

## Thomas S. Eliot's eyes on Dante Alighieri

Sha Ha\*

School of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou University, P.R.China

Corresponding Author: Sha Ha, E-mail: hasha2006@126.com

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### ABSTRACT

Thomas E. Eliot devoted several essays to Dante Alighieri, declaring that he considered the Italian poet the most universal of all poets of the continent. Dante's recourse to visual images to enunciate very abstract philosophical and theological themes, finds its counterpart in Eliot's use of the 'objective correlative' to evoke in the reader sensory experiences. Purpose of the present paper is to investigate about the influence exerted by the author of the "Divine Comedy" on the great innovator of the English literary landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, utilizing to that purpose the scripts by T.S. Eliot himself.

### INTRODUCTION

During the first decade of 1900 T. S. Eliot (1888 - 1965), at that time a philosophy student at Harvard University, took inspiration from the Italian scholar and poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) to introduce in his first poetry work, "*The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" (Eliot, 1915), the so called 'objective correlative', i.e., 'a sensory experience evoked by a chain of events, that the poet feels and hopes to evoke in the reader'. Dante frequently used visual images in his "*Divine Comedy*" to express very abstract philosophical and theological themes. His verses, written in Tuscan vernacular, the 'volgare', still survive, while several of the philosophical and theological themes treated in his poetic masterpiece have lost their relevance outside academic circles.

Aim of the present research is to investigate about Dante's influence on Eliot, the great innovator of English poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, using to that purpose his original scripts, "*The sacred wood*" (Eliot, 1921), "*Selected essays 1917-1932*" (Eliot, 1932), "*To criticize the critic*" (Eliot, 1965) The paper consists of Section 1. (*Introduction*), Section 2 (*Dante's Comedy*), Section 3. (*Eliot's eyes on Dante*) and Section 4. (*Conclusions*). The primary sources of this research have been Dante's and Eliot's works and some scholarly papers indicated in the References. The English translation of the *Comedy* utilized in this paper is the work of Dante Gabriele Rossetti (1828-1892), a British poet and painter of Italian ancestors, who founded in 1848 the "*Pre-Raphaelite Society*" (Dante, 1997).

### DANTE'S YOUTH WORK IN TUSCAN VERNACULAR: "VITA NUOVA" (NEW LIFE)

Dante was born in 1260 in the city state of Florence (Tuscany) from the wealthy family of *Alighieri*: at that time Italy was torn by a struggle for political supremacy between the *Papacy*, spiritual heir of the 'Western Roman Empire', and the Germanic 'Holy Roman Empire', which detained a nominal political control over the Northern part of the peninsula. Dante's family was loyal to the 'Guelphs', who supported the *Papacy* and stand in opposition to the 'Ghibellines', who were backed by the German Emperor: Dante fought with the *Guelph* cavalry at the victorious *Battle of Campaldino* (1289) and soon after entered the "*Physicians' and Apothecaries Guild*". After defeating the *Ghibellines*, the Florentine *Guelphs* divided into two fighting factions: the 'White Guelphs' (to which Dante was loyal) and the 'Black Guelphs'. Their ideological differences were based on opposing views of the papal role in Florentine affairs, with the *Blacks* supporting the Pope *Boniface VIII* and the *Whites* wanting political independence from Rome (Gardner, 1921). After alternate successes, in 1301 a 'Black Guelph' government was installed in Florence and the major exponents of the 'White Guelphs', Dante included, were condemned to perpetual exile. The poet never came back to Florence until his death, which took place in Ravenna in 1321.

Dante admired the Latin writers of classical antiquity especially *Virgil* (70-19 BC) (Howatson, 2011), and also the po-

ets of the ‘*Sicilian School*’, who wrote in Sicilian vernacular (Gaunt & Kay, 1999; Robey & Hainsworth, 2002). He and Brunetto Latini (1220-1294) became the leaders of the poetry movement of “*Dolce Stil Novo*” (*Sweet New Style*), a term coined by Dante himself: their poems were a sort of *courtly love* compositions written in ‘*volgare*’, the vernacular language derived from Latin and spoken in Tuscany. His sonnets for *Beatrice*, the female character he idealized, were collected by him in 1295 in “*Vita Nuova*” (*New Life*), a self-biography of his youth years (Dante, 1899). The following are the translated verses<sup>1</sup> of one of his very delicate love sonnets to Beatrice, entitled “*Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare*” (*So kind and so honest she looks*):

*So kind and so honest she looks  
my woman, when she greets others,  
that every tongue becomes, shaking, mute,  
and eyes dare not look at her.  
She goes, hearing people praise her,  
benignly dressed in humility,  
and it seems she's something that's come  
from sky to Earth to show a miracle.  
She looks so attractive to those who look at her  
she gives through eyes a sweet taste to heart,  
which can't be understood by one who hasn't experi-  
enced it;  
and it seems her face releases  
a pleasing spirit full of love,  
which tells the soul: Sigh.*

During the period 1302-1305, just before he started writing the *Comedy*, Dante wrote in *Latin* an essay entitled “*De vulgari Eloquentia*” (*On the eloquence in volgare*) (Dante, 1996), addressed to the scholars of his time, where he recommended the use of “*volgare*” while dealing with high literary topics: in that treatise he examined the historical evolution of language, its grammatical structure and its possible use in different literary genres (Brand & Pertile, 2008).

## DANTE'S “*COMEDY*”

Dante's masterwork, the “*Divine Comedy*” (Dante, 1997) lasted from 1306/7 until his death, in 1321, during the years of his peregrination through Northern and Central Italy, as a political refugee banned from his native country, Florence: he was the guest of the rulers of several Italian city states, among others *Cangrande della Scala* in Verona and *Guido II da Polenta* in Ravenna, the city where the poet died. Some few decades later the novelist Giovanni Boccaccio, in his “*Trattatello in laude di Dante*” (*Small book in praise of Dante*) (Boccaccio, 2002), attributed to the *Comedy* the qualifier of ‘*divine*’, which was since then universally accepted. The poem is an allegory of the poet's painful estrangement from a *sinful life*, in the form of a *vision*, typical of medieval literature: it describes his spiritual journey through the world of afterlife, from “*Hell*” to “*Purgatory*” and “*Paradise*”: the author appears in the *Comedy* in two forms, as the pilgrim who makes the journey and the poet who recounts it. The poem consists of 100 *cantos*, subdivided into three *canticas*: “*Hell*” (containing 34 *cantos*), “*Purgatory*” and “*Paradise*”, containing 33 *cantos* each.

The following is a summary of Dante's *vision*: on a certain day of his adult life, in the early morning, the poet finds himself inside a dark forest, without knowing how that could have happened. To escape from that scary place, he moves toward a hill enlightened by the early sun, but three wild animals hinder his steps: a lynx, a lion and a she-wolf, which represent his ‘*capital sins*’, lust, pride and greed. Dante despairs to find a way of escape (i.e., the way to his spiritual salvation), but suddenly a human shadow approaches him: it is the materialization of the soul of the Latin poet Virgil (70-19 BC), who has been sent to him by *Beatrice*, Dante's youth love, since long time dead and now in *Paradise*. She acts, in Dante's vision, as the ‘*Divine Grace*’ (God's help to redeem him from his sins through a long journey in the underworld, first in “*Hell*”, to know the depth of evil, then in “*Purgatory*”, to know the *atonement*, and finally in “*Paradise*”, to know the different degrees of God's beatitude). *Beatrice* chose *Virgil*, Dante's beloved poet, as his guide through the first two reigns of the underworld, while she will guide him through “*Paradise*”.

Virgil's soul had been condemned by God to stay in “*Limbo*”, the after-life location of the good people who had not received the Christian message, in the company of the souls of other great scholars of the past, among whom there were the philosophers *Plato* and *Aristotle*. The following are Virgil's words to describe *Beatrice*'s descent in “*Limbo*” from “*Paradise*”:

*Her eyes where shining brighter than the star;  
and she began to say, gentle and low,  
with voice angelical, in her own language (Hell, II, 1-6)*

Encouraged by Virgil's words, Dante begins his descent through “*Hell*” in the company of his guide. In Dante's vision, the “*Hell*” is located inside an enormous funnel reaching the center of the Earth, made by Satan while falling from “*Paradise*” after rebelling against God: he is trapped there in ice. “*Hell*” is subdivided into “*Limbo*” and seven *infernal circles*, where (in descending order, with lesser sins punished in higher circles and graver sins lower down) are condemned to suffer the souls of the people who indulged, without repenting, in the ‘*deadly sins*’ of lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, anger, envy and pride.

Most episodes of “*Hell*” are described with verses of great poetic force, as Dante's interviews with the soul of *Francesca*, who committed adultery with *Paolo*, her brother in law: her husband, the ruler of the city of Rimini, discovering them kissing each other, killed them. God condemned their souls to float, tenderly embraced, in the infernal sky for the eternity, pushed by a wind with no respite:

*As turtle-doves, called onward by desire,  
with open and steady wings to the sweet nest  
fly through the air by their volition borne,  
so came they from the band where Dido<sup>2</sup> is,  
approaching us athwart the air malign,  
so strong was the affectionate appeal. (Hell, V, 82-87)*

*Francesca*'s words betray her gentle spirit and the tender love that unites her with her lover, who listens and cries:

*Sitteth the city, wherein I was born,  
upon the sea-shore where the Po descends  
to rest in peace with all his retinue.*

*Love, that on gentle heart doth swiftly seize,  
seized this man for the person beautiful  
that was taken from me, and still the mode offends me.*  
(*Hell*, V, 98-103)

Finally, Francesca describes their mutual falling in love:

*One day we reading were for our delight  
of Launcelot<sup>3</sup>, how Love did him enthrall.  
Alone we were and without any fear.  
Full many a time our eyes together  
drew that reading, and drove the colour from our faces;  
but one point only was it that overcame us.  
When as we read of the much-longed-for smile  
being by such a noble lover kissed,  
this one, who never from me shall be divided,  
kissed me upon the mouth all palpitating.* (*Hell*, V,  
127-136).

Once completed their journey through “*Hell*” with the terrifying view of *Lucifer*<sup>4</sup>, Dante and Virgil walk painfully out of the bowels of the Earth through a long, narrow and dark cave, moving towards the surface of the southern hemisphere. There the fall of *Lucifer*, in making the hole, generated the mountainous island of “*Purgatory*”. Along that mountain the sinners, who repented before their death, are atoning for their sins before ascending to God’s beatitude in “*Paradise*”. The landscape of this new place is that of a marina, suffused with the delicate blue light of an early morning sky. From the beach the mountain of “*Purgatory*” rises towards the sky; the two poets are welcomed by *Cato the Younger* (95-46 BC), the Roman politician who killed himself when Julius Caesar established his dictatorship. God chose him as the general guardian of the place where souls convert ‘*from the sorrow and misery of sin to the state of grace*’ (Haller, 1973). On the lower slope, Dante and Virgil encounter the souls of the *excommunicated, late repenting* people. The remaining part of the mountain of “*Purgatory*” is subdivided into seven terraces, where are atoning the souls of the people who committed the same deadly sins encountered in “*Hell*”, repenting before death. The first three terraces relate to ‘*perverted love*’, directed toward harm of others (the sins of pride, envy and wrath); the fourth terrace relates to ‘*deficient love*’ (the sin of sloth) and the last three terraces relate to *excessive* or ‘*disordered love*’ (the sins of avarice, gluttony and lust). At the top of the mountain, separated from “*Purgatory*” by a wall of fire, is located the “*Earthly Paradise*”, the “*Eden*”, where the first humans, *Adam* and *Eve*, were living before being banned from it when they committed the ‘*original sin*’ of eating an apple from the ‘*tree of knowledge*’, against God’s will (The Bible, Genesis, 3,1-13.22-24).

The canticles of “*Purgatory*” and “*Paradise*” are mainly devoted to the discussion, in verses, of philosophical and theological themes, as the ‘*nature of soul*’, the ‘*free will*’, the ‘*faith*’ and other theological issues: the works of the German scholar Albertus Magnus (1193-1280) and the “*Summa Theologiae*” (*Theological Treatise*) by the Italian monk Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) (Davies, 1993) offered the cultural basis for Dante’s *philosophical poetry*. The texts of the ancient Greek philosophers Plato (428-348 BC) (in the neo-platonic interpretation of Plotinus, living in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), and those of Aristotle (384-322 BC), which had

been re-discovered in medieval Europe during the 12<sup>th</sup> century through their translations from Arabic into Greek and Latin by the scholars of the “*Islamic School of Cordoba*”, in Spain, and the commentaries of the Arab philosophers Avicenna (980-1037 AD) and Averroes (1126-1198), animated the philosophical and theological debates among the scholars of the Christian and Islamic Europe (Lafferty, 1911). The crucial point of those debates was the responsibility that man and woman have of their acts. Rejecting the determinism of the believers of ‘*Astrology*’, which made everything depend on the influence exerted on human actions by the stars, Dante reaffirms the value of the ‘*freedom of will*’, a gift that God made to humans.

As announced before, on the top of the mountain of “*Purgatory*” is located the “*Earthly Paradise*”, the “*Eden*”. To enter it, Dante and Vergil must cross a wall of fire. “*Eden*” is also the place where the penitent souls reach the end of their path of expiation, preparing to ‘*rise to the stars*’: it is a divine forest, in which a light breeze is blowing, produced by the movement of the ‘*celestial spheres*’<sup>5</sup>, surrounding the Earth. Forwarded in the woods, Dante finds himself blocked by a river, the “*Lethe*”, who has the power to erase the memory of the sins; in Eden there is also a second river, the “*Eunoe*”, which has the power to strengthen the memory of the good deeds accomplished by the atoning souls. Beyond “*Lethe*”, a beautiful young woman appears, *Matelda*, who is the only inhabitant of the place (a possible allegory of the lost state of man’s innocence): she helps Dante pass through the river “*Lethe*”, when suddenly a procession of souls (representing the flowing of human history) comes forward, headed by a two-wheeled cart pulled by a *griffin*<sup>6</sup> (symbolizing the Church), on which *Beatrice* sits triumphantly: she is now the personification of *Theology* and her dress has the colors of the three ‘*theological virtues*’ of ‘*Faith*’ (*white*), ‘*Hope*’ (*green*) and ‘*Charity*’ (*red*). *Beatrice* reproaches Dante for his intellectual pride, and he cries bitterly, in response to her reproaches. Then he assists to a new procession, an allegory of the *Biblical* and *Churches* history, which includes a denunciation of the corrupt *Papacy* of the time: a harlot (the *Papacy*) is dragged away on a chariot (the *Church*) by a giant (the French monarchy, which in 1309, under King Philip IV, succeeded in moving the ‘*Papal Seat*’ from Rome to Avignon). *Beatrice* finally submerges Dante in the waters of the *Eunoe*, preparing him for the ascent to “*Paradise*”.

He enters into it after crossing a ‘*sphere of fire*’ (which was believed to exist, to Dante’s time, in the Earth’s upper atmosphere). The ‘*Paradise*’ is distributed along the surface of nine concentric spheres, rotating around the Earth: the Ptolemy’s spheres of the planets Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn and two additional ones, the sphere of ‘*Fixed Stars*’ (where are enjoying God’s beatitude the souls of the people who excelled in the theological virtues of ‘*Faith*’, ‘*Hope*’ and ‘*Love*’) and the ‘*Primum Mobile*’ (the sphere where the *Angels* are located). Beyond those spheres there is the outer universe, dominated by the ‘*Empyrean*’, also called ‘*Mystic Rose*’, inhabited by the Saints and the Prophets and enlightened by the ‘*Divine Trinity*’ (composed of *God Father*, *Jesus* and the *Holy Spirit*). Here *Beatrice* takes leave from Dante to join the ‘*Mystic Rose*’: her place as

Dante's guide is taken by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) (Cantor, 1993), the best expression of the 'Roman Catholic' mysticism, who addresses to Jesus' mother, Mary (the major symbol of 'Divine Grace') a sublime hymn of love, with lyrical accents of great beauty.

The prayer is articulated in two moments: in the first one there is the praise of Mary, as the highest creature in the human hierarchy. Mary is at the same time a virgin and a mother, Jesus' mother and God's daughter:

*Thou Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son,  
humble and high beyond all other creature,  
the limit fixed of the eternal counsel,  
Thou art the one who such nobility  
to human nature gave, that its Creator  
did not disdain to make himself its creature.  
Within thy womb rekindled was the love,  
by heat of which in the eternal peace  
after such wise this flower has germinated.  
Here unto us thou art a noonday torch  
of charity, and below there among mortals  
Thou art the living fountain-head of hope.  
Lady, thou art so great, and so prevailing,  
that he who wishes grace, nor runs to thee,  
his aspirations without wings would fly.  
Not only thy benignity gives succour  
to him who asketh it, but oftentimes  
forerunneth of its own accord the asking.  
In thee compassion is, in thee is pity,  
in thee magnificence; in thee unites  
whate'er of goodness is in any creature.  
Now doth this man, who from the lowest depth  
of the universe as far as here has seen  
one after one the spiritual lives,  
supplicate thee through grace for so much power  
that with his eyes he may uplift himself  
higher towards the uttermost salvation. (Paradise,  
XXXIII, 1- 27)*

The prayer continues in the second part, where Bernard reminds Dante's task to exhort men to overcome their passions and to follow the teaching of the Gospel. Mary's eyes, fixed on Dante, show that St Bernard's plea is welcomed, then she turns her eyes towards the 'Divine Light' (which appears as three bright, concentric circles of different colors, with Jesus' face in evidence).

The following are the Comedy's last verses:

*Here vigour failed the lofty fantasy:  
but now was turning my desire and will,  
even as a wheel that equally is moved,  
the Love which moves the sun and the other stars. (Paradise, XXXIII, 142-14)*

## ELIOT'S EYES ON DANTE

Thomas S. Eliot (1888-1965) wrote three essays about Dante, the first one in 1920, which is contained in "The sacred wood: essays on poetry and criticism" (Eliot, 1921), under the "Dante" title; the second one, under the same title, edited in 1929 and inserted in his "Selected essays 1917 - 1932" (Eliot, 1932), and a third one in 1950, under the title "What

*Dante means to me*" (Eliot, 1965). In the first essay he declares that the 'Divine Comedy' was a demonstration of the fact that a poet, resorting to *allegory*, can expose a philosophical thought without excluding the lyrical expression of emotions. He further examines the wide spectrum of artistic emotions elicited by Dante's verses, from the most sensual ones, as in the episode of *Francesca* (*Hell*, V 82-138), to the most intellectual, as in the episode of *Ulysses* (*Hell*, XXVI 85-142) (as shown in the Conclusions of this paper). As for the philosophical/religious themes, *allegory* is, according to him, the best suited poetic structure to give a visual representation of Dante's concepts.

In his second essay Eliot first observes that Dante's language is *universal*, because all European scholars read *Latin*, in such a way that they were able to understand the Tuscan vernacular, the 'volgare', derived from Latin and rather close to it. In addition to that, the philosophical and theological themes contained in the *Comedy* were well known to medieval scholars, since they all studied on the same texts, the *Bible* (in the Latin translation of "Vulgata"), the Greek classics and the theological treatises of Middle Age. Finally, Dante's use of *allegoric visions* made possible to him the illustration of the most abstract and spiritual themes: 'Speech varies, but our eyes are all the same. And allegory was not a local Italian custom, but a universal European method.' *Hell* can only be experienced through the projection of sensory images.

About the canticles of "Purgatory" and "Paradise", Eliot writes: "from the Purgatorio one learns that a straightforward philosophical statement can be great poetry; from the Paradiso, that more and more rarified and remote 'states of beatitude' can be material for great poetry'. As an example, the following is Dante's definition of 'free will':

*Forth from the hand of Him, who fondles it  
before it is, like to a little girl  
weeping and laughing in her childish sport,  
issues the simple soul, that nothing knows,  
save that, proceeding from a joyous Maker,  
gladly it turns to that which gives it pleasure.  
Of trivial good at first it tastes the savour;  
is cheated by it, and runs after it,  
if guide or rein turn not aside its love.' (Purgatory,  
XVI, 85-93)*

Eliot finally examines the question of the poetic credibility of the "Divine Comedy". This is his answer: 'We must assume that the reader can obtain the full aesthetic enjoyment without sharing the beliefs of the author'. A related question is whether the poet believes in what he is writing. Eliot answer: 'We can distinguish between Dante's beliefs as a man and his beliefs as a poet. But we are forced to believe that there is a particular relation between the two and that the poet means what he says.'

In his third essay, entitled "What Dante means to me", Eliot pays a renewed tribute to the Italian poet, calling him his teacher: 'Of what one learns, and goes on learning, from Dante I should like to make three points. The first is, that of the very few poets of similar stature there is none, not even Virgil, who had been a more attentive student to the art of poetry, or a more scrupulous, painstaking and conscious practitioner of the craft. The whole study and practice of Dante

seems to me to teach that the poet should be the servant of his language, rather than the master of it... Dante seems to me to have a place in Italian literature—which, in this respect, only Shakespeare has in ours; that is, they give body to the soul of the language, conforming themselves, the one more and the other less. That is one lesson: that the great master of a language should be the great servant of it... The second lesson of Dante—and it is one which no poet, in any language known to me, can teach—is the lesson of width of emotional range. The *Divine Comedy* expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity's despair and the beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing... The task of the poet, in making people comprehend the incomprehensible, demands immense resources of language; and in developing the language, enriching the meaning of words and showing how much words can do, he is making possible a much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed.'

The third lesson is the following: 'Dante is, beyond all other poets of our continent, the most European ... The Italian of Dante is somehow our language from the moment we begin to try to read it; and the lessons of craft, of speech and of exploration of sensibility are lessons which any European can take to heart and try to apply in his own tongue.'

In the same essay, Eliot makes also references to Dante's constant use of the 'triple rhyme' in his triplets: "Twenty years after writing 'The Waste Land', I wrote, in 'Little Gidding' a passage which is intended to be the nearest equivalent to a canto of the *Inferno* or the *Purgatorio*, in style as well as content, that I could achieve... Dante thought in 'third rhyme'... English is poorer than the Italian of rhyming word... This section of a poem—not the length of one canto of the *Divine Comedy*—cost me far more time and trouble and vexation than any passage of the same length that I have ever written...". This is that poetic excerpt (Eliot, 1943):

Ash on an old man's sleeve  
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.  
Dust in the air suspended  
Marks the place where a story ended.  
Dust inbreathed was a house —  
The walls, the wainscot and the mouse,  
The death of hope and despair,  
This is the death of air.  
There are flood and drouth  
Over the eyes and in the mouth,  
Dead water and dead sand  
Contending for the upper hand.  
The parched eviscerate soil  
Gapes at the vanity of toil,  
Laughs without mirth.  
This is the death of earth.  
Water and fire succeed  
The town, the pasture and the weed.  
Water and fire deride  
The sacrifice that we denied.  
Water and fire shall rot  
The marred foundations we forgot,  
Of sanctuary and choir.

This is the death of water and fire. (*Four Quartets* - Little Gidding, II, 1-24)

Eliot concludes his essay, declaring: 'Certainly I have borrowed lines from [Dante], in the attempt to reproduce, or rather to arouse in the reader's mind the memory, of some Dantesque scene, and thus establish a relationship between the medieval *inferno* and modern life. Readers of my 'Waste Land' will perhaps remember that the vision of my city-clerks trooping over London Bridge from the railway station to their offices evoked the reflection 'I had not thought death had undone so many'; and that in another place I deliberately modified a line of Dante by altering it—'sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled.' And I gave the references in my notes, in order to make the reader who recognized the allusion, know that I meant him to recognize it, and know that he would have missed the point if he did not recognize it. The intention, of course, was the same as with my allusions to Dante in 'The Waste Land': to present to the mind of the reader a parallel, by means of contrast, between the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, which Dante visited, and a hallucinated scene after an air-raid'.

## CONCLUSIONS

Dante possessed high thinking and a great spontaneity of expression, qualities acquired through the appropriate use of people's language; those qualities were accompanied by a vast cultural background and a deep knowledge of the human heart. All that conferred to his verses a character of universality, as evidenced by the dramatic appeal of *Ulysses* to his travel companions, a few moments before their sinking into the waters of the ocean:

'Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang;  
ye were not made to live like unto brutes,  
but for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge.' (Hell, XXVI, 118-120)

As for Eliot, he considered Dante his teacher in poetry. In the *incipit* of "The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock", he even inserted a quotation from Dante's "*Inferno*" (XXVII, 61-66), referring to the fact that his poem was the interior monologue of an isolated city man, frustrated and incapable of action:

If I believed that my reply were made  
To one who to the world would e'er return,  
This flame without more flickering would stand still;  
But inasmuch as never from this depth  
Did any one return, if I hear true,  
Without the fear of infamy I answer.

But he strongly differs from Dante's use of literature as a means to enlighten the minds of the people, following the principle of 'literature as a vehicle for moral messages'. Six centuries of world's history and the dramatic events of the war carnages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created disillusionment and a new credo: 'l'art pour l'art' (art for art's sake) (Poe, 1850).

In spite of this disillusionment, Dante's literary representation of religion and his possible influence on Eliot's poetry continues to arouse the interest of scholars, as underlined in a paper of W. Franke (2018), entitled "Religion and representation", where three interesting essays on the subject are cited: the first one is a paper entitled "Dante in T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets: Vision, Mysticism, and the Mind's Journey to

God”, by A. Aresi (2016), the second is the volume “*Dante’s Person: an Ethics of the Transhuman*”, by H. Webb (2016) and the third one is “*Dante, Mercy, and the Beauty of the Human Person*”, edited by L. J. De Lorenzo & V. Montemaggi (2017).

## END NOTES

1. Translation by *Lyric Translate* (2017). Pdf retrieved from: <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/sonetto-sonnet.html>
2. The *Hell’s* circle of lustful people, where *Queen Dido’s* soul is, who committed suicide for love, when *Aeneas* abandoned her, as described in Virgil’s poem “*Aeneis*” (29-19 BC).
3. Launcelot was a valiant knight of King Arthur of Britain: he fell in love with Genevieve, Arthur’s wife.
4. According to the ‘*Geocentric Model of the sky*’ by the Greek astronomer Ptolemy (about 100-170 AD), the celestial spheres contain the orbits of the various planets surrounding the Earth (the Moon and the Sun were considered as planets).
5. According to the ‘*Geocentric Model of the sky*’ by the Greek astronomer Ptolemy (about 100-170 AD), the celestial spheres contain the orbits of the various planets surrounding the Earth (the Moon and the Sun were considered as planets).
6. A legendary creature with the body, tail, and back legs of a lion; the head and wings of an eagle.
7. Third rhyme (Terza rima): it is a three-line stanza using chain rhyme in the pattern ABA BCB CDC DED etc.

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