been and what has been Point to one end, which is always present.

Or, as Dante was told by Benedict:

'Frate, il tuo alto disio s'adempierè in su l'ultima spera, ove s'adempion tutti li altri e 'l mio. Ivi è perfetta, matura ed intera ciascuna distanza; in quella sola è ogni parte là ove sempr'era, perche non è in loco, e non s'impola.' 23

We, then, are still in a spiritual, if not physical ascent.

Shall we follow?

We do, and we perceive a pool
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,

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21 Alighieri, op. cit., Paradiso, Vol. III, Canto XXIII, 70-72. All subsequent quotations from the Paradiso will emanate from this volume; only the canto and line numbers will be given.

22 Paradiso XXX, 145.  
23 Paradiso XXII, 61-67.
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

This pool reminds us of the river of light which Dante described.

E vidi lume in forma di rivera
fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive
dipinte di mirabil primavera.\textsuperscript{24}

Then the ascent is continued until we look

Below, the boarhound and boar
Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among the stars.

Dante, from time to time, looked below at places he had already by-passed. He realized that he was travelling upwards, for he could see the earth below him.\textsuperscript{25}

Throughout the \textit{Four Quartets}, Eliot, as Dante, has knowledge of, but cannot yet see, the blessed vision. Dante was prepared little by little for that blessed vision by several personages whom he and Beatrice met on their way up; so that when he reached the Empyrean he was conditioned, mentally and physically, to perceive God. The dance "in the still point" that Eliot speaks of was mentioned by Dante.

This dance

prima cominciato in li altri Serafini;\textsuperscript{26}
but where that dance originated has not yet been visited by Eliot;

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Paradiso} XXX, 61-63.
\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Paradiso}, XXII.
\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Paradiso}, VIII.
I can only say, there we have been;  
but I cannot say where.

And since the dance emanates from the still point,

I cannot say, how long,  
for that is to place it in time.

Eliot realizes that devout contemplation and selfish  
ideas are not compatible: self-negation and that contempla-  
tion are requisites to attaining the blessed state:  

The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering,  
release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,  
Erhebung without motion, concentration  
Without elimination, both a new world  
And the old made explicit, understood  
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,  
The resolution of its partial horror.

Dante's views of the same virtues can be examined by a read-  
ing of Canto XXI, where the contemplatives reside in the  

Sphere of Saturn.  

In section III of Burnt Norton Eliot ponders the  
other-worldliness, as did Dante.  

Here is a place of disaffection  
Time before and time after  
In a dim light.  

No longer is there  

... a white light still and moving  

that we saw earlier: it has now dimmed. We need to  

Descend lower, descend only  
Into the world of perpetual solitude  
World not world, but that which is not world.  

We need  

Internal darkness, deprivation  
And destitution of all property,  
Dessication of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,  
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;  
This is the one way, and the other  
Is the same, not in movement  
But in abstention from movement; while the world moves  
In appetancy, on its metalled ways  
Of time past and time future.

Then we see a glimpse of the light after  
The black cloud carries the sun away.  
We are not completely under  
che non si turba mai.27 . . . dal sereno

Now Eliot comments on  
. . . that which is only living  
Can only die.

But what cannot die must always have been:  
Or say that the end precedes the beginning,  
And the end and the beginning were always there  
Before the beginning and after the end.  
And all is always now.

Beatrice told Dante virtually the same thing:  
ché nè prima nè poscia procedette  
lo discorrer di Dio sovra quest'acque.28

But Eliot is not satisfied with his message; he finds  
it difficult to express his feelings:  
. . . words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

Yet he must use words to tell us that  
Desire itself is movement  
Not in itself desirable;

27 Paradiso XIX, 64-65.  
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement.

Which especially applies to Dante's idea of the

... slow rotation of suggestive permanence

that Eliot mentions in section III of *Burnt Norton*.

Then

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
Quick now, here, now, always.

Eliot has a brief glance of the Incarnation: Dante said,

Cosi fu fatta gia la terra degna
di tutta l'animal perfezione;
cosi fu fatta la Vergine prege:
si ch'io commendo tua opinione,
che l'umana natura mai non fue
ne fia qual fu in quelle due persone.29

And Eliot agrees that

Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.

Therefore, to return to the beginning of *Burnt Norton*,

All time is unredeemable.

That the form of the *Four Quartets* does not all the
time resemble that of the *Paradiso* becomes immediately evi-
dent after one finishes *Burnt Norton*. To say that the lat-
ter embodies Dantesque philosophy throughout, by virtue of
the similarity in imagery and tone, would be glib, perhaps;
nevertheless, the ultimate goal is manifestly coincidental.
Symbolically, there is always a difference between the two
poets with regard to the means by which each man expresses
his symbols: Dante's symbols, although numerous and varied,
contain a typically Dantesque naiveté; Eliot, on the other
hand, retains the subtlety he displayed in his earlier
works, although now his imagery does not encompass the vast
literary ancestry that it displayed intrinsically in those
works. Otherwise, there is little difference between the
symbolism of the two poets. And unless one reads Eliot's
Quartets in conjunction with the Paradiso, he cannot per-
ceive their close relationship.

Eliot has commented several times that many critics
credit him with a certain meaning hidden within his poetry,
when actually he meant nothing of the sort. However, with
rare exceptions—and perhaps even some of these exceptions
have not been preserved in writing—Eliot himself has re-
mained singularly non-committal concerning the meaning behind
his poetry. Therefore, critics have no alternative but to
form their own ideas and hope that they are not far from the
original meanings.

John M. Bradbury, in his article on the Quartets,
writes that

... the Quartets, while making some use of both the
Inferno and the Purgatorio, derive their chief Dantesian
images from the Paradiso. (There is a sort of Divine
Comedy in the last three phases of Eliot's work; but
the chief theme of the Quartets, despite its final
glimpse of Paradise, is still purgatorial.)

Perhaps Bradbury's comment can be justified in view of the
fact that, in my opinion, Dante's Paradiso, until the final

30 John M. Bradbury, "Four Quartets: The Structural
vision, constitutes, in a sense, an extension of the
Purgatorio. In my reading of the Paradiso, I felt that,
except for the locale, Dante was still among the most for-
tunate of the penitents, who, when their sins were absolved,
would also perceive God. In the Purgatorio we were ascend-
ing; in the Paradiso we are also concerned with ascent, and
it is not until the final canto that Dante himself experi-
enced his vision. And even then it was, as is Eliot's
vision in the Quartets, a glimpse—

Un punto solo. . .31

Bradbury further states that "the organization of the
Quartets, however, is not in terms of images from Dante;
only the symbolic resolution is Dantean."32 As I have al-
ready pointed out, the form, or organization, of the Quartets
has no resemblance to that of the Paradiso, as the Purgatorio
had no resemblance to the structure of Ash Wednesday. Yet,
let us consider an interesting point.

Dante's ascent, according to the Paradiso, consisted of
these stages: After his wanderings through the planets, in-
cluding the sun and the moon, that revolved around the
earth, he passed upward to the fixed stars; thence he entered
the Crystalline, or Primum Mobile; and finally he found him-
self in the Empyrean. There, then, are four separate and
distinct areas, each containing its own particular meaning,
yet retaining a liaison with each other. Perhaps it is not

31Purgatorio XXXIII, 94. 32Bradbury, op. cit., p. 256.
a coincidence that we are comparing the *Paradiso* with the *Four Quartets*.

To return to the *Quartets*, we find that at the end of *Burnt Norton* we left Eliot in a lofty position. In the next poem, *East Coker*, he is occupied with humility as a means of wisdom, divine wisdom. He descends to a mundane atmosphere, where

In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.

To the poet, everything changes; nothing changes:
everything is born; nothing is born; everything dies; nothing dies:

In my beginning is my end.

This poem is "in time";

Now the light falls
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,

and

If you do not come too close,
if you do not come too close,
On a Summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire.

The two above quotations strongly remind one of a passage in the *Paradiso*, which, although too long to present here, depicted a field upon which the sun's rays fell, and in which there was sweet heavenly music.  

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33 *Paradiso* XXIII, 79-102.
were now in the second phase of their ascent; the light represented the Divine light and the music the heavenly music that Dante heard again later, after he had come nearer the Empyrean.

In the second section of *East Coker*, Eliot realizes that knowledge by experience is unsatisfactory. His ancestors and their ancestors were disillusioned, and, consequently, disillusioned their posterity: By simply growing old, a person can attain neither peace nor wisdom; for he will surely end up

In the middle, not only in the middle of the way
But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
not in the rose-garden; The difference between Dante's

Nel mezzo del cammin

and

per una selva oscura

and that of Eliot's

. . . moment in the rose-garden
lies in wisdom. And

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility; humility is endless.

However, along with that humility, the poet feels the need of Dante's faith, hope, and love—although in section III Eliot rearranges their order. To him they must come thus:

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

In Cantos XXIV, XXV, and XXVI of the Paradiso, Dante was examined by St. Peter, St. James, and St. John, on faith, hope, and love, respectively. After he had answered every question, he was allowed to proceed to the next step, the Crystalline, from which he later ascended to the blessed region of the Empyrean. These examinations occurred in the second phase of Dante's ascent; we are now dealing with the second of the four Quartets.

Eliot, however, does not yet feel ready to mount; he tells himself to

Wait without thought,   
for you are not ready for thought;   
So the darkness shall be the light   
and the stillness the dancing.

Section IV of East Coker is concerned with Adam and with salvation. In the Paradiso, Adam spoke to Dante after the latter had passed the examinations we have already mentioned. Here, in Eliot's poem, we are living in an earth

Endowed by the ruined millionaire,   
Wherein, if we do well, we shall   
Die of the absolute paternal care   
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.

Here we are aware of an ironic Eliot, the Eliot of "Prufrock" and "The Hippopotamus." But his irony appears justified:

If I be warmed, then I must freeze   
And quake in frigid purgatorial fires   
Of which the flame is roses, and the smoke is briars.

(We should not forget those in the frigid regions of the Inferno, Canto XXXII, who, as traitors to their countries,

36Paradiso, XXVI.
were frozen forever.)

The dripping blood our only drink,
The bloody flesh our only food:
In spite of which we like to think
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

Only by accepting Christ and Mary will the poet be able to reach the highest celestial regions.

The last section of *East Coker* finds the poet pondering this problem: Poets have endeavored to transmit their feelings by the use of words, but the attempt has been, on the whole, unsuccessful. To depict Paradise through diction proved difficult even for Dante and Milton, although Eliot believes that they did not fail:

By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men
Whom one cannot hope to emulate—but there is no competition—there is only the fight to recover what has been lost and found and lost again and again;
And now under conditions that seem unpropitious.
But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying.
The rest is not our business.

Concluding *East Coker*, Eliot remarks that

Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.

This is Dante's love—Dante who sought the Eternal Light in order that he might know that after death there was a better life for which he could now prepare himself. Eliot announces the same idea when he realizes that

In my end is my beginning.

We now have the converse of the beginning lines of this
poem. Wallace Fowlie, writing of the significance of Eliot's usage of first

Dans mon commencement est ma fin

then

Dans ma fin est mon commencement

states that

"Le commencement d'une vie humaine est déjà un ache- 
minement vers la fin de cette vie; et par son dernier 
vers, il constate le paradoxe spirituel de l'homme: 
la fin de la vie terrestre marque le vrai commencement, 
celui de l'autre réalité."37

It is time to pass into the Crystalline, which is 

"sometimes called the Primum Mobile because it is the first 
moved of all the spheres. . . ."38 And the Crystalline

. . . is under the immediate influence of the Empyrean, 
that influence operating through its controlling order 
of angels, the Seraphim, the spirit of love, the 
highest of the angelic orders. The infinite speed ex- 
presses the desire of all its parts to be in contact 
with the Empyrean, and its motion is distributed to the 
lower spheres, by whose motions time is measured and 
given to the world.39

In The Dry Salvages there is the feeling of movement. 
The river manifests an excellent example of a Crystalline, 
for, as Dante's Crystalline distributed the motions by which 
time was returned to us after it had been measured,

The river is within us, the sea is all about us. 
Dante's sea--the Empyrean--was all about him; it was a 
motionless Empyrean, yet it moved.

37 Quoted in R. J. Schoeck, "T. S. Eliot, Mary Queen of 
Scots, and Guillaume de Machant," Modern Language Notes, 
LXIII (March, 1948), 187-188.

The tolling bell
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers.

This reminds us of the description of the Empyrean and the
Crystalline quoted above. Here we are made aware of what
Dante described.

E non io mi rivolsi e furon tocchi
li miei da ciò che pare in quel volume,
quandunque nel suo giro ben s'adocchi,
un punto vidi che raggiava lume.40

In this phase of the ascent, Dante was prepared for the
next step. Eliot, too, remembers Krishna's admonition,
which could well be applied to the poet as he stands at the
threshold of Paradise:

"You who come to port, and you whose bodies
Will suffer the trial and judgement of the sea,
Or whatever event, this is your destination."

And this is truly the end of the beginning and the beginning
of the end; therefore,

But fare well, voyagers.

Then, as St. Bernard prayed to the Virgin Mother in the
last canto of the Paradiso, the poet here beseeches his Lady,

Figlia del tuo figlio,
Queen of Heaven.

The poet can visualize his ascent to the Empyrean, but he
remembers those who were

... in the dark throat which will not reject them
Or wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell's
Perpetual angelus.

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40Paradiso XXVIII, 13-16.
This supplication reminds one of what St. Bernard said:

Or questi, che dall' infima lacuna
dall'universo infin qui ha vedute
le vite spiritali ad una ad una,
supplica a te, per grazia, di vertute
tanto, che possa con li occhi levarsi
più alto verso l'ultima salute.41

Here, there is a personal appeal: Bernard talks specifically of Dante and asks for his salvation; Eliot includes everyone, not just himself.

All at once the tempo of The Dry Salvages quickens; the fifth section rapidly concludes the poem on the note that despite man's search for a moment in God's presence, only the saints remain capable of capturing that wish: St. Bernard, St. James, St. Peter, St. John, and others who are in the Empyrean. For man,

Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
Only in this way are the past and future of Burnt Norton

... conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement--

which corresponds to Dante's answer to St. Peter, when the latter asked the poet to speak on faith:

È io rispondo: Io credo in uno Dio
solo ed eterno, che tutto il cial move,
non moto, con amore e con disio.42

Thus, concludes Eliot

... right action is freedom
From past and future also.

For most of us, this is the aim
Never here to be realised;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying;
We, content at the last
If our temporal reversion nourish
(Not too far from the yew-tree)
The life of significant soil.

From this state of humility we approach the end of the journey—at least we are in the very region of the blessed. To Dante, there appeared a ray of light, from whose keenness

... i' sarei smarrito,
se li occhi miei da lui fossero aversi.43

Eliot’s light in Little Gidding was

A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.

This is the prelude to the moment out of time, which, after having been experienced, can barely be described:

And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfillment.

Dante uttered

O quanto è corto il dire e come fiocco
al mio concetto!44

This state in which Eliot finds himself serves one purpose:

You are here to kneel

Where prayer has been valid.

And, reminiscent of the scenes in the Paradiso wherein Dante was spoken to by the heavenly spirits, Eliot describes his

43 Paradiso XXXIII, 77-78. 44 Ibid., 121-122.
Heaven, a place for the dead; but

... what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead; the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire
beyond the language of the living.

Then, in section II of *Little Gidding*, we encounter the
most Dantesque of all Eliot's poetry. The poet tells—much
in the same way that Dante so often described his meetings
with personages in the *Commedia*—in frankly Dantesque cantos,
without the *terza rima*, of his meeting with a stranger, who
had the appearance of

... some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled.

This episode evokes memories of another meeting—-that
of Dante and his teacher, Bruno Latini, in the *Inferno*.45
And as one peruses the incident carefully, a feeling that
this meeting again involves Dante, the stranger, permeates
the reader's mind. However, the other figure is not Latini,
but Eliot. The latter takes fitting opportunity to praise
his master, his life-long inspiration, and his epitome of
all great poetry and poets. Eliot has Dante comment post-
humously on the events concerning the Italian since the time
of his death in obscurity:

'So I find words I never thought to speak
In streets I never thought I should revisit
When I left my body on a distant shore.'

Dante was a student of language; the *Commedia*, as a
major literary work, should have been written in Latin, the

literary language of Dante's time; but Dante tells Eliot,

'... our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe.'

And as a student of theology, he also wanted to

'... urge the mind to aftersight and foresight.'

In the latter stanzas, Dante relates his feelings for
the way in which he was treated, and for the way in which he
misinterpreted his fellow men,

'... 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.'

And he concludes by advocating that

'From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.'

Then he left Eliot

'... with a kind of valediction,
And faded on the blowing of the horn.

Alone, the poet resumes his meditations;

All shall be well, and
All manner of thing shall be well.

Eliot is beginning to feel the effects of Dante's

E'n la sua volontade è nostra pace.46

For now he believes that

All manner of thing shall be well
By the purification of the motive
In the ground of our beseeching.

But in addition to beseeching only,

The only hope, or else despair.

46Paradiso III, 85.
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre--
To be redeemed from fire by fire.
And redemption, this man has learned, is torment. But it is a justifiable torment:

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.
We can live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

Thus at the conclusion of Little Gidding we find the poet looking back to Burnt Norton and realizing that

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

And, as Dante also experienced,
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
Are of equal duration.

Then comes the admission that

With the drawing of this love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

For the end is the beginning, and the beginning is the end.

But now the poet becomes attentive;

Quick now, here, now, always--

He, as Dante, had his vision only momentarily.

He thinks he sees it for a moment, and in a moment it is lost as if in the lapse of ages... So passing and so indubitable, so intangible and so real, so apart from all the experience of the world we know and so profoundly significant for it, was this moment of
revelation, the impact of another world on this, the awakening of a new life. 47

This was written of Dante, but it could also have been said of Eliot.

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing 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's once-independent will now has taken on the passiveness of one who has had a vision— an act not uncommon even in this day—and has believed. Essentially, Eliot feels as Dante did when the latter experienced his miracle:

ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,
al come rota ch'iguaiamente è mossa,
l'amor che move il sole e l'altra stelle. 48

And what one commentator wrote concerning Dante's final vision may well apply to Eliot:

It should be noted, for it is fundamental in Dante, that, while his pilgrimage ends in rapture, it is not mere rapture, but, expressly, a vision which controls his desire and will, a final persuasion to an inward and complete obedience, the fulfilment of Bernard's prayer for him that his affections may be kept pure and his human impulses guarded from above. 49

The end of the long and difficult road to the stars has been attained by Eliot; and with the end of Little Gidding, he wrote his last poem: since the end of the Four Quartets, Eliot has been occupied with writing plays and essays. Interestingly enough, the last canto of the Paradiso marked the end of Dante's literary career.

47 Paradiso, p. 490. 48 Paradiso XXXIII, 143-145.

49 Paradiso, p. 491.
That there is a resemblance between Dante's *Paradiso* and the *Four Quartets* may continue to be debated. But I feel that, taken in sequence, the poems comprising this latter *opus* bear a strong influence from the Italian's work; and, certainly, we have read Eliot's statements which manifest his attitude for Dante and for his works, those statements showing up most clearly in Eliot's poetry, where we can perceive the extended influence.

It was not my endeavor to do a line-by-line explication of the *Quartets*; I have omitted, therefore, some lines in several of the sections of each poem. I did not feel that such a thorough inspection was requisite for an understanding of the similarity between Eliot's and Dante's imagery and purpose of them. At the same time, one cannot be fair to a poet by wrenching (arrachant is a better word) a line or phrase of his poem from its context; and I regret that such a practice was the only practical way of approaching my task. I hope that my omissions are not construed as a means by which I might distort a poem or passage in order that it conform to my intent; for a careful study of Eliot's *Quartets* in relation to the *Paradiso* reveals a similarity in subject, tone, and imagery; a similarity more marked when seen in relation to the life of Dante and the life of Eliot.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

I am not sure that we can enjoy a man's poetry while leaving wholly out of account all the things for which he cared deeply, and on behalf of which he turned his poetry into account.

T. S. Eliot.

At the beginning of this thesis, I mentioned that critics warned against reading Eliot's life into his poetical works; yet we must realize that many of these critics have not given reasons why Eliot's poems should not be considered as autobiographical. We have observed that because the poet was an exile, much was said against him that was brought about by the manner in which he left his country.

Memories of Ezra Pound and his Fascist propaganda made American critics step lightly when they wrote of Pound's protege. As a result, criticism of Eliot became perhaps a bit more hostile than it otherwise might have been; criticism of his poetry suffered accordingly. On the other hand, other critics remained loyal and even servile to their chef; they wrote, as we have read, more favorable criticism than unfavorable; they ignored or subordinated his political, cultural, and moral inclinations, interpreting his poetry as impersonal.
Also, critics have often failed to acknowledge, or sometimes even failed to see, the great debt that Eliot owes to Dante. Critics felt that the poetry was either Eliot's own, or that he borrowed it from someone else; Eliot's personality, so to speak, seldom entered into the poetical analysis. Certainly there have been many writers and many literary works that influenced the style of Eliot, and served as inspiration for his poems; witness the epigraphs that accompany many of his poems. Yet Eliot always returns to Dante for his greatest ideas.

I believe that Eliot's greatest contributions to his generation are his applications of Dante's greatest poem to modern man and to the modern world. Of course, Pound bettered Dante's literary position among contemporary writers; but Eliot explored the Commedia and found it inspiring. It has been, I believe, an important influence on his personal life. Also, he wrote a revealing essay interpreting the Commedia, and a study of this essay is, I believe, a primary requisite to any reading and interpretation of Eliot's poetry.

In the essay Eliot says, "In my own experience of the appreciation of poetry I have always found that the less I knew about the poet and his work, before I began to read it, the better."έ Keeping in mind that this essay on Dante was composed between the time that Eliot became an anglo-catholic (1927) and the time that it was published (1930), we realize

1T. S. Eliot, Dante, p. 15.
that by 1930 Eliot, after several readings of the Commedia, and with some acquaintance with the life of Dante, had received the full impact of Dante's great moral lesson,

E'n la sua volontade è nostra pace.

Throughout the years before 1927, Eliot was undoubtedly being influenced by Dante, for Eliot wrote, "I have found no other poet than Dante to whom I could apply continually, for many purposes, and with much profit, during a familiarity of twenty years." ²

We are now aware that for Eliot The Divine Comedy was not only an important literary source, but also a spiritual source. Biographical similarities in the lives of the two poets are stringent; one can hardly describe a passage in Eliot's poetry without returning in some part of the Comedy to a passage containing similar ideas. Gradually, Eliot has developed his poetry into a sort of Divine Comedy, the three sections of which have already been described in Chapters two, three, and four of this thesis.

Of the many books and essays written about the poems of Eliot, I could find none that thoroughly investigated the Dante-Eliot relationship. This lack of recognition may be due to lack of familiarity on the part of the authors with The Divine Comedy and the facts of Dante's life. All, or nearly all, of the authors recognized the need to peruse The Dark Night of the Soul, From Ritual to Romance, and

²Ibid., p. 11.
The Golden Bough; they advocated reading Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Beaumont and Fletcher. There is no denying that these works and authors are important as sources, but to read through the whole of Eliot's poems without a concurrent reading of The Divine Comedy is to lose the over-all effect created by the juxtaposition of the two men's lives, and by reading the poems of Eliot in the shadow of the Divine Comedy. In order to understand Eliot's poetry, one must follow his instructions concerning our understanding of Dante: "The vital matter is that Dante's poem is a whole; that you must in the end come to understand every part in order to understand any part." Dividing Eliot's poems, as I have done, one becomes aware of the incompleteness of each section when it is read by itself; of the coherence of the sections when they are read as a whole.

Looking backward, we remember having first met Eliot when his attitude toward man and his world was one of scorn and disdain; "Prufrock," "Gerontion," and The Waste Land manifested his feelings toward his fellow men, while another poem, "The Hippopotamus," smirked at the Church. This part of his life caused him to search for a foundation, not a human foundation but a spiritual one.

When we next met him, Eliot was a changed man: his religious position, once agnostic, if not antagonistic, now became strongly anglo-catholic; his literary tendencies,

3Ibid., p. 43.
once sarcastically critical, became mildly penitent. His *Ash Wednesday* depicted a man who now shuddered at the life that he had formerly been living; and the poem manifested Eliot's search for forgiveness.

Although up to now we have been primarily concerned with his poetical achievements, we know that Eliot has utilized his abilities as critic and playwright to present his ideas to the public. Just as over 500 years ago Dante became a spokesman for his Church, Eliot too has found a niche for himself in the edifice of the Anglican Church. Since the *Ariel Poems*, he has devoted his writings to religious causes. The *Rock and Murder in the Cathedral* served as excellent vehicles through which Eliot began his sermons; his later plays continue his preaching; drama has already proved for him a literary genre inferior to poetry.

After his conversion, Eliot became occupied with matters dealing with Paradise. Dante's *Paradiso* urged him on until he composed the *Four Quartets*, a fitting end to a remarkable poetical career. No longer are we reading the works of a man whose only concern is with sin or with personal salvation; we are now *vis-à-vis* with an apostle, as true an apostle as Dante was in the *Paradiso*. The last section of *Little Gidding* clearly exhibits what Eliot means when he says that nowhere else in poetry but in the last canto of the *Paradiso* "has experience so remote from an
ordinary human experience been expressed so concretely.\textsuperscript{4} Eliot himself endeavors to express that same experience in the \textit{Four Quartets}.

It has now been eleven years since the appearance of \textit{Little Gidding}; Eliot has reached his sixty-eighth year; perhaps he has written his last poem. If he does withdraw from writing poetry, he will have followed Dante's example; that of allowing the \textit{Paradiso} to be his final poetical message to the world, and the concluding section to his \textit{Divine Comedy}.

Concerning his compositions, Eliot remains today as enigmatic as he ever was. When asked, on one of his rare visits to America, if there was any final word of conclusion to the meaning behind his poetry, he paused, then said, "I don't think so . . . I believe there is no final word."\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{4}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{5}"Find Your Own Answers," \textit{Time}, LVI (November 13, 1950), 53-54.
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