

Dantean Journeys: The Motif of Meeting the Dead in Modern Poetry

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It seems almost odd that a poet as remote, historically, linguistically, and philosophically, as Dante should maintain so pervasive an influence on modern poetry in English, by which we may comprehend the work of romantic, modernist, and contemporary poets.¹ And yet it is easily demonstrable that Dante, a poet with medieval religious beliefs, an elaborately allegorical method, and an Italian system of versification difficult to transpose into English, has been an intimate and profound influence on poets as diverse as Shelley, Dante Rossetti, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Allen Tate, James Merrill, and Wendell Berry. Indeed, Eliot went so far as to recommend Dante as a “universal school of style” (228), a better model for English poets than such native luminaries as Shakespeare and Milton. The nature of Dante’s actual influence varies from case to case, and ranges from attempts at “Englishing” *terza rima* to imitations of the grand structure of the *Commedia*. In the case of poets like Eliot and Tate, it may extend even to religious admiration, emulation, or attempted revival. The focus of this essay, however, will be on a narrower, and more strategic form of emulation: the recurrence in modern poetry of the motif of meeting and conversing with the dead.

There are a number of reasons that this motif should prove so congenial to the modern sensibility in spite of its allegorical associations.² For one thing, it provides what one might call an “objective correlative” for the exploration of the

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²Dante himself may be said to have picked up this motif from Homer and Virgil, and it could be argued that a poet like Pound seems more at home in a Homeric underworld than the underworld of the *Commedia*. The Homeric underworld is relatively free of moral judgments and punishments found in the underworlds of Virgil and Dante. This element seems important in the work of

unconscious mind, which since the time of the romantics, for good or ill, has been perhaps the central endeavor of poetry. Lancelot Whyte has argued in *The Unconscious Before Freud* for the centrality of the unconscious in the modern era:

faith, if it bears any relation to the natural world, implies faith in the unconscious. If there is a God, he must speak there; if there is a healing power, it must operate there; if there is a principle of ordering in the organic realm, its most powerful manifestation must be found there. (7)

In poetry, as M.L. Abrams has shown, this habit of mind gave rise to “expressive form” (*The Mirror and the Lamp*), a revolutionary and pervading sense of poetry as the sincere expression of feeling. The interest of modern poets in the Dantean motif of meeting the dead is thus characteristically psychological, and represents a psychological reinterpretation of Dante’s practice, analogous perhaps to the many “expressive” reinterpretations of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century. Whereas in Dante the meeting with the dead is at once literal and allegorical, in modern poets it is suggestive in terms of personal symbolism, a metaphor of the journey into the self.

Significantly, the modern poets generally offer some psychological explanation for their visions, suggestive of intercourse with the unconscious. Shelley’s Dantean *tour de force*, “The Triumph of Life,” is presented, for instance, as a “trance” or “waking dream,” during the course of which he meets with his own counterpart to Dante’s Virgil in the figure of Rousseau. Rossetti’s “Willowwood” sonnets suggest a dream in which he sees his dead wife and muse, Elizabeth Siddal. Even Eliot’s confrontation with the “familiar compound ghost” after an air raid in London is given the quality of a dream or hallucination. And more recently, in “The Buried Lake,” Allen Tate presents a dream-like visit to the underworld. For the modern poets, the psychological aptness of these situations takes precedence over any allegorical function. Their significance, therefore, is not publically accessible, as in Dante, but must be construed in terms which are essentially interior and personal.

Shelley’s “Triumph of Life,” left unfinished at his death, recounts in over five hundred lines of *terza rima* his vision of a wild throng of people being driven before a chariot in which an allegorical figure, or “Shape” of Life sits in Roman-style

Shelley, Rossetti, Eliot, and Tate, however. The dominant feeling among the modern poets is a kind of guilt, and the Dantean treatment is more appropriate.

triumph.³ The throng Shelley witnesses, “Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam” (line 46), is representative (one might say representative in their misery) of all the stages of life: “Old age & youth, manhood & infancy, / Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear” (52-53). Sexual love is suggested, in uncharacteristically dark and futile terms, by an orgiastic dance of “Maidens & youths” who “fling their wild arms in the air / As their feet twinkle; they recede, and now / Bending within each other’s atmosphere / Kindle invisibly; and as they glow / Like moths by light attracted & repelled, / Oft to new bright destruction come and go” (149-54). One by one, they fall exhausted and “senseless” (160) in the path of the chariot, and their place is taken up, in a grotesque parody by “Old men, and women foully disarrayed” who “Shake their grey hair in the insulting wind, / Limp in the dance & strain with limbs decayed / To reach the car of light which leaves them still / Farther behind & deeper in the shade” (165-69). Shelley’s final conception of sexual love, as the ending of the generally exultant “Epipsychidion” also suggests, is a pessimistic one, emphasizing futility and betrayal. Harold Bloom has argued that although “the tone of Shelley’s last poem is derived from Dante’s *Purgatorio*,... the events and atmosphere of *The Triumph of Life* have more in common with the *Inferno*” (xl). This might have been different had Shelley lived to complete the poem, but the fragment as it stands offers a vision of unrelieved darkness, a dying modern man’s vision of last things.

This general tone of bleakness is even more conspicuous in the Dantean center of the poem, the meeting with Rousseau, which even T.S. Eliot admired.⁴ Harold Bloom, a more sympathetic critic, calls it “the highest act of Shelley’s imagination in the poem” (xli). Rousseau is quite obviously to Shelley what Virgil, the figure of Reason in the “*Inferno*” and *Purgatorio*,” is to Dante, the dead “master” and guide, though we may infer that here Shelley will be guided not so much by Reason as by Feeling. Indeed, Rousseau, in a rather melodramatic fashion appropriate to his role as the archetypical romantic, shocks the poet with his sudden appearance:

Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry,
Half to myself I said, ‘And what is this?
Whose shape is that within the car? & why’—

³As Marius Bewley, following A.C. Bradley, has pointed out, Shelley appears to have been influenced by Petrarch as well as Dante, particularly Petrarch’s allegorical *Trionfi*, which describe similar dream visions of Roman triumphs involving the figures of Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time, and Divinity (870).

⁴Eliot wrote of this passage, that it was “better than I could do ... one of the supreme tributes to Dante in English, for it testifies what Dante has done, both for the style and the soul of a great English poet” (see Bewley 870).

I would have added—'is all here amiss?'
But a voice answered .. 'Life' ... I turned & knew
(O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)

That what I thought was an old root which grew
To strange distortion out of the hill side
Was indeed one of that deluded crew,

And that the grass which methought hung so wide
And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
And that the holes it vainly sought to hide

Were or had been eyes. (176-88)

Rousseau is characteristically defiant, claiming that in spirit he “still disdains” to wear his earthly “disguise,” but he is nonetheless condemned with the others “chained to the car” of Life, “The Wise, / The great, the unforgotten: they who wore / Mitres & helms & crowns, or wreathes of light” (205, 208-10). Upon questioning, he reveals some of these, including Napoleon, who “sought to win / The world, and lost all it did contain / Of greatness” (217-19), and “those spoilers spoiled, Voltaire, / Frederic, & Kant, Catherine, & Leopold, / Chained hoary an-archs, demagogue & sage” (235-37). Indeed, almost all men, the great only more conspicuously than the mean, stand condemned, “For in the battle Life & they did wage / She remained conqueror” (239-40). Rousseau himself claims to have been undone “By my own heart alone” (241). As Marius Bewley has noted, “in this poem self-betrayal appears to be almost universal” (870). Jesus and Socrates (and interestingly not his disciple Plato) are virtually alone in escaping conquest by Life because of the peculiar honesty and intensity of their visions.⁵

What it is exactly that vitiates the others, and by implication Shelley himself, is less certain, but seems to be a matter of impurity of imagination, the one power, according to Bloom's reading, “capable of redeeming life” (xlii). Rousseau's first sentence suggests the importance of withholding one's inner *self* from the seductive attractions of earthly life: “ ‘If thou canst forbear / To join the dance, which I had well forborne.’ / Said the grim Feature, of my thought aware, / ‘I will now tell that which to this deep scorn / Led me & my companions’ ” (188-92). But

⁵Harold Bloom argues interestingly that, “on the basis of *Adonais*,” Keats can be placed with them also, “as he too had touched the world with his living flame, and then fled back up to his native noon” (xl-xli).

Shelley seems aware that, like Rousseau, he is not among those who can forbear the dance; like the dead master, he is “one of those who have created, even / If it be but a world of agony” (294-95). Rousseau’s experience, in his “April prime” (308), of seduction by nature away from a primal, imaginative vision, echoes Shelley’s own experience, and interestingly what Shelley perceives as the experience of Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode.” (Indeed, it is not uncommon to read Rousseau’s speech as a parody of Wordsworth’s poem.) The malevolent seductress of Rousseau is described as a mysterious “shape all light” (352), a Wordsworthian conception of nature that according to Donald H. Reiman, “is composed of all that is ‘wonderful, or wise, or beautiful’ in the young Rousseau’s experience, but as the product of a limited human imagination, she is still of earth, earthy” (quoted by Bewley 872). Bloom notes that Rousseau, drinking from the shape’s “crystal glass / Mantling with bright Nepenthe” (358-59), forgets “everything in the mind’s desire that had transcended nature, and so he falls victim to Life’s destruction” (xlii). The lesson comes too late, however, to Shelley, for whom “life had become the destructive element in which perfect integrity and purity of heart and imagination were all but impossible” (Bewley 871).

In spite of its fragmentary nature, “The Triumph of Life” is a most impressive achievement. The influence of Dante was obviously beneficial in tightening Shelley’s style and clarifying his images. But the points where Dante’s influence ceases its penetration are most interesting in highlighting Shelley’s distinctively modern concerns. The first thing one notices about Shelley’s use of Dante is his secularization of his model’s religious and allegorical approach. Like Dante, Shelley wants to write on the level of ideas, but these ideas are personal and secular, expressive not of a shared body of religious belief but of personal conviction and feeling. Thus, Shelley’s vision is explained in psychological terms that are quite alien to Dante’s belief and practice, though as one might point out, even modern religious poets like Eliot offer some “realistic” explanation for their visions. Perhaps by analogy with Virgil’s inadequacy of faith in the *Commedia*, Rousseau is presented as a corrupted figure. But though his message is ambiguous, it suggests certainly a dark and infernal view of human life alien to Dante’s larger view, but rather typically modern. Whether Shelley might have won through to a more positive view if he had lived to finish the poem is, of course, unanswerable, but doubtful, and perhaps beside the point. Dante provided him chiefly with an overarching metaphor, a poetic structure for investigating the hellish interiors of the modern soul, and it is perhaps in the nature of it that the investigation should be fragmentary.

Dante Rossetti’s use of his namesake is similarly psychological and infernal.

In the “Willowwood” sequence of *The House of Life*, the Dantean motif functions to expose the failure of love as a means of overcoming Narcissism. The dream imagery in these sonnets, while it provides the adequate psychological explanation necessary for a modern use of the Dantean motif, functions at the same time to undermine its validity as an objective vision. Thus, the “Willowwood” sonnets become a dark, Narcissistic fantasy, a nightmarish journey into a troubled self.

The “Willowwood” sonnets (#’s 49-52) appear near the end of the “Youth and Change” section, the first part of *The House of Life*, and signal a significant darkening of the seemingly more hopeful attitude about love that finds expression in such sonnets as “Silent Noon” (#19). In the earlier poem, as the lovers lie together in a pasture “neath billowing skies that scatter and amass,” their moment is epiphanized, the landscape of “kingcup-fields” and “cow-parsley” is made “visible silence, still as the hour-glass.” Love transforms even the meanest constituents of nature into things of significant beauty and indeed plays the trick of bestowing timelessness on the lovers, offering them, “for deathless dower, / This close-companioned inarticulate hour / When twofold silence was the song of love.” Rossetti is not so innocent, however, as to mistake his epiphany for something more than a provisional assuagement of the condition of timefulness. On closer inspection, the insight of the poem appears deeply paradoxical. The “inarticulate hour” is also described as “winged,” for time, as perceived by human consciousness is never really still; an “hour-glass” is never still unless its sands have run out. Indeed, our only possible timelessness on earth is death. As Stephen Spector has argued, this notion is involved in and underlined by Rossetti’s use of the sonnet form itself, with its inherent structural imbalance suggesting the ineluctable movement of time (54-58). Thus the “deathless dower” is really an epiphanic “moment’s monument” of art with precedents in the sonnets of Shakespeare and Michelangelo. This is the only possible transformation into timelessness that the poem offers, and it represents something less selfless than a romantic ideal of love.

The “Willowwood” sonnets make use of the Dantean motif to explore the Narcissistic consequences of such love. As in all modern Dantean poems, a psychological explanation of the vision is intimated, in this case through impressionistic, dreamlike imagery and the dreamlike compression of the title (“Willowwood,” of course, is the wood of weeping, the forest of tears). Another suggestion of dreaming is the deliberate confusion of the speaker, Love, and the beloved, with the implication that the consciousness of the speaker embraces all the rest. The first sonnet begins with the speaker sitting “with Love upon a woodside well, / Leaning across the water, I and he.” Though the speaker and Love appear to be at

least grammatically distinct at this point, we should keep in mind that the speaker “leaning across the water” is in the classic pose of Narcissus, implying rather his identity with Love. The image is not so simple, however, for Love makes “audible / That certain secret thing he had to tell” (though we might indeed say such things to ourselves), and this in turn comes “to be / The passionate voice I knew.” At this point, the image of Love changes to that of a female beloved: “his eyes beneath grew hers; / ... And as I stooped, her own lips rising there / Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.” This seems on the surface at least a fairly straightforward rehearsal of the dream motif of a speaker meeting his beloved (the fact that she is a “lost” beloved suggests, perhaps, the influence of Milton’s “Methought I saw my late espoused saint”). But the notion of Narcissus continues to govern in some sense throughout the poem, implying that the love of the speaker is somehow self-love. Like the young officer in Rilke’s “Letzter Abend,” the speaker here sees a mirror image in his beloved, not her own. The myth of Narcissus is very clear about the dangers of such love, and they are suggested by the sonnet.

The next two sonnets of the “Willowwood” sequence are taken up with Love’s song, though interestingly it is “meshed with half-remembrance hard to free,” arguing again for the omnipotence of the speaker’s Narcissistic consciousness. Love sings not so much a song as a Dantean anecdote while the speaker and his beloved relive their days together, “the shades of those our days that had no tongue.” In Willowwood is “a dumb throng [the language here is interestingly close to Shelley’s] / ... one form by every tree / All mournful forms, for each was I or she.” They engage in a “soul-wrung implacable close kiss,” but all the while make “broken moan” in their hopelessness. The kiss, which holds until Love has finished his song, is a sort of enabling talisman of the vision. In the third sonnet, Love addresses “all ye that walk in Willowwood / ... with hollow faces burning white.” These manifestations of vain love (“who so in vain have wooed / Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite / Your lips to that their unforgotten food”) are promised nothing but “one lifelong night” before they “again shall see the light.” Indeed, the speaker prays for a Lethean forgetfulness: “Better all life forget her than this thing, / That Willowwood should hold her wandering!” Willowwood, of course, suggests the speaker’s mind in its dream state. The implication of these lines, therefore, is that he would drive her from his unconscious, where she lives on as an occasion for unbearable guilt.

The notion of guilt is reinforced in the final sonnet of the series as Love ends his song: “when the song died did the kiss unclose; / And her face fell back drowned, and was as gray / As its gray eyes.” If the speaker of the poem may be identified to any degree with Rossetti himself, then the lost beloved of the poem

is very likely Rossetti's wife, Elizabeth Siddal, who had died of tuberculosis six years before the probable date of composition. The image of her falling "back drowned" may be seen as something more than a colorful arabesque. It suggests rather a surcharge of guilt in the form of negligence on the part of the speaker who cannot help letting her fall back.⁶ In the context of the poem, this guilt manifests itself in the Narcissism that calls into doubt any unclouded sense of youthful, idealistic love. The Narcissistic confusion of identities, set up in the first sonnet, rises to a chilling climax in this final poem of the sequence:

Only I know that I leaned low and drank
A long draft from the water where she sank,
Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:
And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face
Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,
Till both our heads were in his aureole.

The speaker, as it were, drinks the very being of his beloved, subsuming her completely to his own identity. Indeed, this may have been a part of his love all along, as the transformation into art, the "moment's monument" of "Silent Noon" suggests. Whether such transformations are redeeming, for the artist or the object of his attentions, is a matter for question. The final lines of the poem claim that the speaker has also grown one with Love, so much so as to share his aureole. There may indeed be some redemption for him here, but taken in the dark context of the poems, these lines seem rather like the speaker's attempt to cheer himself up in the end. The woman is still dead. The Narcissism is unabated. And the darker vision of the "Change and Fate" section lies ahead.

Dante was a profound influence on T.S. Eliot throughout his career. He was, first of all, the paradigm of the Christian poet for Eliot, as well as a model of concrete and precise language. In terms of Eliot's own poetry, the *Inferno* (as transposed to modern London) certainly plays its part in *The Wasteland* and other early works. Similarly, the *Purgatorio* furnishes much of the imagery and intellectual underpinning of *Ash Wednesday*. Eliot's most sustained imitation of Dante,

⁶There is ample evidence that Rossetti's relations with his wife, both before and after her death, were ambiguous and compulsive. Rossetti lived with Elizabeth Siddal, his favorite model, for ten years before they were finally married in 1860. Within two years, she was dead, and Rossetti was so despondent that he impulsively buried a manuscript of his poems in the coffin with her. In 1869, however, he allowed his wife's body to be exhumed so that the manuscript, which formed the basis of his 1870 collection, could be retrieved. In later years, he lived under the illusion that his wife's spirit returned to him in the form of birds.

however, occurs in “Little Gidding,” in the passage where the speaker meets “a familiar compound ghost” while patrolling the streets of London during an air raid.⁷

It is instructive to consider this passage in the light of Eliot’s earlier use of Dante in the famous passage occurring near the end of “The Burial of the Dead.” In the earlier poem, the Dantean experience is presented as the hallucinatory overtone of an ordinary commuter morning in London. The place is London Bridge “Under the brown fog of a winter dawn.” In keeping with the “method” of *The Wasteland*, Eliot suggests the Dantean hallucination by means of actual quotes from the *Inferno* dropped into his piece without explanation:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

With the exception of the second line quoted above, this passage might be taken as simple description. The quote from Dante, however, enters the passage with a surreal force that produces disequilibrium in the lines that follow. The ordinary commuters are suddenly suggested to be shades in “Limbo,” a throng of the living dead deprived of the certainties of their existence. Indeed, the passage would seem silly to the point of being meaningless if it were not for the psychological aptness of the speaker’s perceptions. The literate mind of the speaker, which includes among other things familiarity with these lines from Dante, brings them to bear upon the scene he witnesses. It might even be argued that the passage suggests unconscious association of Dante and the commuters. Once the association has been made, however, Eliot reinforces and develops it with a line typical of Dante as he is about to meet one of the dead: “There I saw one I knew, and stopped him.” This turns out to be “Stetson,” who, in spite of his unlikely name, is proposed as a former comrade of the speaker’s in the First Punic War. The appropriateness of this bizarre detail, with its implied comparison of the First Punic and First World Wars (both senseless and futile), has been much commented upon. I would add that the detail of the ancient war superimposed upon the memory of a recent one, along with the conversation that follows, a pastiche of Webster and Baudelaire,

⁷How closely we should identify this “speaker” with Eliot himself is a difficult question. Eliot was notoriously slippery about allowing the voices in his poetry to be identified with his own. He was, however, an air raid warden in London during the Second World War, and the passage does closely reflect his personal concerns.

conveys again a sense of the unconscious mind of the speaker, a detritus of information it has picked up here and there, the fragments of self he will later use to shore against his ruins. The manner of association here suggests, as much as anything, a dream. The Dantean experience is thus another journey, infernal to be sure, into the self, where, in the context of *Wasteland*, misery and emptiness await. As with Shelley and Rossetti, Dante provides Eliot with a means of interior journeying and Eliot's occasion, in 1922 at least, is similarly bleak.

By the time of the *Four Quartets*, a number of events had intervened in Eliot's life that might conceivably have altered this situation. He had converted most visibly to Christianity, for one thing, and his difficulties with his wife had at least been put on hold. But even in "Little Gidding," the darkness of his modern Dantean vision persists. This is attributable, most obviously, to the approach and onset of World War Two, a time, as he later put it, when "the conditions of one's life changed and one was thrown in on oneself" (quoted by Ackroyd 253). This interesting confession suggests, however, a sense of personal urgency and unease, as well as public concern for the precarious state of civilization. Peter Ackroyd has noted that during the composition of *Four Quartets* Eliot was plagued by doubts about his creative vitality, going so far on one occasion as to suggest that he might not be able to write anything again (254). These doubts find expression in the theme of language that runs persistently through the *Quartets*: the difficult struggle "To purify the dialect of the tribe" ("Little Gidding"), and the equally difficult realization that one learns "to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it" ("East Coker"). Eliot is quite capable of collapsing his own lyrical flights, such as the opening of the second part of "East Coker":

That was a way of saying it—not very satisfactory:
A Periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

Richard Poirier, commenting on these lines, argues that Eliot is devaluing "literature in the interests of the preeminent values of language," something "too important to be left in the care only of poetry" (48). According to Poirier, Eliot displays a profoundly "de-creative impulse, with respect to the more reassuring values of the past," which is "evidence of an especially austere heroism" (59). Eliot suffers "in a degenerative era, for the necessarily de-creative movements within the processes of creation" (Poirier 60). I think Poirier may be overstating his case here,

but his arguments are useful in focusing our attention on the broodingly ambiguous and personal nature of Eliot's concern with language in the *Quartets*.

Significantly, the Dantean motif of the meeting with the "dead master" in "Little Gidding" is concerned largely with the problem of language. The speaker is patrolling the streets of London after an air raid "In the uncertain hour before the morning." He meets "one walking, loitering and hurried / As if blown," and soon recognizes him as

some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable.

The identity of the ghost has been much debated, most critics settling for a composite of Yeats and Swift and Eliot himself.⁸ The dream-like "compound" of the interlocutor, as well as the speaker's presumed involvement in the compound himself ("I assumed a double part ... I was still the same, / Knowing myself yet being someone other"), suggests another use of the Dantean motif as a metaphor of the journey into the self. Speaking to the apparition, whose words, interestingly, "sufficed / To compel the recognition they preceded," the speaker is on one level holding a colloquy with himself. The passage is full of paradoxes with which language must wrestle. The conversation is held at an "intersection time / Of meeting nowhere, no before or after." The wonder that the speaker feels "is easy, / Yet ease is cause of wonder." Indeed, the poem itself strains from the beginning against the boundaries of human experience. The title refers to a seventeenth century Anglican community to which Eliot has turned as one of the "places / Which ... are the world's end." The scene in London, "before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night / At the recurrent end of the unending," is another of these places.

Here language, with its full freight of history (a notion enforced by the Dantean motif), strains to its end. The ghost will not rehearse his thoughts,

For these things have served their purpose: let them be.
So with your own, and pray they be forgiven
By others, as I pray you to forgive

⁸Hugh Kenner goes so far as to include Yeats, Mallarmé, Hamlet's father, Ezra Pound, Dante, Swift, and Milton in the composite, a simultaneous embodiment of "the *literary* past which has been Eliot's theme since 1917" (321).

Both good and bad. Last season's fruit is eaten
And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.
For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.

In Shelley's poem, the gloom arises from the speaker's consciousness of the impurity of the human imagination; in Rossetti's sonnets a similar gloom issues from his awareness of the impurity of romantic love; for Eliot, the impurity of language is cause for despair. The ghost notes, paraphrasing Mallarmé, that "our concern was speech, and speech impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe / And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight." But Eliot seems aware that this goal is doomed to failure. Interestingly, Mallarmé had spoken merely of giving a more pure sense ("un sens plus pur") to the words of the tribe. "To purify the dialect of the tribe" suggests something much more, an enterprise, as Poirier would argue, beyond the powers of poetry, even without the additional injunction to "urge the mind to aftersight and foresight." Like Rousseau in "the Triumph of Life," the ghost in "Little Gidding" offers his interviewer only the fruits of defeated purpose, "gifts reserved for age / To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort." These include such things as "the cold friction of expiring sense / Without enchantment," the "bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit," "the conscious impotence of rage," and "the rending pain of re-enactment / Of all that you have done, and been." The best hope the ghost can offer of escape from the inferno of desire is a sort of purgatory of art, where the "exasperated spirit," moving tentatively "From wrong to wrong," may be "restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer." It is at once a state of effort and of grace, and far from the bravado of purifying language itself. Indeed, "Little Gidding" tests the "no man's land" at the boundary of poetic language as a condition of faith in the modern era, an era obviously less conducive to such faith than Dante's own. Eliot's use of the Dantean motif, like Shelley's and Rossetti's, highlights not so much a moment of affirmation as one of doubt, of darker musings on the frailties of modern man.

In his later poems in *terza rima*, Allen Tate also finds in the example of Dante a vehicle for the exploration of dark, modern subjects. "The Swimmers" is a straightforward and effective narrative that describes a childhood memory of a lynching. "The Buried Lake" is a more difficult poem that makes use of the Dantean motif of meeting with the dead to explore the relationship of poetic inspiration and religious faith in the modern world. Typically, it presents itself as a dream, a nocturnal visit to the unconscious where the speaker "had kept opaque / Down deeper than the canyons undersea / The sullen spectrum of a buried lake /

Nobody saw; not seen even by me.”

The frame of the poem is a prayer to Saint Lucy, the lady of light from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, to whom the speaker “would admit a dream.” Throughout the poem, Tate contrasts the lady’s “imponderable stuff / Of light,” the mystical lucidity achievable through prayer, with his “edge of darkness,” the opacity of the human unconscious. “An ageing child,” the speaker stumbles “all night long on sand and shell / By a lakeside where time, unfaced, was dark.” He is admitted to the underworld, “a pinched hotel,” by “a sick dog,” whom we may identify as Cerberus, the three-headed dog who according to tradition guards the entrance to Hades. Once there, the speaker himself reveals a touch of Orpheus, unsnapping a “lyric case” and preparing to play on his violin. If this is meant to suggest Tate’s vocation as a modern poet, his attitude seems at this point darkly ambiguous. The “cadenza” he plays is “for the Devil’s Trill.” A “Small dancing girl” appears and then disappears as suddenly, having “locked the fiddle up.” The poet’s response is to mourn “the death of youth without a word.” Like Shelley’s early idealization of sexual love, the youthful poet’s first bloom of inspiration proves to be a dead end.

The speaker next meets his “friend Jack Locke, scholar and gentleman,” who glares and flicks “his nose as if about to scan / My verse.” He has moved from his youthful, lyrical “Devil’s Trill,” it seems, to the maturer musings of empirical philosophy, but Locke too disappears “as mist upon the browning air [pun presumably intended] ... Leaving me guilted on a moving stair / Upwards, down which I regularly fell / Tail backwards.” A Browningsque delight in materialism will no more do than youthful, lyrical exuberance. The poet/speaker is left to topple “tail backwards” (there is still a bit of the devil in him, it would seem) down his Dantean escalator. Having worn through the other possibilities, he would now “resume / The grey sonata,” an art of old age perhaps. At this point he has a vision of his “love,” “A stately woman who in sorrow shone,” wearing the aspect of a Piero Francesca “Madonna.” She would appear to be his muse, possibly associated with the beauties of nature (“Under the dogwood tree / In bloom, where I had held her first beneath / The coiled black hair, she turned and smiled at me.”) But as he tries to look at her, she turns suddenly into “Another’s searching skull whose drying teeth / Crumbled me all night long and I was dead.” This passage, with its realistic, nightmare images, is one of the most effective in the poem. The speaker’s efforts as a secular poet hurl him into a psychological abyss.

Indeed, any resolution of this dark night of the speaker’s soul, conceived purely in mortal terms, seems doomed to failure. “All grace being lost,” the only hope of salvation is in religious conversion and prayer: “come to midmost May I bent my knees, / Santa Lucia! at noon ... And knew I had not read your eye

before.” Tate does not pretend that such conversion can come easily, however. “How vexed, bitter, and hard the trance / Of light—how I resented Lucy’s play!” He goes so far as to wonder if it were not better to “stay dead.” Yet as Lucy “lost the day” only to “re-found it Lucy-guise,” the speaker refinds the light “where two shadows meet” and greets his “speaking Dove,” his Lady “in the double of our eyes.” The speaker’s paradoxical salvation is to be found in the self, or at least that part of the self akin to Lucy’s light, suggested by “the double of our eyes.” The dream, which may after all have been the darkness of unenlightened human life, “is over and the dark expired. / I knew that I had known enduring love.” With this, the speaker is released from his nightmare, if not into a paradisaical state, at least into the purgatorial state of hope suggested in the poem’s epigram.

In addition to his recreation of *terza rima*, Tate goes farther than any of the other poets we have considered in trying to recreate the religious allegory of Dante. But it seems curiously unsatisfactory in the modern, psychological setting where it must perform. If “The Swimmers” suggests, in its relatively simple, narrative fashion, a human *Inferno*, “The Buried Lake” is clearly meant to suggest, in terms of a struggle carried out in the self, the climb from an *Inferno* of the soul to a *Purgatorio* of at least possible salvation. But while the dream images seem psychologically apt, the allegorical apparatus, which must do the work of performing the conversion and salvation, seems forced to the point of accidental comedy. The “sick dog” who must act the part of the modern Cerberus, for instance, is appropriately plain in the best modern way, but hardly terrifying as he was meant to be. The playing of the “fiddle,” acceptable as a dream image, cannot really bear the weight of association with Orpheus’ lyre which is forced on it. Whereas in Shelley the Dantean motif functions beneficially to concretize an imagination habitually too free, in Tate it acts as an encouragement to the sort of crabbed ratiocination which is his greatest vice as a poet. The hopeful conclusion of “The Buried Lake” seems not so much the inevitable outcome of the poem as an act of intellectual will, for the theology of the poem is ultimately at war with the poem’s modern, psychological constituents. The result is an ambiguity more awkward than enduringly provocative.

It is not without significance that the more formidable Dantean moments in Eliot are not specifically imitative of Dante’s manner or theology. The Dante at work upon Eliot’s poetry was by historical necessity different from the Dante Eliot contemplated as a critic. In his moments of what F.R. Leavis has called “difficult sincerity” (118), Eliot’s poetry represented “a striving after a spiritual state based upon a reality elusive and yet ultimate” (Leavis 118). The paradox of this state being at once elusive and ultimate is important. The state of grace may hint at

transcendence, but its expression in human language can only be provisional. On his salient occasions, as in “East Coker” and “Little Gidding,” Eliot was enough a man of his time to recognize this.

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