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**Abstract:** Through the analysis of some fragments of Thomas Stearns Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* (specifically from sections I, II and VI), this article attempts to evince how the reconciliation of the human and the spiritual nature of love is here addressed through the theme of sublimation, related to the *Stilnovo* tradition and introduced by Dante in his early work, *Vita Nova*. The human being, the faithful speaker, the lover, is finally kept suspended, and even if in hope, left in a state of tension that does not reach a final fulfilment.

**Keywords:** Eliot, Dante, Cavalcanti, *Stilnovo*, sublimated love, intertextuality.

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**Love, separated. An analysis in three sections of *Ash Wednesday* by T. S. Eliot**

**0. Introduction**

*Ash Wednesday* is one of Thomas Stearns Eliot's most complex poems. Fully published in 1930 after the previous individual publication of some sections, it is composed of six parts. In the impossibility of framing and defining the poem in an exhaustive way due to this complexity, we might approach the text initially through what many critics have been pointing out, that the general structure of *Ash Wednesday* could be identified as that of the quest.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the approach that Audrey T. Rodgers suggests in her article, "T. S. Eliot's 'Purgatorio': The Structure of *Ash- Wednesday*", will be especially interesting for the purpose of this analysis: "Eliot, like Dante, uses the pattern of the quest to describe the

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<sup>1</sup> See Rodgers, Audrey T. "T. S. Eliot's 'Purgatorio': The Structure of 'Ash Wednesday'".

individual search for 'unity in contrariety'." (97) At the same time, as stated by Eliot himself, the *Vita Nova*, the early work of Dante, is here to be considered a fundamental comparative macro-structure in the way that it tends to "find meaning in final causes", being the final cause "the attraction towards God." (234) And it must be said, that in *Ash-Wednesday* Dante represents one of the greatest detectable influences both at a macro and micro level (Nicolì 57), even if, it must not be omitted, it does so within a complex web of intertextual references that Eliot makes use of. The ideas that Eliot developed regarding the creation of the literary text, in fact, as argued by María Jesús Martínez Alfaro in "Intertextuality: origins and development of the concept", can be considered as "quasi-intertextual", in particular due to the concept he relied on, that of the "simultaneity of all works of literature" and the consequent "perpetual process of re-adjusting the relations among them" (270). Moreover, within an intertextual approach, it has to be mentioned, texts are to be considered "not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures." (Alfaro 268). In fact, as Eliot himself admits in "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

[...]

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. ("Selected" 4-5)

No writer can therefore ever exclude from his work the previous ones, which come to interlace within it, shaping it and giving it a new meaning that, however, is never a "self-contained unit" (Alfaro 268). In this context, and aware of the many textual materials Eliot reuses –gleaning them from Shakespeare, the Bible, and the Anglican liturgy among many other sources– as underlined by Mandal, Annesha and Modak in "An Exploration of Man's Search for God: A Postmodern Analysis of *Ash- Wednesday*." (2), there is no doubt that the Florentine medieval poet's art was of an extreme interest to him,<sup>2</sup> and has a fundamental role in this case in particular. In the awareness of the impossibility of giving a straight and definitive interpretation of the poem, as Eliot himself never used to give to his work, it can be said however quite accurately that the poem deals with a quest for the reconciliation of a human and spiritual nature; the need to find a meaning to the contradictions in human nature and give them a sense within the bigger frame of a Christian morality. And in this case, as Valentina Nicolì suggests in her study "L'influenza di Dante nell'opera di Eliot", Dante was extremely inspirational to him, given the fact that his art found a way to combine in a rational way the human and the spiritual sphere: "the representation of human emotions has its start in a metaphysical dimension and reaches a more strictly religious one, giving to

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<sup>2</sup> See Nicolì, Valentina. "L'influenza di Dante nell'opera di Eliot". All the fragments quoted in the text are a personal translation or paraphrasing into English from the original in Italian.

men the possibility of the existence of a principle that governs the whole universe, and gives it an order" (46).

Human emotions are given an order, a possibility to be purified and harmonized. Among them, love has a central position. In Eliot's own words, as compiled in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, *Ash-Wednesday* could be thought to be "an exposition of my view of the relation of *eros* and *agape* based on my own experience." ("Poems" 732) A relation that is here questioned, considering in particular the *Vita Nova* of Dante as a first inspirational model, as previously said. The parallel with the medieval work allows him especially to explore the "experience of man in search of God" and to give a representation of the man who tries to "explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal" (Eliot 731). This idea is generally also alluding to the philosophy of the *Stilnovo* tradition that, as explained by Paolo Savi-Lopez in *Trovatori e Poeti – Studi di Lirica Antica*, emphasized the spiritual and divine qualities of the woman who was elevated to the celestial sphere to be an intermediate figure between the man and God (15). The concept of love was somehow not just *noble* anymore, as it already was in the Troubadours tradition, but acquired, so to speak, "heavenly features" (Savi-Lopez 16). And in the itinerary of the poem's speaker, in fact, a tendency can be detected to question the same essence of human feelings, and of love in particular, highlighting the need to make them adhere, in a way, to certain moral standards. There is, as commented by Rodgers as well, a recognition of human passions and limitations (110), and a wished need to purify them in the attempt to find a harmony between the two sides.

In the second section in particular, the contrast between the two types of love is made explicit and visual. Even if remodelled for his own purpose, Eliot makes reference to the idea of passionate love, which in Cavalcanti's concept consumes and devours the man. As Bruno Nardi clarifies in "Dante e Guido Cavalcanti",<sup>3</sup> love in Cavalcanti's works was depicted as a passion born in the sensitive part of the man and due to its intensity could even lead him to death (488-489). Moreover, through Cavalcanti Eliot has the possibility to introduce and reuse in his own way the theme of the exile, exalting in this case an irreconcilable distance between the man and the idea of an idealized love and the divinity itself.<sup>4</sup> *Ash-Wednesday* is a poem of contrasts –or, in Rodgers' own words, of "opposing tensions" (99)– in which the idea of the fight between the divergent impulses that the human being can experience, and the different kinds of love he can feel, comes out quite clearly. There is also the necessity of a compromise between the two, which is ideally resolved within the Christian and Dantean thought.<sup>5</sup> In fact, as further explained by Joseph Anthony Mazzeo in "Dante's Conception of Love", Dante "does not attempt to distinguish between corporeal and spiritual substances" and, Mazzeo clarifies, "places special emphasis

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<sup>3</sup> The fragments quoted from "Dante e Guido Cavalcanti" by Bruno Nardi are translated or paraphrased into English; translation and paraphrase mine.

<sup>4</sup> The theme of the exile was already very present in the Medieval Troubadours tradition, as Michelangelo Picone asserts in "Addii e assenza. Storia di un motivo lirico dai trovatori a Petrarca.": "the lover, identified with the 'pilgrim'" (a possible additional declination of the figure of the poem's speaker) that is "guided by his erotic desire in his "quête" (quest), was often forced to bid farewell to the woman he loved" (34). Translation mine.

<sup>5</sup> Dante's philosophy was particularly close to the thought of both St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustin. See, for instance, Mazzeo, Joseph Anthony. "Dante's Conception of Love"

on the fact that man is a microcosm of all these loves" (151). Dante finally offers the solution to human contradictions via the necessary connection with Christian morality. Moreover, to Eliot, both as poet and as a man, Dante seems as the perfect embodiment of poetry and spirituality, of order and rationality. As Nicolì concludes:

The doctrine of Love in Dante, the concept of the awareness of sin, the suffering inherent to the process of purification, so different from the Romantic suffering, closed on itself, the perfect adaptation of the human will to the divine one as the only way to happiness, came in Eliot's poetry totally transformed, to indicate the only way out from the ennui of modern life. (57)

Considering the aforementioned introduction, I will concentrate on some aspects that evidence the contrast between the human and spiritual dimension of love and the inner fight that the human being is called upon to face, trying to harmonize his complex and opposite feelings. It will be also shown how the Dantesque image of Beatrice –the mediating figure between Earth and Heaven– becomes particularly important in the poem, in relation to the need of a connection between the two spheres.

### 1. The Inner Confession (a brief illustration)

The first section of *Ash-Wednesday* emphasizes what could be defined as the intimate and bitter condition of self-recognition of the speaker as a human being; in Christian words, possibly a sort of confession. It is the section –stuffed with textual allusions to Dante– where the moral pressure and the sense of human inadequacy contrast without solution. It is the beginning of the process of repentance, as many critics have argued.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the present analysis, some principal images will be shown in order to give the idea of the condition of the speaker as torn in its self-questioning and constantly stretched between opposite poles: body and soul, the spiritual and the material, backward or onward movements. As Rodgers explains: "the speaker passes from death to life, from illusion to reality, from temporal concerns to an aspiration toward the infinite" (99). It is the state where human contradictions are questioned, and with them the moral constructs, here resounding in the far voice of Beatrice whose presence is already detectable. The heaviness of the atmosphere is clearly perceivable and the rhythm is marked by an exhausting recurrence of the term "Because" (Eliot "Poems" 87). The speaker is ruminating thoughts which are accompanied in parallel by the musical progression of the stanza. The voice describes tediously, almost in the shape of a litany, the progressive development of the verses. The inner tension of the speaker's condition is made evident since the beginning, in the use of the verb "to turn" (Eliot "Poems" 87), that *par-excellence* places the speaker at a turning point between material things and the possibility of a Christian self-enhancement; between sin and purification; between flesh and spirit. The highly religious tones are underlined by the quotation (or a sort of misquotation in this case) of the following fragment of one of the sermons of the collection, *Ninety-six sermons*, by Lancelot Andrewes. As John

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance, Rodgers, Audrey T. "T. S. Eliot's 'Purgatorio': The Structure of 'Ash Wednesday'", or Ferguson, John. "Ash Wednesday".

Ferguson commented in his article "Ash Wednesday", in the alluded sermon Andrewes "plays on every thought implicit in the word" (100): "First, a 'turn,' wherein we look forward to God, and with our 'whole heart' resolve to 'turn' to Him. Then a turn again, wherein we look backward to our sins wherein we have turned from God, and with beholding them our very heart breaketh." (Andrewes 359)

The connection with the initial verses of the poem is clear: "Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope / Because I do not hope to turn" (Eliot "Poems" 87). Finely playing on the words, Eliot interlaces Andrewes's words with a quote from the opening verse of one of the most famous *ballades* by the Tuscan poet Guido Cavalcanti: "Perch'í no spero di tornar giammai" ("Rime" 31). The association contributes to reinforce the sense of personal suffering and alienation and also the contrast between an orthodox Christian point of view and a more sensorial approach, so to speak, symbolized by Cavalcanti's poetry. The quotation of the poet underlines especially the theme of the separation from a figure that in this specific case is meant to be, agreeing with what stated by most of the critics,<sup>7</sup> overlapping with the divine one. But most interestingly the verb "to turn", points directly to the position of Dante both in the *Vita Nova* and in the *Divina Commedia*, accentuating the idea of the man choosing the easy way and turning towards futile things and earthly affections. Through the allusion to the *Vita Nova*, and to Dante's attraction for the woman at the window ("Vita" 56) that symbolizes earthly love (opposed to and overcome by the greater, heavenly love of Beatrice), we are introduced to the inner dilemma of the speaker. In the same way, the allusion is to Canto XXX of *Purgatorio*, when Dante is reproached for having turned towards the wrong path: "e volse i passi suoi per via non vera" (Alighieri "Commedia" 574). It is clear, as Samir Dayal asserts in "The Efficient Fiction: A Reading of *Ash Wednesday*", that "Eliot cultivates the double sense" and that the "turning" is "not only invocation but turning away" (57). And, apart from the evident point of junction and disjunction that the word embodies, what is important to underline is that the deep moral questioning is here clearly presented, alluding to the need of a detachment from the material world and from a love that is seen as carnal, not pure and durable, bringing the man back on his quest for self-improvement.

The words of Joseph Anthony Mazzeo on Dante's philosophy of Love could at this point result quite interesting to see the concept more in depth: "It is because he possesses love of the first kind, that of simple bodies, that man 'loves' to sink downwards and is fatigued if he goes against this tendency, or upwards." (150) The sense is reinforced by the image of the eagle, actually alluding to several mythical and religious references.<sup>8</sup> What is fundamental to highlight, however, is the sense of spiritual elevation and the simultaneous consumed weariness conveyed by the adjective "agèd" (Eliot "Poems" 87). In this contrasting representation, very plainly and shamelessly, the speaker renounces to any type of lie about his own worldly nature. The need to "stretch" the wings (Eliot "Poems" 87) and be able to meet God, as in Canto XXXII of Dante's *Paradiso* ("Commedia" 912), is openly questioned. The speaker renounces any "blessèd face" and unveils his humanity (Eliot

<sup>7</sup> See, Rodgers, Audrey T. "T. S. Eliot's 'Purgatorio': The Structure of 'Ash Wednesday'".

<sup>8</sup> See, Ferguson, John. "Ash Wednesday".

"Poems" 87). There is probably a devoted, honest will to accomplish the moral duties and move towards a higher feeling, but at the same time the voice is loudly perceived, warning in bitter tones that times and real experiences often do not permit it. The will that could be here defined as Mazzeo suggests as man's power to control the "natural impulses of desire" that "arise from necessity" (156), is often too "small" and "dry" (Eliot "Poems" 87). In this, again, lies the speaker's deep interior tension. The dilemma between realism and idealism is not solved. Surprisingly, the help comes from Dante himself, who as Eliot states in his essay, "Dante", makes use of an anti-romantic "practical sense of realities" and recommends us "not to expect more from *life* than it can give or more from *human* beings than they can give" ("Selected" 235). This realism, or disillusion, however, permeates the verses of this first section, so much that it seems that there is no room left for hope. There is no union between the mystical vision and the examination of the human condition, as Nicolì describes it in relation to Dante's *Vita Nova* (49); nor between the depth of man's soul and his natural drives. The answer at the end of the section is left to the words, which keep revolving in agony, stumbling and hoping for a divine judgment that will not be too heavy to bear.

## 2. "Battle of the thoughts"<sup>9</sup>

The second section of the poem (originally devised to head the poem) appears to be central in our analysis. The sense of the human inner struggle between opposite feelings, and love in particular, is here made fully manifest, just as the fragmentation of the human being is made practically visible. Relying on what was analyzed by most critics,<sup>10</sup> this is the section of the renouncement to the flesh and the supremacy of the spirit. It can be argued, therefore, that it is the stanza of the two contrasting types of love, the earthly one, and the higher, spiritual one. As Eliot himself explains, the three leopards are in fact deliberately "the World, the Flesh, and the Devil" ("Poems" 730). Moreover, as shown further by Rodgers, they can represent here the three forms of disordered love that Dante witnesses in his ascent through Purgatory, which are Lust, Gluttony and Avarice ("Commedia" 103). And actually, the leopards have been also described as "agents of purgation" (Mandal, Annesha and Modak 3), by devouring the lust and the appetites of the body. It is the process through which sensitive love is destroyed and sent to oblivion by the purer one. But what is interesting to notice for the present reading is specifically the contrast between the two sides. A dialogue between opposites that is moral and internal to the man himself and that is made extremely visual and corporeal by the contrast of the images used. The first dimension, which is the most sensorial and physical –further strengthened by the images representing the dissembled body of the speaker, the "guts", "eyes", "indigestible portions", "liver", "heart", and "legs" (Eliot "Poems" 89)– is here fittingly reinforced by two other quotes from Cavalcanti, which come here to be –in my opinion– not casual. In fact, as clarified by Simon West in *The Selected Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti: A Critical English Edition*, the kind of love that the Florentine poet used to describe in his verses was "of this world and rather destructive", the "irrational or disruptive intrusion of love on the individual." (xii). The association is made

<sup>9</sup> See note no. 13 in page 90 of this article.

<sup>10</sup> See, Rodgers, Audrey T. "T. S. Eliot's 'Purgatorio': The Structure of 'Ash Wednesday'"; Dayal, Samir. "The Efficient Fiction: A Reading of Ash Wednesday".

here between passionate love and death, realized in the internal struggle of the speaker, who is finally reduced to pieces. But is also the destroyed body of the man who renounces – religiously speaking – to his corporeal impulses for a greater regeneration. As F. Sawyer states in “A reading of T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*”, “Only when we have died to the ‘flesh’ may we truly live in a spiritual way” (251). In both cases, the man is left without life, in the state of decomposition instilled in the word “dissembled”, a word that again can be ambiguous (Mandal, Annesha and Modak 5) and that, I suggest, could be alluding to the expression used again by Cavalcanti in the ballata “Perch'io non spero di tornar giammai” to describe the fact that the poet's death is near: “Tanto e` distrutta gia` la mia persona” (“Rime” 31). The sense of destruction of the body and carnal love is therefore accentuated.

This representation is simultaneously opposed –on the other side– to the figure of the lady, “withdrawn/ in a white gown, to contemplation” who “honours the Virgin in meditation” (Eliot “Poems” 89). The second image is obviously alluding to Beatrice, as critics have already pointed out,<sup>11</sup> who represents the woman that with her love is able to bring man closer to God, and therefore makes the process of purification possible. It is the higher type of love, the one coming from the *Stilnovo* tradition, as argued in the introduction. Portrayed as being dressed in white, exactly as she showed herself to Dante in section III of the *Vita Nova* in which she greets him with kindness (Alighieri “Vita” 2); she is also the one who was intimately alluded in the first section to remind the silent believer of his duties.<sup>12</sup> The two representations of love alternate between each other, contrasting the one with the other, leaving the man reduced to “bones” without any woman to whom he can proffer his “deeds” (Eliot “Poems” 89); a figure also typical of the *Stilnovo* tradition, indicating the man who serves his lady (Alighieri “Vita” 14-15). In “Perch'io non spero di tornar giammai”, the poet tells to the *ballatetta* to bring his message to the woman, telling her that he was the servant of Love “colui/ che fu servo d'Amore” (Cavalcanti “Rime” 31). No love is finally left to the man, who is called to sacrifice himself in order to be allowed entry to the more transcendental dimension. He is the final victim, the unfortunate objective of the fight, reduced to death in his own body and at the same time devoted to a spiritual fulfillment.

Similarly to what is argued by Mandal, Annesha and Modak, by explaining the sense of the whole section as “an adaptation of Dante's first meeting with Beatrice after nine years” (2), I wish to suggest that the section can be appropriately described as the condition experienced by Dante in the *Vita Nova*, when he interrogates himself about the nature of the passion he feels for the woman at the window, and first opposes it by means of the intellect (“Vita” 59). In fact, there is a real battle, which critics have described as the “battle of the thoughts”<sup>13</sup> that takes place in Dante's self when he is stuck between the feelings for the recently known woman and his pure dedication to Beatrice.<sup>14</sup> Correspondingly, I wish to argue that the speaker of the poem is here in a parallel condition of vacillation. The personal

<sup>11</sup> See, Sawyer, F. “A reading of T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*”.

<sup>12</sup> A “figura” or “visionary imago”, in the words of Rodgers (103).

<sup>13</sup> In Nardi's original text: “Battaglia di pensieri”.

<sup>14</sup> According to Picone, “The recurring sight of that gentle lady and her colour, pale almost like love, which reminded him of the pearl colour of Beatrice, soon make him feel such an intense desire that his own heart – the place of perception and sensitive love – almost surrendered. But the soul – that is the reason – loyal to Beatrice, removes the evil desire.” (494- 495) Translation mine.

divergence that in the first section was internally and ardently questioned, reaches here the point of impact between the two types of love; a strong, disclosed aspect that places him in the decisive crossroads between natural desire and the need to transcend it, as shown in the following quotation: "But desire in man has a further peculiarity precisely because it is the desire of a rational being. Man, by nature, desires the eternal, or immortality, in which alone the higher faculties can find the rest and joy which is the goal of all desire." (Mazzeo 159)

The section finally closes with a prayer to the "Lady of silences" in the attempt to find a harmony in this "scattered" fragmentation (Eliot "Poems" 90). In agreement with Rodgers, I do believe that the lady –a figure that overlaps with Beatrice and that reveals already the ones that will follow in the poem– should resolve in herself the juxtapositions she is described with: "Terminate torment/ Of love unsatisfied/ The greater torment/ Of love satisfied" (Eliot "Poems" 90). Nevertheless, this resolution is only wished and left in prayer, waiting for the final outcome. The lady's presence, in fact, persists as "reigning" in a higher, suspended state, reinforcing the distance from the broken speaker/ human, who is "concentrated in purpose" and somehow recalling the illustration of the ending section (Eliot "Poems" 90).

### 3. "Suffer me not to be separated"

Section VI closes the quest of the speaker throughout the poem. As Ferguson also asserts, the beginning, which retakes the one of the first section of the poem, has however a slightly different connotation. The sense that something happened between the poem's first and last section is rendered by the substitution of the introductory "Because" with "Although" (Eliot "Poems" 87, 96), underlining the awareness gained. But the use of the same starting point reconnects also with the alluded idea of exile presented in the first section, which was unveiling already at that point the unavoidable distance from the speaker's final purpose, which will in fact keep existing. In the end of his journey, the speaker's recognition of his human, material condition is maintained and the contradiction between the natural and spiritual nature of his love is not resolved. Neither the sacrifice of the flesh, nor his will, were sufficient to achieve the wished sublimation, which Mazzeo here defines: "The will of any rational creature naturally desires the eternal because reason, unlike sense, is not confined to the 'here and now' but knows without being confined to either time or place." (160)

The speaker remains therefore "between dying and birth" (Eliot "Poems" 96), in the earthly, actual and temporal state of tension, incapable of reaching the eternal. The cry is lifted, leaving him in his upward-stretched position –as it was seen in section II, specifically in the remark "concentrated in purpose" (Eliot "Poems" 89)– but without being able of elevating his feeling to a purer stage; the same stage which is made perfect in the figure of Beatrice, the symbol of the real connection between Earth and Heaven and between the two types of love. After being the blended and alluded moral and virtuous model in the first section, and having revealed herself in the second one in the figure of the Lady, withdrawn and castrating the physical impulses of the speaker, she is here finally seen in her rightful place among the blessed, as in canto XXXIII of Dante's *Paradiso* ("Commedia" 915). I do agree with Rodger's stance that the Lady's figure is multileveled (109), alluding also to the Virgin and God Himself, and recalling Dante's progression towards the centre of the divinity



in the last Cantos of the *Divina Commedia*. In a similar way, the image can be seen as a recollection of the end of the *Vita Nova*, when Beatrice is seen by Dante as elevated to the celestial sphere. He is then incapable of speech and asks God for the possibility to witness in the future the glory of his woman, who "looks in the eyes of Whom is blessed for ever and ever" (Alighieri "Vita" 65).<sup>15</sup> The speaker, also a complex figure, could be said to shift between a modern Dante and Bernardo: he addresses her and asks her for her intercession, making use of words of praise that remind of Bernardo's prayer in *Paradiso* at the beginning of Canto XXXIII (Alighieri "Commedia" 913-915). At the same time he is the penitent who in the first section had recognized his mortal, sinful soul and who now asks to be guided to God. This final union, also highlighted by Rodgers, even if wished is evidently not reached.

Playing again with the images, overlapping and dismantling them, Eliot builds in this final prayer to the "Blessed sister, holy mother" his own meaning ("Poems" 97). The supplication does not involve –in this case– any further elevation (the wings that in the first section were questioned, in the end were not stretched). Unlike Dante, who in canto XXXIII of *Paradiso* ecstatically recites "Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna/ legato con amore in un volume,/ ciò che per l'universo si squaderna" ("Commedia" 919),<sup>16</sup> the speaker is not admitted to the final conjunction with God. On the contrary, there is a request for help and an expression of hope that is lifted towards the figure of the Virgin/ Beatrice. The reaffirmation of the "still" final position of the plural speaker is further reinforced by the verse "our peace in His will" (Eliot "Poems" 97), both of Christian derivation and alluding to the condition of Piccarda Donati who, in Canto III of *Paradiso* rejoices in her condition of being far from God but stretching towards Him, in the serene certainty that she will reach Him one day and placing in Him her peace (Alighieri "Commedia" 629). In comparison, I argue that in Eliot's version the line stresses on a final gloomy surrendering state, in the perfect awareness of the condition of human nature, even if invoking, as pointed out by Rodgers, "his inclusion with all things of the spirit" (110). In a modern, realistic and somehow discouraged way, the speaker remains "among these rocks" (Eliot "Poems" 97); an image that can remind of Mount Purgatory and at the same time strengthens the sense of dryness that is opposed to the essence of the Divinity, who in Canto XX and XXXI of *Paradiso* is associated to the image of the "fountain" (Alighieri "Commedia" 795, 899). The sense of an unaccomplished regeneration is implied.

The last two verses finally and abruptly change into the singular, focusing on the speaker's personal experience and recalling back to the origin of the poem: "Suffer me not to be separated/And let my cry come unto Thee." (Eliot "Poems" 97) In his plea, the speaker finally implores not to be "separated", a term that is related primarily to the wished unity with God. There is, therefore, a final evidence of the failed attempt to translate the earthly feelings into something higher, and the man's admittance of the unfortunate reality of his existence. The recognition of a spiritual aspiration innate to the human being, which keeps

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<sup>15</sup> Originally: "che la mia anima se ne possa gire a vedere la gloria de la sua donna, cioè di quella benedetta Beatrice, la quale gloriosamente mira ne la faccia di colui 'qui est per omnia secula benedictus.'" (Alighieri "Vita" 65). Translation and paraphrase into English mine.

<sup>16</sup> "In the depth of the divine light everything we see as divided and scattered in the universe is contained, gathered in a bond of love" (Alighieri "Commedia" 919). Paraphrase into English mine.

fighting with the secular and more material feelings is evinced; and so it is the impossibility to get to a final integration between the earthly and heavenly soul. The conflict of the nature of the individual is not solved; the unity between flesh and spirit, that had to be ideally completed through the help of the Lady/Beatrice, is not achieved. She remains the silent kaleidoscopic addressee of the speaker's last prayer, which remains without answer. The reassuring union of the Christian tradition, which Andrewes so clearly expresses in two illustrative sermons, is left unsatisfied:

Our soul is not turned into nor compounded with the body, yet they two though distinct in natures grow into one man. So, into the Godhead was the manhood taken; the natures preserved without confusion, the person entire without division. (91)  
[...]

That in the dispensation of the fulness of the times, He might gather together into one all things, both which are in Heaven, and which are in earth, even in Christ. (265)

But in this final section also Dante's words and philosophy of love are strongly echoed, showing again the unaccomplished solution: "the goal of man's desire is a union of peace and ardor, tranquility and passion, a passionate tranquility in which desire finds rest without in some sense ceasing to be desire—a state which in Paradise cannot be lost and which requires no effort to retain" (Mazzeo 160). The final tranquility of a full integration of man's material and spiritual nature is left to its possible future resolutions. As Rodgers claims, the "promise of reconciliation of opposites" alluded in the image of the yews is kept unrealized (110), and "the attempt to transcend the sins of the temporal life to achieve a reunification with a divine essence" (111) is not completed. The unity with God is finally just hoped in the faithful murmuring of the final lines. In contrast with what Nicolì states (53), I argue that human love here does not find its way of purification, but is left in his human and thus imperfect condition. The same condition of which Dante himself was however perfectly aware, since, Nicolì further explains, the structural human inadequacy was considered the cause –both for Dante and Eliot– of a flawed idea of earthly love (52). But most importantly, this final state blends with the one of Dante at the end of the *Vita Nova*, in which no sublimation is found, even if wished and perceived by Dante just as is in *Ash-Wednesday* by the speaker. As stated also by P. J. Klemp in "Layers of Love in Dante's *Vita Nuova*": "The ending of the *Vita Nuova* is wide-open and filled with anticipation because we expect Dante to reach the highest love or an awareness of allegory's 'sovrassenso', this 'peregrino spirito' is not allowed a direct vision of God." (192)

The poem closes leaving the soul in its suspended state, more aware, but not perfected; something that is in a way implicit in the repetition of the opening verses of the section. The speaker is left struggling with his own human sensations, tended simultaneously towards the spiritual dimension. Suspended in his "brief transit" (Eliot "Poems" 96), he seems to end up repeating tormentedly Andrewes' words: "Repentance itself is nothing else but *redire ad principia*, 'a kind of circling,' to return to Him by repentance from Whom by sin

we have turned away. And much after a circle is this text; begins with the word 'turn,' and returns about to the same word again." (358).

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis made has tried to show how, through the intertextual use of the Dantean and Stilnovo traditions, inevitably correlated with the Christian, Eliot addresses a deep inner crisis, namely the struggle for the human being to reconcile the natural and spiritual side of his feelings and the difficulties in finding a balance between the needs of physical existence and the awareness of an unavoidable inclination towards a more spiritual dimension. Quite probably, it could be argued, the poem deals with the complex matter related to the need of inscribing and justifying man's natural pulsions in a wider moral and spiritual frame, as Dante –here the model– managed to do. "Emphasizing on the spiritual vision of love" (Mandal, Annesha and Modak 2), and unlike Dante who in the *Divina Commedia* successfully reunites "the profane and the sacred love" (Picone 35) and in the *Vita Nova* keeps his final hopeful condition, Eliot shows how the material dimension prevails, leaving the possibility of providing men with an exhaustive answer suspended. Neither Beatrice, the emblematic mediating figure between the two types of love (Nicoli 54), nor probably any woman, is here seen as the solution to modern man's disenchanting dilemma. As George Thaddeus Wright asserts in a comment to *The Waste-Land* in *The Poet in the Poem: the Personae of Eliot, Yeats, And Pound*, in Eliot's poetry "degrading attitudes towards human love never turns out to be a very profitable path for the quester." (63)

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