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FRAMING DANTE AT HARVARD: A STUDY OF EARLY DANTEAN TRACES IN ELIOT'S "CIRCE'S PALACE"

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Eliot's "Circe's Palace", which he wrote during his student years at Harvard. The conducted analysis surveys several images, namely: that of an unnamed female figure, of a garden, of flowers, and of a fountain. The selected images have been discussed in relation to the transitional section of the "Divine Comedy – "Purgatory." More specifically, the sequence of images in question has been paralleled to Dante's encounter with Matelda and his arrival in Earthly Paradise, which spans the development of the events starting from "Canto XXVIII" onwards. This article advances the tentative conjecture that the female figure from Eliot's poem could be viewed as an evocation of Matelda, the garden – as an allusion to the Garden of Eden, the flowers – as a reference to the flowers which Matelda gathers, and the fountain – as the source from which the Lethe and Eunoe spring forth. In the course of the conducted analysis this article also addresses the specific nature of Eliot's poetic image in "Circe's Palace" which poses certain problems for the development of the parallel between the two texts. A possible solution to this problem is conveyed and a remark related to the transference of religious and theological symbols from "Purgatory" to "Circe's Palace" is also conveyed.

KEYWORDS: T.S. Eliot, Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, Purgatory, Circe's Palace, Modernism, Poetry

In 1989 Dominic Manganiello published his book "T.S. Eliot and Dante". In it he traces the multilayered and multifaceted influence which the Florentine poet exercised over Eliot's own poetic enterprise. In the course of his book, Manganiello foregrounds a claim which has solidified itself as a starting point for all critics, who are bold and daring enough to navigate the uncharted waters through which the voices of the two poets could be heard to resonate as one; namely, the fact that Eliot's work, at least in its broader sense and larger scope, resembles Dante's "Divine Comedy" (Manganiello, 1989, p.16). In this respect, Manganiello is the first true argonaut who dares to set sail from the shoreline of this claim and venture off on an interpretative voyage towards the mysterious horizon where Dante and Eliot converge. The interpretative map which Manganiello manages to chart is divided into three parts which correspond "to the great sections that make up the *Divine Comedy*, *The Waste Land* being Eliot's *Inferno*, *Ash-Wednesday* his *Purgatorio*, and *Four Quartets* his *Paradiso*" (Manganiello, 1989, p.16). It has been more than thirty-five years since the end of Manganiello's academic voyage, yet there is no other argonaut to undertake another such an odyssey in order to continue to map the hidden contours and uncharted territories of this vast and partially explored poetic influence which stretches over the entirety of Eliot's works.

There are numerous references, so skillfully woven into the fabric of Eliot's poetry, so inextricably linked to the meaning of a particular element from the "Divine Comedy," that at a certain point, Eliot's poems cannot be completely understood without knowledge of Dante's text, as well the theological and religious symbolism which underlines it. So much do these two authors intersect and align with one another, considering the more than five hundred years that separate them, that to understand a line from Eliot we often have to read an entire canto from Dante to be able to see and comprehend what exactly lies before our eyes (and even then, we still often only see what lies on the surface). What is more, our understanding, as well as our appreciation of Dante, is only magnified by our reading of Eliot, for no other author, as Manganiello himself points out, could have paid more meaningful and worthwhile a tribute to another author, than Eliot to Dante (Manganiello, 1989, p.1). The merits for this claim are far too numerous and far too complex to be addressed meaningfully within the scope of a single article, perhaps even a book would fail to encapsulate the dimensions of this profoundly intense artistic bond, as the theological and religious architecture of the "Divine Comedy," as well as the presence of Dante's creative genius, unfolds across numerous dimensions of figurative and symbolic meaning, all of which are bound and threaded together through the fabric of Eliot's poetry.

With this consideration in mind, the current study aims to focus on one of Eliot's earliest poems, which he published in *The Harvard Advocate* while he was a student at Harvard University. The poem in question is one of several other poems which were subsequently named "The Harvard Advocate Poems," after the student magazine in which they appeared. The poems were written between 1907 and 1910, when Eliot was already in his late teens and was gradually entering his early twenties. An insight

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into these poems would be worthwhile, since the scholarly focus of critics and academics to this point has fallen specifically on Eliot's major works up to 1943, the year in which "Four Quartets" appeared as a whole work in print format. It is not surprising that it is Eliot's major poetic works that have attracted the attention of critics, who have sought to cast their light on the correspondence between Eliot and Dante, since the complex and multi-layered structure of these major works, as well as their thematic and symbolic depth, lend themselves to a more extensive exploration of the way in which Eliot weaves and recreates images, symbols, themes, motifs, and even entire scenes, from the "Divine Comedy" within the scope of his own poetry.

Against the background of the critical interest in these major poems, which have traditionally been identified as the most significant repository for Dante's influence over Eliot's oeuvre, it would be beneficial for the academic community, as well as for anyone with an interest in Eliot's work, to divert their gaze away from these cardinal works and to turn their attention to Eliot's minor poems, which seem to be overlooked by scholars and critics. In keeping with this idea, the present examination seeks to illustrate, as far as it is possible to do so, that Eliot's major works are not the only source that accounts for Dante's presence in Eliot's creative output. It is the intention of this study to highlight, as well as to draw the attention of Eliot's critics, to the hypothesis that Dante, as well as the "Divine Comedy," were already on Eliot's mind in 1907-1910, when he was still a student at Harvard. In making this proposition, the present work does not intend to impose the idea that Dante's presence in this early poem is as crystallized and refined as it is in his more mature works. Nor is it the intent of this work to advance the view that Eliot's evocation of Dante is as precise as it is in, say, "Four Quartets," nor that the symmetry of his poetry with the "Divine Comedy" is as meticulously calculated – no, the present study does not make and will not make such propositions. The one aspect of this study which might be useful to both a seasoned critic of Eliot's work and an admirer of his poetry, who is sometimes the most insightful of all critics, is the idea that even in his student years, Eliot developed an interest in Dante, an interest that is reflected in a particular poem of this period, a period that predates the publication of "Prufrock" by at least half a decade.

The total number of poems which Eliot composed, during the period 1907-1910 (a period in which he himself was part of the editorial board of *The Harvard Advocate*), numbered ten short poems (I take the liberty of using the word *'short'*, since many of the poems he wrote in his later years were of considerably longer length) which we might call experimental. It is important to clarify that these poems are not experimental because they introduce some unheard-of novelty into their verse or structure – I call them experimental because with them Eliot is simply experimenting with writing poetry, in other words, he is training his hand with both poetic form and rhyme, but also with style. He himself does not deny this. In "Poets at Work: The Paris Review Interviews" (1989), Eliot is asked if: "he remembers the circumstances under which [he] began to write poetry" (Plimpton, 1989, p.28). Eliot explains that he had tried his hand at writing poetry before his years at Harvard, but he suppressed these poems completely, so much so that they did not exist (Plimpton, 1989, p.28). The first poetic endeavors which he shared with the world were those that appeared in *The Harvard Advocate* which, he admits, were written as a writing activity, or an exercise, as he himself puts it, for his English teacher (Plimpton, 1989, p.29). Regarding these poems, as well as his subsequent editorship in the university journal, he says the following:

> Then I wrote a few at Harvard, just enough to qualify for election to an editorship on The Harvard Advocate, which I enjoyed. Then I had an outburst during my junior and senior year. I became more prolific, under the influence of Baudelaire and then of Jules Laforgue, whom I discovered I think in my junior year at Harvard (Plimpton, 1989, p. 29).

Two important things come out of this interview regarding his early endeavors at writing poetry. The first pertains to him experimenting and exercising his hand with poetry, the latter to the fact he wrote these poems under the influence of other poets.

To a certain extent, Eliot is indeed quite sincere in this statement, for the influence of Baudelaire and Laforgue is indeed felt; but, as we shall see in a moment, he spares two other influences of his that are also present in these early works. It is no secret that these two authors were among Eliot's earliest poetic influences, which in one way or another found their way into the Nobel laureate's early verse. He himself does not conceal this influence, saying quite candidly, in "A Talk on Dante" that: "(...) Jules

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Laforgue (...) was the first to teach me how to speak, to teach me the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech" (Eliot, 1952, p. 179). Baudelaire, on the other hand, taught Eliot that the poetic could be derived from "the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis" (Eliot, 1952, p.179). Indeed, when we read these early poems, we can perceive how it does not appear all that unlikely that he may have been inspired by the idea that "the source of (...) poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic" (Eliot, 1952, p. 179-180). Support for this proposition is derived from the poem "Spleen" (one of the ten poems which were published in the *Advocate*), in which Eliot conveys, in Baudelaire's unique style, the sense of enchanting melancholy that looms over an ordinary Sunday. This melancholy, or "the actual experience of the disillusioned soul" (Weinberg, 1969, p.26) generates a feeling of existential fatigue that causes the narrator to accuse life of being "a little bald and gray" (Eliot, "Spleen"), which directly compliments Baudelaire's disillusioned and bleak view on life. Above all, this quote manages to reverberate perhaps one of the most central themes in all of Baudelaire's poetry, namely the "meaninglessness of existence which leads the soul to madness" (Weinberg, 1969, p.55) which is to be overcome through death. Weinberg explains that:

> So terrible is the suffering caused by it that after trying in vain to escape it by evil (...) its victims welcome death – the great Baudelarian theme – as a deliverance, praised as the only event to be looked forward to (Weinberg, 1969, p. 55).

Weinberg indicates that in Baudelarian terms: "(...) the poet may find the beauty which he had always dreamed for beyond the grave. Only beyond the tomb will the infinite curiosity, which is the source of the spleen, be satisfied" (Weinberg, 1969, p. 55); hence, the reason why the narrator from Eliot's poem is waiting: "hats and glove in hand / (...) on the doorstep of the Absolute" (Eliot, "Spleen").

Yet, this poem, and the other such poems he wrote in this period, are "more Laforguian than Baudelarian" (Weinberg, 1969, p. 22). In his article "T.S. Eliot and Jules Laforgue" (1983), Soldo surveys the instances in which Laforgue's influence is felt in the poems which Eliot wrote during his student years at Harvard University. According to Soldo, in "Nocturne", Eliot deliberately modifies one of the greatest love stories, that of Romeo and Juliet, in a typical Laforguian manner; through a specific downplaying or understatement of emotion which renders the theme of love somewhat dull and boring (Soldo, 1983, p. 142-143). Hence the reason why the feelings between the two lovers are presented as unfolding: "beneath a bored but courteous moon" (Eliot, "Nocturne"). In "Humoresque," Eliot tries his hand at writing in colloquial speech, an aspect of Laforgue's poetry that greatly appeared to him (Soldo, 1983, p.144). The Sunday setting in "Spleen" directly complements a number of poems by Laforgue which all unfold during Sundays (Soldo, 1983, p.145). Here, Eliot "set out to write [in] the innovative techniques and tone of Laforgue" (Soldo, 1983, p.145) which included: *a)* a breaking away from formal rhyme scheme patterns and *b)* the use of vers libre (Soldo, 1983, p. 145-146).

Although Eliot does highlight the names of Baudelaire and Laforgue during his New York interview, he says nothing about another important influence of his, that of the metaphysical poets. Although in his more mature years (both as a person and as a poet) he would vocalize the impact that these poets had had on his work, it was not until 1921 that this critical disclosure of his was presented to the world in the form of an essay, entitled "The Metaphysical Poets." Yet, at this time Eliot was already thirty-three years old and was not only a different person from the young Harvard student, but a different poet from the editor of *The Harvard Advocate*, who wrote experimental poetry. Apart from the fact that he came across Donne's name while writing a review of Herbert Grierson's "Metaphysical Poetry," and that he became more familiar with Donne's work in the course of writing the review, little is known about this early encounter (see Robertson, 2013, p.1). Although we do not have much background information on Eliot's early impressions of the metaphysical poets, the influence of Donne and Marvell can nevertheless be perceived in these early attempts at writing poetry, which may possibly lead us to believe that these poets had already captivated his mind and imagination as a student. It is well known that in his more mature years Eliot would go on to describe the importance of the metaphysical poets, not only on his style as a poet, but to the whole poetic tradition; but, in the years when Eliot was editor of the Harvard Advocate, the only thing that could lead us to more strongly believe the fact that he was being influenced (or inspired) in one way or another by these poets is the poem "Song" (published on June 3, 1907) which might be regarded as an amalgamative pastiche

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

between “The Flea” from Donne and “To His Coy Mistress” by Marvell. It is no secret that Marvell’s poem is a plea from an unnamed lover to an unnamed lady, within which, the lover urges the lady to live in the moment and to not let opportunity slip away from her because life happens now and every moment is a precious gift. Similarly, the speaker from Eliot’s poem, again unnamed, makes a plea to a lady, also unnamed, that life must be lived now, and opportunity acted upon in the present, as the present moment and the present opportunity are life’s greatest certainties. Notice the remarkable similarities between the following lines from Eliot’s “Song” which read as follows:

> But let us live while yet we may,
> While love and life are free,
> For time is time, and runs away (Eliot, “Song”).

And the following lines from Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” which read as follows:

> Had we but world enough and time,
> This coyness, lady, were no crime (Marvell, “To His Coy Mistress”).

Marvell’s commitment to living in the moment, his idea that opportunity must be seized in the present, the danger and uncertainty that time holds, and the limited time we have available to us are directly reflected in Eliot’s poem with extreme precision. In this poem, Eliot also draws inspiration from Donne’s wit, as well as his use of paradox – here I am referring to the functional use of paradox in poetry as defined by Cleanth Brooks – to create a space, or repository, in which love, or the union between the man and woman, could be fulfilled. If, according to the narrator from Eliot’s poem, neither time nor space existed, then they – here we are talking about the speaker and his beloved – are already one. This directly echoes the functional metaphor of the flea from Donne’s poem, through which the two characters also become one.

The examples discussed are by no means a comprehensive or exhaustive overview of all the instances in which these poets influenced or inspired Eliot during a period in which he himself was experimenting with poetry. These examples are intended to merely draw the reader’s attention to the fact that during this period, Eliot experimented and attempted to emulate certain poets within his own verse and style. Although the influence of these poets has been addressed by critics, some to a greater extent and degree than others, here I am referring to the influence of Baudelaire and Laforgue, there still seems to be unexplored recesses in scholarship related to this early period of Eliot’s oeuvre, which is largely neglected by most of the critics, who examine Eliot’s poetry. The few such studies that do exist, however, completely overlook the impact of one particular poet, who has not only exerted the strongest and most abiding influence over Eliot’s verse, but also over the religious and theological symbolism which underlines it. This poet is Dante.

The fact that Dante is traditionally overlooked in these early poems could certainly be considered as a tendency, or a typical practice, since his presence in Eliot’s poetry is often most clearly associated with the poems from “Prufrock” onwards – this statement, however, does not apply to every single poem thereafter, but rather only to the most fundamental and major of works. There are, of course, occasional remarks and commentaries related to Dante’s influence in his lesser poems, but the comments that are made in relation to that influence are almost always overshadowed by those comments and analyses that are directed at his major works from 1915 onwards. Here I take the liberty of making a clarifying comment. When I say that there are comments or remarks regarding his earlier poems, I am again referring to the poems written after his student years at Harvard. Dante’s impact on his Harvard poetry seems to have been entirely overlooked in favor of his more mature poetry which is traditionally regarded as the main source of insight into the parallel that exists between the two poets. This is probably due to the tendency of most critics to think that this poetry reflects Eliot’s more mature poetic mind, or his more refined abilities as a poet, which allowed him to weave within his own verse a voice as multilayered and as complex in symbolic meaning as Dante’s. There is undoubtedly a connection between the mature Eliot and Dante that is gradually crystallized after his thirtieth birthday, first in his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1919), published when Eliot was 31, then in his essay “Dante” (1929), published when he was 41, and, finally, in his lecture on Dante, entitled “What Dante Means to Me” (1951), delivered before the Italian Institute in London when Eliot was 63.

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

Unquestionably the mature Eliot articulates well his attitude, appreciation, and homage to Dante, but by then Eliot had already won the Nobel Prize for Literature (awarded in 1948) as well as the Dante Gold Medal (1959) and was a radically different person and poet from the Harvard student still learning how to write poetry.

Typically, when a critic discusses the parallel between Eliot and Dante within the framework of these more primary and more mature works of his, they have the convenience of using his criticism as a point of reference – here I refer to the aforementioned essays in which Eliot describes the ways in which Dante influenced and inspired him. This is indeed a great convenience, since a hypothesis or conjecture about Dante's impact in any of his more prominent and central works could easily be tied to a supporting quotation from these essays, or from one's interpretation of them. Yet, when we are discussing a period in which this relationship is not yet clearly defined, nor clearly spelled out as a stable critical position, things become much more complicated, as we have to work without a safety net. In this particular case, we have to make a critical assessment of his attitude towards Dante based only on one particular poem and on the ways in which Dante is woven into the structure of the poem in question. Yet, this seems like a worthwhile exercise in close reading, by means of which we could gather enough information from the poem itself, so that we can make some educated guess about Eliot's attitude towards Dante during his student years – an attitude that remains largely bypassed by the critical community concerned with Eliot's work.

Since the poem itself is short it does not prevent us from presenting it within the framework of the article, so that those who want to refer to it can do so more easily. This is the poem as it was printed in *The Harvard Advocate* on November 25, 1908:

Around her fountain which flows
With the voice of men in pain,
Are flowers that no man knows.
Their petals are fanged and red
With hideous streak and stain.
They sprang from the limbs of the dead. –
We shall not come here again.

Panthers rise from their lairs
In the forest which thickens below,
Along the garden stairs
The sluggish python lies;
The peacock's walk, stately and slow
And they look at us with the eyes
Of men whom we knew long ago (Eliot, "Circe's Palace").

To begin with, let us first attempt to identify who the nameless female figure is – the same one that is referred to as only '*her*' in the poem's first line. The modest proposal which this article wishes to advance as a hypothesis is the tentative conjecture that the female presence in Eliot's poem could be viewed as an evocation of Matelda, whom Dante encounters shortly after entering Earthly Paradise (The Garden of Eden). Dante beholds Matelda in Purgatory, more specifically in "Canto XXVIII", when he arrives in Earthly Paradise. After walking for some time and marveling at the vibrant vegetation, Dante arrives at a stream which blocks his path. Upon directing his gaze towards the other bank of the river to further marvel at the beautiful greenery, particularly the flowers, he sees "a solitary woman, / singing, and gathering up flower on flower – / the flowers that colored all of her pathway" (Dante, "Canto XXVIII"). The woman recognizes that Dante appears lost and offers valuable explanations regarding Earthly Paradise, as well as the nature and source of the streams that flow through it. Regarding this matter, she says the following:

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

The water that you see does not spring from
a vein that vapor—cold—condensed—restores,
like rivers that acquire or lose their force;

it issues from a pure and changeless *fountain*,
which by the will of God regains as much
as, on two sides, it pours and it divides (Dante, "Canto XXVIII").

Matelda highlights the fact the waters of Earthly Paradise are divided into two rivers – the first, the river Lethe which has the "(...) power to end / one's memory of sin" (Dante, "Canto XXVIII"), and the second, Eunoe, which can "can restore recall of each good deed" (Dante, "Canto XXVIII"). In "Canto XXXI", Matelda will plunge Dante into the waters of the Lethe where he will be further purified of his sinfulness before he can face the four handmaidens of Beatrice. Subsequently, in "Canto XXXIII", she will immerse Dante in the waters of Eunoe.

Yet, what is the symbolic role of Matelda within the framework of the last canticas of "Purgatory?" One of the primary functions which she performs is to aid the souls in undergoing the final steps of purification and cleansing before their final ascension to Paradise. This proposition is supported by Singleton, who makes the following observation: "it appears that it is Matelda's function to administer the water of the two streams Lethe and Eunoe to all souls reaching this summit as well as to Dante in this most exceptional case of a living man's presence here" (Singleton, 1973, p.768). The waters of the river Lethe are of utmost importance for the completion of the purification process that all souls go through voluntarily (their suffering up to this point is also voluntary). Those souls who have endured and accepted their suffering, as well as repented sincerely and withstood the purification process, are to be immersed in the waters of Lethe, which erase the memory of their sinfulness. Matelda leads the souls into the water, as she does with Dante himself, under the antiphon *Asperges me* which adds further emphasis on the process of purification which she oversees. Matelda also ushers the souls into the river Eunoe, which affirms the goodness in the souls of the penitents. It is precisely through their validated virtues that the penitents ascend to Heaven. Since this final process involves purification by water, and not just any water, but such that streams from the most Holy of sources, Matelda's function can be compared to the moment "when the priest sprinkles the holy water on the sinner who has confessed himself, thus absolving him" (Singleton, 1973, p.769). This interpretation ties in perfectly with the fact that she sings *Asperges me,* when she purifies Dante in the waters of Lethe, as the antiphon celebrates the very moment when a person is cleansed of his sins and his soul becomes whiter than snow (in other words, completely pure and blameless). This notion is expressed in the following lines: "Cleanse me of sin with hyssop, that I may be purified; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Singleton, 1973, p.769). This reading is also supported by Barolini, who claims that "Matelda — now named for the first and only time, in Purgatorio XXXIII "(...) functions as a kind of priestess responsible for taking Dante and Stazio to bathe in Eunoè" (Barolini, "Canto XXXIII Commentary"). In this capacity, she, similar to a priest, carries out the asperges unto Dante and Stazio, after which the pilgrim "[recalls] his good deeds, [and] (...) returns to Beatrice. It is here where the journey in Purgatory ends, and Dante is now ready to begin his journey towards Heaven by rising to the stars" (River, 2013, "Canto XXXIII"). Ultimately, "Matelda becomes teacher rather than lyric lover, and directs Dante to focus on the unfolding of the procession that represents the coming of the word of God into history (Barolini, "Canto XXIX Commentary").

It is possible that the unnamed lady from Eliot's poem is a representation of Matelda for two main reasons – the first is related to her proximity to a fountain and the second is linked to the fact that there are flowers around this fountain. The fountain in question, as well as the flowers that grow there, are described at the very beginning of Eliot's poem:

Around her *fountain* which flows
(...)
are *flowers* that no man knows.
Their petals are fanged and red (Eliot, "Circe's Palace").

Let us throw further light on the two elements (the fountain and the flowers) individually, so that we can gain a better understanding of not only how they are presented in the final canticas of "Purgatory,"

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

but how they function symbolically within the context of Earthly Paradise and in relation to Matelda. Only when we have obtained sufficient understanding of the significance of the fountain and of the flowers in the context of Purgatory can we construct a coherent parallel with Eliot's poem, in which these details are presented in their most compressed form, for such is simply the nature of poetry, especially Eliot's, in which a single word sometimes requires several pages of explanation.

Before Virgil's departure as Dante's guide, he directs the pilgrim to gaze upon the beauty of Earth Paradise which is visible from a distance: "(...) look at the grasses, flowers, and the shrubs / born here, spontaneously, of the earth" (Dante, "Canto XXVII"). Subsequently, when Dante has already entered the periphery of the Garden of Eden and has caught sight of Matelda, he makes mention of the fact that she is plucking flowers:

> I saw a solitary woman moving,
> singing, and *gathering up flower on flower—*
> *the flowers that colored all of her pathway* (Dante, "Canto XXVII").

When Dante attempts to strike up a conversation with Matelda, he describes the manner in which she turns to gaze upon him (which again makes mention of the flowers which surround her):

> (...) so did she turn, upon the *little red*
> *and yellow flowers*, to me, no differently
> than would a virgin, lowering chaste eyes (Dante, "Canto XXVII").

Even though she does not immediately speak back to Dante, she smiles at him. The instance in which Matelda graces Dante with her smile again provides us with a mention of the flowers which, as it would seem, underlines an existing connection, or association, which is periodically evoked almost every time Dante describes her.

> Erect, along the farther bank, she smiled,
> her hands entwining *varicolored flowers* (Dante, "Canto XXVII").

Had Eliot been a little more specific when presenting the flowers, either as a functional image or as a symbol, their interpretation would probably have been much easier. The fact is, however, that Eliot is vague in his description, as he is vague in numerous other occasions in his poetry. What is interesting, however, is that Dante also does not name the flowers with any precision or accuracy – in other words, like Eliot, he also does not define exactly what they are; that is, he does not give us their type. Like Eliot, who simply generalizes them as *flowers*, Dante, as he watches Matelda walk along the riverbank, does the same thing – he names them simply as *flowers*. If Dante had said that she was picking roses, just as an example, then we could much more easily understand the symbolism of the picked rose, and of the rose in general. He seems to be so captivated by the presence of Matelda, who enthralls him in such a charming way, that he does not even pay attention to the exact type of flowers she is picking – Dante just brushes them off as a minor, or even somewhat trivial, detail that is overshadowed by Matelda's presence. The generalization of the flowers on behalf of both authors is somewhat problematic (even though it is also an intriguing point of convergence) as it prevents us from providing a more accurate and more precise conclusion related to their role within the framework of the parallel that is formed between the image of the nameless woman and the flowers around her from Eliot's poem and Dante's encounter with Matelda in the outskirts of Earthly Paradise. This generalization is problematic as in the Biblical tradition, flowers are typically ascribed with a specific symbolic function which is dependent on their type. For example, "the lily represents purity, innocence, and resurrection, while the rose symbolizes love, beauty, and hope" (Thursd, 2024). Nevertheless, we do have some leeway as far as their interpretation is concerned, for just as the flowers have a specific symbolism that is associated with their designated species, so too do they have a general symbolism within Biblical discourse. On the one hand, the presence of the flowers in both Eliot's poem and in Dante's encounter with Matelda could be indicative of purity and of life (see Thursd, 2014). What is more, these flowers could also stand in symbolic relation to virtue, among which: love, hope, and faith (see Thursd, 2014). Ultimately, the flowers could also serve as a symbol, as well as of a tactile indicator,

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

for the presence of God, as well as of His love (see Thursd, 2014). Although the combinations, as well as the different variations of these combinations are numerous, we can safely assume that the flowers are, at least in a broader and more general sense, associated with the promise of a new life, with resurrection, and with a new beginning – a beginning which is not only pure and untarnished, but also imbued with the pure love of God that is life-giving and renewing (see "Flowers in Christian Symbolism"). The blossoming of the flower is symbolic of this process, as well as of this promise, which bears witness to God's presence which bestows life, beauty, and love (see "Flowers in Christian Symbolism"). This idea is conveyed in "Isaiah 35:1-2" which reads as follows:

> The desert and the parched land will be glad;
> the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
> Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom (Isaiah 35:1-2, NIV).

This quote affirms the idea that the very blooming of the flowers could be interpreted as a sign of God's promise of resurrection and renewal after death. Thus, the blossoming of the flowers is not merely a natural phenomenon, but a testament to God's promise to breathe life once more where it had ceased. This notion is further developed in "Peter 1: 24-25" which reads as follows:

> All people are like grass,
> and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
> the grass withers and the flowers fall,
> but the word of the Lord endures forever (Peter 1: 24-25, NIV).

This quote emphasizes the fact that man is not immortal, but rather transient and perishable, like everything living on earth. Like the grass and the flowers, man too will wither and cease to exist, so that he could flourish and bloom once more. The cyclical framework within which the flowers and the grass exist, that of life, death, rebirth, and reincarnation, is paralleled with the lives of human beings, who after death, like the flowers, will bloom once more in their new life in Heaven. Just as the transience and withering of the stems does not mean an absolute end for the flowers, so too does the withering of our bodies not mean a definite end to our existence, but rather a state of transition. Indeed, death is an integral part of this process, but so is rebirth – in other words, this is a necessary death, one through which all living things must pass in order to be reborn and blossom once more into eternal life.

From Dante's description it is clear that Matelda is surrounded by flowers, which she collects along the bank of the river that divides them. Yet what could these flowers signify, in the context of the scene which Dante presents us with? On the one hand, we could make the speculation that the flowers around her are a functional symbol, as well as a perceivable indicator, both to us as readers, but also to the very souls who reach the banks of that river, of the fact that God's promise of a new life and of renewal will be fulfilled. As we have already mentioned, flowers are typically associated with the cyclical nature of life that results in a new and pure beginning. It should be noted that the flowers in question are among the first things that the souls see when they enter Earthly Paradise; and they are the first, or among the first things, for a specific reason. In other words, their presence there is not mere chance (in the sense that they just happen to grow there) but rather, they are there to give an important signal to the souls who have made their arrival. In this sense, the flowers become a beacon which signals to the souls that they will be renewed and restored to their state of original purity and sinlessness before the Fall. This proposition draws inspiration from the specific way in which these flowers (as well as any other form of vegetation) grow in Earthly Paradise. Matelda informs Dante that everything there grows without seed (see "Canto XXVIII", lines 116-117). The fact that these flowers are not born of seed leads us to believe that they are completely pure and undefiled. Dante does not mention this particular feature of theirs for no reason. We can make the assumption that they are meant to symbolize the state of humanity before the Fall – a state of utter and absolute purity and unity with the Divine. These flowers symbolize and embody Creation in its most idealistic and immaculate state – the state in which Adam and Eve experienced in the Garden of Eden before the plucking of the apple. The very fact that these flowers exist without having gone through the process of birth, growth, and withering which are an integral part of the mortal world, testifies for the direct covenant between God and his Creation. So immediate is the relationship between God and his Creation in Earthly Paradise that the very

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existence of the flowers is not subject to any process or phenomenon, but solely to God's Will, which brings life into existence. It is quite possible that these flowers, which are not inadvertently placed by Dante at the very beginning of the Garden of Eden, serve as the most prominent and obvious sign, not only to the souls who step into the coveted Garden, but also to all of us as readers of the moment of Creation itself – a moment when God created all things through the power of his Will alone. Aside from the possibility that these flowers reveal to the souls that only by believing in God's Will can they be saved, the immaculate existence of the flowers also reminds us that life is a God-given gift which is granted to us completely unconditionally. Like the flowers in Earthly Paradise that bloom with the gift of life, so too will the souls of the penitent bloom once more in full glory and splendor in Heaven in the warmth and radiance of the Creator if they place their faith in Him; Who through his will and love sustains all. This assumption is in some ways in line with one of the main theological propositions that Dante posits in "Purgatory," namely the idea that Divine Love is the motivation behind everything. In this sense, these flowers exist because God, in his boundless and incommensurable love, has willed them to exist – they are, in this sense, the direct embodiment of that moment of Creation in which everything was a direct and uncorrupted embodiment of God's Will and Love; they are a symbol of the original harmony between God and Creation.

One important aspect that we can perceive from the manner in which the pilgrim describes Matelda is the fact that she has some symbolic relationship with the nature that surrounds her (including the flowers that are an integral part of her surroundings). This proposition is supported by Shapiro, who notes that: "Matelda is never separated from the enchanted scene around her" (Shapiro, 1975, p. 171). It appears worthwhile, then, to pay closer attention to the inseparable bond that exists between her and the specific location which she inhabits as a means to reveal something more about this enigmatic figure which Dante does not fully reveal. It seems possible, given her connection to this place, that it could tell us more about her than she herself reveals during her encounter with Dante. The first thing that stands out to us is that Matelda's depiction is in symbolic parallel with the flowers that surround her. These, however, are not ordinary flowers that we might encounter in the fallen world, but are symbolic representations of a certain aspect of divinity, as we have already discussed. The other thing we need to pay attention to is the very nature that surrounds her; and the fact that it is not at all ordinary, as we have already mentioned. Both the flowers and the nature that surrounds her are all highlights of Earthly Paradise with which Matelda forms a harmonious bond. The fact that Matelda's presentation as a figure, as well as her very presence as a character in Dante's discourse, are so inextricably associated with the Garden of Eden allows us to make the claim that she "(...) embodies the pure beauty and innocence of this Terrestrial Paradise, which was the home of Adam and Eve before they disobeyed God and were cast out" (Raffa, 2009, p.212). What is more, "the landscape of the Terrestrial Paradise in which she meets the pilgrim fuses the charms of nature with the graces of a perfect inner life. It is a state of the soul, that of the highest blessedness attainable on earth" (Shapiro, 1965, p.169-170). For this reason, according to Barolini, "Matelda is most of all an unfallen Eve, the unfallen version of one of the original inhabitants of this place" (Barolini, "Canto XXVIII Commentary").

In relation to this role which has been appointed to her, this study disagrees with those critics who attempt to decipher exactly who Matelda was as a historical figure – and such are the majority of studies related to her role in Dante's "Purgatory" – as by giving her a mortal identity and by positioning her within the framework of the fallen world, she is deprived of her purity and of her untarnished innocence which make her the ideal mediator between God and the penitent (or the ideal symbolic presence through which the Divine is interceded) in Earthly Paradise. This work takes into account the fact that the majority of the characters that Dante encounters on his journey were real people, which naturally prompts us to figure out who Matelda was, but in this particular case, this is not only quite pointless, but also quite disadvantageous. Her role is simply such that if we were able to place her within a biographical or historical framework, although this is unlikely given the existing disagreements, as well as the overall lack of credible historical evidence, her harmonious unity with Earthly Paradise would simply dissolve. Her role as a pure and untarnished guide for the souls will also erode, as a mortal identity always mandates sinfulness and corruption. For this reason, this work proposes that it is much more useful to view her as a spiritual ideal, rather than an actual person, as only through a spiritual ideal can the transition between Purgatory and Paradise be made. Moreover, Dante himself does not appear to go into biographical or historical details when he encounters Matelda. It is worthwhile to point this out, as he does frequently engage in such details when addressing certain souls during his journey. This

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does not mean that he is not as interested in her as he is in the other souls that he encounters, quite the opposite. He is so interested in her that he conveys his hatred towards the river which keeps them just three paces apart from each other. Unlike other instances in which Dante is either driven by curiosity or a desire to know the identity of a certain soul he encounters along his way, here he is captivated and entranced by the very presence of the lady, which transcends the confines of identity. She *is*, not because the human or the mortal in her are defining, but because the divine is. In other words, her identity appears far less important to Dante (as it should to us), than what she stands for. It could be possible, though we cannot know for certain, that this is also the reason why Eliot, like Dante, chose not to give an identity to the lady from his own poem. She remains, just like in Dante's discourse, "a solitary woman" (Dante, "Canto XXVIII"), whose identity is overshadowed by not only her divine presence (so overwhelming that it captivates the narrator from Eliot's poem) but also by the symbolic function she performs.

Although we have discussed several different options related to Matelda's function, and even though we have also considered several revealing details related to the place in which she is located and in which she performs these functions, we should define this place in a slightly more precise manner, as it serves as an interesting point of overlap between Dante's narrative and Eliot's poem. The place in question is Earthly Paradise which this article has alluded to several times before. It is worthwhile to devote some attention to the Garden of Eden, as Eliot also makes mention of a garden – referred to only by the word *'garden'* – in the second part of the poem. Even more intriguing is the fact that he refers to, and even depicts the image of this garden, in relation to an unnamed *'she'*, whose development as a figure is also accompanied by flowers and a fountain. What is more, he also highlights the fact that this garden is the inverse of a forest which "thickens below" (Eliot, "Circe's Palace"). This is an important detail in Eliot's poem, as Dante also stresses this distinction in his own description of the Garden. Regarding this matter, Barolini, who lends evidence in support of this proposition, informs us of the following:

> The beginning of Purgatorio XXVIII is one of the most intensely beautiful descriptions of place ever conjured by Dante's pen. The "divina foresta spessa e viva" of Purgatorio 28.2 (in Mandelbaum's beautiful rendition "that forest — dense, alive with green, divine") is, obviously, the in bono counterpart to the "dark wood" ("selva oscura") of of Inferno 1.2 and to the wood of the suicides in Inferno 13: "un bosco / che da neun sentiero era segnato" (a wood on which no path had left its mark [Inf. 13.2-3]) (Barolini, "Canto XXVIII Commentary").

With this remark, Barolini inadvertently draws our attention to a rather intriguing phenomenon in "Circe's Palace," namely, the fact that when Eliot evokes Dante through the images of the unnamed *lady*, the *flowers*, the *garden*, and the *fountain*, his portrayals are not as detailed and vivid as those of Dante, but quite the opposite, they are quite sparse and unadorned. Since previously we were delineating on the representation of Earthly Paradise, let us examine the manner in which Dante describes the Garden and later compare it to Eliot's own representation, so that we can get a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Barolini does an excellent job when it comes to conveying the extraordinary beauty of Earthly Paradise in her commentary on "Canto XXVIII." Regarding the beauty of the Garden of Eden, as well as the eloquent manner in which Dante conveys its ineffable radiance, she writes the following:

> It [the Garden] is the absolute perfection of natural beauty, a natural beauty raised to the level of art. We feel and hear its natural art in Dante's beautiful language. The (...) sweet breeze (...) of Petrarchan memory blows without alteration, making the leaves of the trees incline toward the morning, but never so much as to disturb the little birds in their branches or to cause them to leave off (...) 'all their arts.' The musical art of the little birds consists of singing in counterpoint to the rhythmic undertone provided by the rustling leaves (...). The sound of the leaves is compared to that of the wind blowing through the branches of the ancient pine forest near Ravenna: "the wind that sounds from branch to branch along the shore of Classe, through the pines." This is a reference to the ancient pine forest that lines the seashore outside of Ravenna, famous in antiquity and in Dante's age and still extraordinarily evocative and beautiful in ours (Barolini, "Canto XXVIII Commentary").

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In contrast to the breathtaking beauty which Dante presents, Eliot's portrayal of the garden, if we can even call it that, is conveyed solely through one word, which we find on line ten of his poem – "*garden*" (Eliot, "Circe's Palace"). One thing that appears striking, especially when considered in relation to the manner in which Eliot evokes Dante in his later works, is the specific way in which he casts Dantean imagery in this early poem. What we gradually become aware of, even after a brief glance at the surface of the poem, is the scarcity of visual details in the construction of the poetic image. This is also relevant for those images which are supposed to contain the figurative connotations and visual traces of the Dantean imagery which Eliot endeavored to project within the framework of his poem; which hinders the reliability of the parallel between the two authors and, by analogy, between the two texts. As the image does not possess the adequate visual substance to perform its role of a repository for the figurative and visual dimensions of the projected image, the ability of the parallel to bridge the gap between the two text and to effectively span the vast divide between time and space that exists between the two authors, is also impeded; as the parallel cannot transmit the referent to a corresponding visual space, as the image, the visual space at hand, has collapsed into a mere word which fails to gesture towards the visual. Even in those instances in which we attempt to draw a parallel between certain images, symbols, themes, motifs, or episodes from Dante, which we have recognized as being similar or complementary in Eliot, or at least, being present in his work (regardless of how vague and ephemeral they might be) will always, due to the thinness of Eliot's poetic image, entail a weak parallel. This correspondence will always be a weak and unstable one as the primary function of the parallel is, as I have stated above, that of a bridge – one that seeks to connect the gap between the two texts across the multiple dimensions of literariness (spatially, symbolically, visually, semantically, etc.) – which not only enables their complementary elements to move in closer proximity to one another, but also to be juxtaposed in order to render what the nature of their complementation is; if they are similar, how so, and if they are different, as is sometimes the case, how that difference is manifested.

Yet, in the case of Eliot's references towards Dante in "Circe's Palace" not only is the very nature of the parallel problematic, but the repository (the poetic image itself) in which the figurative connotations and the visual associations are transferred is also quite troublesome: as the image is so visually thin that it cannot assume anything in its own framework. Regardless if the lack of depth and width of Eliot's image is deliberate or not, if it is the result of his poetical infancy (which could, quite naturally, manifest itself as uncertainty and insecurity in one's early attempts at writing), the fact is that the poetical image here is so profoundly thin and transparent that there is practically no substance in it. The lack of substance is at the core of our conundrum as it is the essence that makes the image visible – and in making it visible, it becomes discernible, perceivable, and identifiable; which ultimately makes it apparent and when something is apparent it becomes recognizable. For only when something is recognized can it be paralleled. In order to find a way out of this predicament we need to devise a way to give agency to Eliot's poetic image which, in turn, will give agency to the parallel between the two texts.

One way of approaching those images through which Eliot evokes Dante is as blank canvases (or as white projection screens) upon which certain images, symbols, scenes, motifs, or themes from Dante, along with their figurative and visual connotations, could be cast. When viewed from this perspective, we can project Matelda, the flowers, the garden, and the fountain of Earthly Paradise onto the blank images of the lady, the flowers, the garden, and the fountain from Eliot's poem. As these images are so devoid of a sensory dimension of their own, they could easily receive and accept any adequate projection which can be accommodated and contained within their frame (as long as certain requirements of theme, form, and composition are met). For this reason, it does not seem all that far-fetched to consider each of these images as something of individual canvases, or even as separate projection screens, upon which certain elements from Dante could be cast and visualized. Although this analogy points us towards a potential possibility through which the parallel could unfold and take shape, we still run the risk of having an image, or for the sake of the analogy, a canvas or a screen, so transparent and translucent that no image could be adequately projected upon. In other words, the very fabric of the image could be so thin, as is the case with all of the images listed above, so as to let the projected image slip through the very fabric which by design ought to hold it stable enough for us to be able to perceive it.

Yet, the transparency of the images listed above is also something of an effect. As these images do not make any claim in constructing a fully realized sensory space, at least not in the same sense as

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

Dante does, they become something that is comparable to a pane of clear glass through which we are allowed almost immediate access to certain segments from Dante's vision with minimal distortion. The translucency of the image itself allows us to look past its thin membrane and in doing so gives us the possibility to see Dante more clearly as he is not reflected back at us through a framed canvas, but is allowed to pass entirely into Eliot's work without diffraction. The very reason as to why Dante is able to so directly permeate this poem by Eliot is due to the fact that these images are so thin and transparent that they present no barrier (but neither do they attempt to perform the role of such an obstacle) for certain scenes from "Purgatory" to be seen through them. For this reason, it seems most beneficial to approach these images as transparent lenses, or as windows, through which we can observe certain images, symbols, and scenes with the least amount of distortion: and not as blank canvases, or white projection screens, as I have proposed before. For every canvas and every screen (depending on its material and texture) will inevitably distort the image in some way. An original will always be an original as it is rendered by the artist on the canvas in a strictly defined way, any attempt to reconstruct that original onto another canvas, by another artist, will inevitably introduce distortions and deviations as artists, like canvases, are not the same. For this reason, I encourage readers of "Circe's Palace" to consider the images of the lady, the flowers, the garden, and of the fountain not as reconstructions of Matelda and of Earthly Paradise, but as open windows into Dante's world. Similar as to how a window does not reconstruct the outside world, so too do these images not reconstruct Dante; but fixes our attention on a certain scene from Dante, framing it in much the same way as a window frames a portion of reality for us to observe. The thin and almost crystal-clear membrane of these image-windows create a profoundly powerful effect, as Dante's work is allowed, perhaps for the first time in Eliot's poetry, to make an almost unfiltered passage within the framework of his own poetic composition.

This truly is a remarkable and unrepeated precedent in Eliot's poetry, as his more mature references to Dante are characterized by a significant distortion on Eliot's behalf whenever he evokes a certain element from the "Divine Comedy." Within the scope of his more sophisticated and refined works, not that "Circe's Palace" is not such a work, yet in it Eliot demonstrates a certain youthful insecurity and timidness which is not inherent in his more mature voice as a poet, Dante is almost always modified in some way. This is perfectly understandable, as any mature poet will always refract a certain artistic element through his own prism, which is an inevitable phenomenon in any meaningful creative process. I argue that this is inevitable, for every referential element must be diffracted through the prism of novelty in order for the new work to be truly new and not to be considered as a "blind or timid adherence to its successes" (Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"). Yet, in "Circe's Palace," Eliot does not offer us with recreations of specific scenes from Dante's work through certain poetic images. These images do not attempt to reconstruct the visual and artistic reality of "Purgatory" as they make no claim to the visual at all. Let us take as an example the image of the garden, which Dante describes in such a vivid way that it comes to life before our eyes – the same image is presented by Eliot as a combination of letters, '*g-a-r-d-e-n*', and not as a sensory space which we can inhabit and experience. Unlike Dante, who strives to saturate the very fabric of his words with different sensory details, such that each word becomes a vivid and immersive image, Eliot's words remain confined to words alone, as they do not transcend the frame of an arrangement of letters. This seemingly unpoetic gesture leads to a remarkable poetic effect in which words perform not the function of images, but of windows to the world of Dante which offer a kind of immediacy, a direct look into the vivid and sensory world of Dante's work, which is not found in his later works.

Yet, how do we know for certain that the images of the woman, the flowers, the garden, and the fountain actually function as clear-glass windows which frame Matelda and Earthly Paradise from "Purgatory"? If we consider these images individually then we will realize that a fundamental problem in our analysis will quickly arise, as we will have no actual certainty that the image of the woman, on its own, could really correspond to Matelda from Dante's "Purgatory" since Eliot's image does not present or indicate anything beyond the word itself. As the word *'she'* remains solely confined to an arrangement of letters and as the context in which the word is presented does not further develop its sensory dimension in some way, we can never really know if this nameless *'she'* is Matelda, for she could be any other woman. The same principle could be applied to the images of the flowers, the garden, and the fountain. If we consider them individually just as some arbitrary flowers, as an unspecified garden, and as a random fountain, for this is the vagueness and ambiguity which arises from such thin and visually devoid images, it is impossible to establish a meaningful connection with Dante's text, as

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

the flowers, garden, and fountain could be any flowers, any garden, and any fountain. This is the second fundamental weakness in Eliot's poem, the first being the problematic nature of the poetic image which I have addressed in the previous passages. Yet, there is a way around this predicament. The only way in which we can overcome the fact that these images are in themselves far too hollow and generic is *not to consider them separately at all*, since then, precisely because of their very non-specific nature, they permit too much associativity. My proposition is that these images should be considered together as when they are gathered and placed in the context of a logically ordered thread, they have the unique property of complementing each other. In other words, when they are considered collectively, as a logically unfolding sequence, beginning with the appearance of the lady (the nameless 'she'), moving through her picking of the flowers, to her position in the garden and by the fountain, they gradually begin to comprise a sequence which follows the progression of the last cantos of "Purgatory"; namely, Dante's arrival in Earthly Paradise and the appearance of Matelda. When viewed as a structured sequence the similarities with Dante's text become too numerous to be deemed the result of simple chance.

The symmetry between the two texts is first implied by the appearance of the mysterious lady, referred to only as 'she' in Eliot's poem, who directly frames the moment in which Matelda appears for the first time before Dante in the final cantos of "Purgatory". Like Matelda herself, the lady from Eliot's poem also remains unnamed, as a means of further solidifying the frame of reference through which we perceive her. Similar to Dante's initial description of Matelda, whom Dante describes as gathering flowers along the banks of a stream, the appearance of the mysterious lady from Eliot's poem is also interspersed with flowers that seem to parallel her presence. Like Dante, who portrays Matelda in symbolic relation to the rivers Lethe and Eunoe, so too does Eliot render his nameless 'she' in symbolic parallel with a fountain (the very source of the two rivers which Matelda alludes to in "Canto XXVIII"). What is more, the specific location in which this unnamed lady is gathering these flowers also directly complements the place in which Dante first catches sight of Matelda – the Garden of Eden.

Although, Eliot's description of these flowers and of her surrounding landscape are not as rich and vivid as Dante's immersive rendering of Earthly Paradise, which Barolini describes as the "absolute perfection of natural beauty (...) raised to the level of art" (Barolini, 2014, "Canto XXVIII Commentary"), we still get the sense that the mysterious *'she'* is also positioned in the same location: not only on account of the framed vista which is established through the word *'garden'*, but in light of the unfolding symmetry which begins to take shape between the images of the woman, flowers, fountain, and garden; and Matelda, who is gathering flowers in the Garden of Eden. Their very arrangement is just such (at least when they are considered together, as a single developing sequence) that it completely rules out any other association than with Dante's text. This does not seem like a far-fetched proposition to make, especially when we consider the fact that these images unfold in what appears to be a highly symmetrical and meticulously premeditated order which directly mirrors the events that begin to unfold in "Canto XXVIII" of "Purgatory." What reasonable connection, what other logical association, could we make as readers other than that with Dante's text? When we perceive the arrangement of these images, beginning with the appearance of the lady, passing through the flowers as a detail that accompanies her appearance, and arriving at her placement in the garden and by the fountain, how can we not make the connection with "Purgatory" and with Dante's coming to the Garden of Eden and his meeting with Matelda? The arrangement of these images is just such that it will always evoke this association in the mind of the attentive reader.

Thus far, this work has made two modest proposals, one related to the nature of the images through which Eliot evokes Dante and a second related to the specific arrangement and exposition of these images in Eliot's poem; which follow the sequence of events from "Canto XXVIII" onwards. However, this work has not yet made a comment related to the specific role of these references within the poem itself. Yet, before this work can provide such a commentary, we must first address another intriguing aspect of the poem, namely the fact that it evokes only one of the three parts of the "Divine Comedy." What is intriguing about "Circe's Palace" is the fact that the entire sequence of images which begins with the appearance of the lady and culminates with the fountain is derived from the transitional part of the "Divine Comedy," namely from "Purgatory". This is indeed quite intriguing as Eliot does not begin to exhibit such a clear and premeditated symmetry with the latter parts of the "Divine Comedy" until 1927 – the year that he converts to Anglo-Catholicism. Up until this period, most of his references towards Dante are characterized by some degree of modification on Eliot's side which is

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

quite often manifested even as irony. One need not be a devoted scholar of both authors to be able to recognize this quite immediately. If one is an attentive reader of poetry and has carefully read through the "Divine Comedy" and those poems by Eliot which time and criticism has deemed as 'major' or 'cardinal' one would quite easily be able to notice not only the instances in which Eliot evokes Dante, but also the degree with which Eliot modifies his vision as well. The renowned, albeit deceitful, Guido, whose fame had spread far and wide, is paralleled with the forgetful and pathetic Prufrock, who fails to attract attention even at a tea party. Gerontion, who is still alive and breathing on Earth is associated with Alberigo, whose soul has been damned in hell, while his body is forced to live out the remainder of its life on Earth – hollow and numb to the world around him. The everyday lives of the city clerks from "The Waste Land" are also compared to that of hell, despite the fact that they are alive and working in London's financial district. Even from these surface level examples one thing becomes quite apparent and that is Eliot's tendency to alter Dante's vision in some way. Regardless if this alteration is exemplified by a deliberate use of irony or a reimagining of Dante's vision, Eliot's impulse to cast the "Inferno" in new forms, to show some of its characters in new light, and to give new shapes to some of its symbols, themes, and motifs defines his approach to Dante's work until 1927. After his conversion, this attitude changes. As Eliot moves closer to religion and God, so too does he move closer to Dante and the themes of renewal and salvation that are at the heart of "Purgatory" and "Paradise." This brief and surface level overview was necessary, as we typically associate Eliot's interest in the thematic and symbolic elements of the latter parts of the "Divine Comedy" with his more mature and devotional poetry and not with a poem he wrote in Harvard when he was in his twenties. Yet, the fact is that this minor poem, written some twenty-one to twenty-two years before "Ash Wednesday" – the poem which most closely aligns itself with "Purgatory" – seeks symmetry with the transitional part of the "Divine Comedy" long before the publication of Eliot's official faith-centered verse. Despite the fact that the images which evoke Matelda's appearance in Earthly Paradise can barely frame this sequence, as is evident by the fact that they appear as a nameless *'she*,' as unspecified *'flowers'*, an unknown *'garden'*, and an undesignated *'fountain'*, they do, however, indicate, regardless of how vaguely and indeterminately, that this sequence was on Eliot's mind at the time; and that he chose to evoke it for a specific purpose, or for a certain artistic effect. Although, we cannot assert this claim with absolute certainty, as there is a lack of definite evidence to lend support to the proposition that during 1908, Eliot engaged with Dante in some way, the fact that he so deliberately and so conscientiously arranged these images to mirror the sequence of events that begin in "Canto XXVIII" of "Purgatory" certainly does make us think that during this time Dante was definitely on his mind. It seems quite possible that this proposition contains a far greater deal of truth than what was previously anticipated, especially if we consider it in relation to an exhibition held at Harvard's Houghton Library some fifteen years ago which showcased books and various manuscripts all related to Eliot's time at Harvard. Among them was Eliot's personal copy of Dante's "Divine Comedy" (see Walsh, 2010), the presence of which really does make us ponder over the speculation that Dante could have really captured Eliot's imagination precisely during his student years at Harvard. One of the few revealing details related to Eliot's engagement with Dante's work during this time comes from David Higgs, who writes the following:

> Eliot's knowledge of Dante began when he was an undergraduate at Harvard, where he enrolled in his B.A. course in 1906 [two years before he composed 'Circe's Palace']. Here a tradition of Dante studies had been established for many years, including among its devotees members of different departments of the university. The poet Longfellow, who translated the Commedia into verse in 1867 [...]. There followed James Russell Lowell, who succeeded Longfellow in the Chair in 1855; the Dante scholar Charles Grandgent, the philosopher George Santayana (to whom Eliot confessed himself indebted for some of his views on Dante), and finally the Professor of Fine Arts Charles Eliot Norton (Higgs, 1970, p. 130).

What is also intriguing is the fact that Eliot's interest in Dante's work first makes itself felt precisely during his Harvard years and specifically in "Circe's Palace" which predates the epigraph to "Prufrock" – the traditionally agreed upon moment in which Dante can be perceived to thread through Eliot's verse – by two to three years (assuming we take as our vantage point, the drafting of the poem in the period 1910-1911). It seems quite possible that the academic environment at Harvard, which

https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v23i3.12

abounds with such a rich tradition related to the study and teaching of Dante, left its imprint on Eliot, who undoubtedly felt that he belonged to something much bigger than himself.

What is equally intriguing is the fact that Eliot chose to evoke a sequence specifically from "Purgatory" which is as intriguing as it is puzzling. Typically, we tend to associate Eliot's engagement with the latter two parts of the "Divine Comedy" with a specific period of his life in which he had found his guiding star in religion; which would lead Eliot out of the dismal depths of his tragic personal life and would offer the disillusioned poet a beacon of hope. It seems only natural, therefore, that the themes of repentance, renewal, and salvation, which are at the heart of "Purgatory" and "Paradise" would resonate so deeply and profoundly with a poet so determined to rise out of his personal hell through his faith in God. It is by the virtue and potency of this newly solidified faith that Eliot would build a new type of poetry, whose main thematic concern would be the fallen spiritual condition of humanity and its arduous pilgrimage towards redemption and God. The fact that Dante would become the rock upon which Eliot would establish his new poetic enterprise is not at all surprising, as Dante had already made this pilgrimage in the "Divine Comedy" and had already outlined not only the way the penitent soul must go, but also the spiritual condition which the souls must attain before it could advance to "Heaven." If Eliot was to raise to the occasion, he would naturally have to follow in the footsteps of Dante which would lead him through spiritual purgation, so that he could, after having been cleansed and purified, and after having his senses properly conditioned, be allowed to experience the moment in the Garden, where Eliot would, like Dante, ultimately lay eyes on the sacred rose of Paradise. Yet, this moment remains far off into the future – he was fifty-three when he wrote the culminating lines of "Little Gidding" which would forever solidify him as "Dante's latest born successor" (Manganiello, 1989, p.1).

Is possible, however, to make the claim that the process of succeeding Dante began with "Circe's Palace"? The answer to this question is equally affirming and denying, as the poem itself is as much a confirmation of this proposition, as it is a contradiction. If we decide to accept the proposition which this article advances and if we are willing to consider the images of the nameless *'she'*, of the *'flowers'*, of the *'garden'*, and of the *'fountain'* as a sequence which frames Dante's encounter with Matelda in Earthly Paradise, then, an affirmative answer to this question is not without merit. When conveying this hypothesis, however, we must be particularly prudent and cautious, as we cannot be completely certain of the degree to which Eliot, at least during his Harvard years, sought, or aspired towards, some kind of continuity with Dante. It seems unlikely that, at least within the scope of "Circe's Palace," he had the idea, as well as the ambition, or even the fixation, to succeed Dante, or to actively seek continuity with the "Divine Comedy," to such an extent that he and his work were to become the vehicle not only of the religious and theological symbolism of Dante's work, but also of a reflection of the soul's journey towards salvation and God. For this reason, it would be advisable to consider these early allusions to Dante not so much as a fully formed theological framework, but rather as something of an aesthetic sympathy with Dante's text, which Eliot probably wished to highlight in some way.

The fact that Eliot had some sort of an interest and attitude towards Dante and his "Divine Comedy," and the fact that this interest is reflected in his poem, through a series of images that in one way or another must have left their mark on the young Eliot, might indeed lead us to think that the gradual expansion of religious, spiritual, and theological themes in Eliot's late and spiritually mature poetry is simply a deepening and a gradual consolidation of views, feelings, and ideas which he probably had in his twenties. It would take some time, however, before Dante ceases to be merely an aesthetic source of a certain kind of symbolism, as he is in "Circe's Palace," before he can become a religious guide for Eliot, in whose footsteps, and on whose spiritual path, Eliot would also eventually embark in his poetry after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. For this reason, my humble recommendation is to consider the references to Dante not only as a window into his world, but also as a window into the very atmosphere of this particular moment in "Purgatory." I think it is proper to categorize these references as an atmospheric resonance rather than a fully structured theological framework, since Eliot himself has not yet been initiated into the complex and multidimensional theological and religious structures within which Dante operates.

Nevertheless, the images through which Eliot frames the action from "Canto XXVIII" of "Purgatory" onward have the peculiar quality of containing within the scope of their visual palette the essence of the theological and religious symbolism with which Dante imbues his own imagery or scenes. Yet, this symbolism is not leading or dominant, as it is in Eliot's later poetry, where it goes hand in hand with the image or scene that is presented. Within the framework of "Circe's Palace", we cannot

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speak of such a deliberate influence of the multilayered religious and theological doctrine that constitutes the very backbone of Purgatory, but rather of an attempt on Eliot's part to direct us to a particular moment in the overall atmosphere of Purgatory that may have left some prominent or lasting imprint on his mind. We also cannot rule out the possibility that this sequence simply appealed to him. This is so because the religious and theological architecture of 'Purgatory' – the very fabric and essence of the work – appears as something of a residual effect in the sequence which Eliot frames through the images of the *'lady*, the *'flowers'*, the *'garden'*, and the *'fountain'*. In Dante's case we observe the opposite. In the "Divine Comedy" the visual and the religious, or the visual and the theological, go hand in hand, in such a harmonious way that what is shown by Dante as an image or symbol is always a manifestation of the Divine – in this sense, the visual is a servant of the Divine order, as it directly manifests, embodies, materializes, and actualizes Creation.

In Eliot's case we do not perceive such a deliberate and premeditated unity between that which is presented and its treatment as some type of incarnation of the Divine. The religious and theological nuances present in his poem are merely a passive consequence of his framing of Dante. Ye this is not at all surprising, it is even unavoidable, as the very nature of that which Dante presents to us as symbols or images in the "Divine Comedy" exists in such a harmonious unity within the architecture of religious and theological symbolism that constitutes not only the backbone, but the very essence of the work, where the visual cannot fully exist without the spiritual; it not only constitutes it but also imbues it with a spiritual significance. My appeal to all readers and critics is to make a clear distinction in their consciousness between the passive slippage of religious and theological symbolism as opposed to a calculated and premeditated theological and religious intent. The fact that we can attribute a certain share of the religious and theological symbolism of the "Divine Comedy" to Eliot's poem is only and solely so, due to nothing more than an aesthetic choice rather than a clearly defined intent or motive, as in the case of Dante. For this reason, Eliot achieves only a visual rendering of a certain atmosphere, or of one specific sensory sequence, and not of a comprehensive spiritual architecture, or of a vast and richly layered religious vision of the soul's journey towards salvation and God.

For this reason, the religious and theological dimensions of Dante's "Divine Comedy," as well as its rich Christian symbolism, are simply an aftereffect or a byproduct of the process through which Eliot frames Dante in "Circe's Palace." The rich and multifaceted symbolism of "Purgatory" which is so intrinsically linked to the visual dimension of Dante's text (symbols, images, etc.) is nothing more than an aura – a secondary effect or even a side effect of the process through which Dante's arrival in Earthly Paradise is framed. Although this aura presents us with the prospect of making general speculations of the sort that the *'she'* from Eliot's poem, assuming we accept the proposition that the *'she'* at hand is an evocation of Matelda, could also perform the purifying and instructive function which Matelda has in Earthly Paradise and as such could have some purifying or instructive effect on the narrator, as Matelda has on Dante. What is more, if we accept the hypothesis that the flowers which Eliot presents in "Circe's Palace" are an evocation of the flowers from Earthly Paradise, the same flowers that coalesce with Matelda's portrayal, then we could also advance the claim that the promise of a new life through God's will and love, is also presented to the narrator, as it is presented to all souls, who have willingly undergone purgation. If we go even further and accept the suggestion that the garden from Eliot's poem is an evocation of the garden from the last canticas of "Purgatory," then, by virtue the transference which occurs during the process through which Eliot frames Dante, we could also make the proposition that the promise of renewal, restoration, and of purity, as exemplified by the garden, is presented to the narrator, who has, like the penitent from Purgatory arrived at the coveted mountain top. Finally, if we are willing to view the fountain which Eliot mentions in his poems as the source of the Lethe and Eunoe, which could well be the case, considering that both rivers, as Raffa indicates are derived from a single source (i.e. a fountain) which then splits into two streams (the two rivers in question) (Raffa, 2009, p. 210), then, we could also make the conjecture that the narrator, like Dante and all the other souls who have made their way to the Garden of Eden, also undergoes the last phase of purification which involves a washing away of the memory of sin and a solidification of the goodness of the soul.

Although in certain cases we can afford to make general and superficial comments of this sort, we should be careful about delving too extensively into such musings, as in no circumstance or occasion in Eliot poem is the religious and theological so invariably linked to the presented image as it is in Dante's text. This is probably the case as Eliot himself dared not cross the threshold of the vast and

awe-inspiring religious and theological edifice which Dante had constructed in the “Divine Comedy.” As a young and still emerging poet, it is quite possible that he had adequately assessed his skills and knowledge, and made the decision that any meaningful and conscious poet would have made, unless one intentionally wishes to turn themselves into a fool, and that is to merely make a subtle nod, or a discreet gesture, towards Dante (when I say *'subtle'*, I mean with the utmost tentative and reverent admiration and cautious-awe), as well as to the religious and theological grandeur of the “Divine Comedy” which he dared not engage with at this stage in his development as a poet. Even though some might categorize this poem as a youthful attempt at writing poetry and as such could view it as a less significant indicator of Eliot’s poetic essence, “Circe’s Palace” discreetly signifies the appearance of the catalyst that will forge the core of this essence – Dante, whose influence will only continue to grow from here on.

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