DANTE IN AMERICA: ELIOT AND THE POLITICS OF MODERNISM

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Dante and America seem to have had an elective affinity to each other. American culture, even more than the British, and in spite of its conflictual attitude towards European culture, has historically given a privileged place to readings of Dante, as though Dante in some ways looked forward to America. Indeed, Charles Olson, in concluding a discussion of Ahab and of *Moby-Dick*, which he regards as *the* American text, sees the quest in that novel as anticipated by Dante's Ulysses, the "Atlantic man". The American has continued with the transgressive flight of Ulysses (*Inferno* 26): he has no further boundary to cross (Olson 1947: 118). But Dante readings in America have not followed a single pattern, though they now have, it may be argued, a consistency of approach, the archaeology of which I want to investigate in this essay, by focusing on a moment of change in American readings of Dante —one which makes Dante a source for modernist appropriations. There is very little of what might be called postmodern readings of Dante, in part because of the power of the modernist "take" on the text. This, in America, has inscribed Dante with a conservatism and an internal consistency which resists plurality and any reading for what Barthes calls "the return of the different" (1974: 16) —the "different" being that which is repressed in any reading that seeks a unitary theme and unified subject-matter. Another sort of conservatism, it should be added, is at work in Britain.

It has not always been so. I would argue that some hints for a postmodern reading of Dante are to be located in the American nineteenth-century reception of Dante which was displaced by modernism, and particularly by a modernism inflected by the assertion of European values. I want here to concentrate on one American modernist: T. S. Eliot, though I

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shall also make subsidiary reference to George Santayana (1863-1952), who taught at Harvard and whose essay on Dante in *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, Goethe* (1910) influenced Eliot. Discussion of Pound, equally important in mediating Dante for modernism, must wait for another occasion.

T. S. Eliot's relationship to Dante can be explored through his poetry or his criticism, but it is important to remember that it was not simply a product of his desire to attach himself to European tradition, but an inevitable result of being soaked in the New England culture of the nineteenth-century, especially at Harvard, which set up a Dante Society in 1881. F. R. Leavis, in an essay called "Eliot's Classical Standing", coincidentally first delivered at Harvard, says that Eliot "overvalued what Dante had to offer him" (1969: 49). Leavis contrasts Dante with Shakespeare in this; there was more that Eliot could have learned from Shakespeare. The question that needs to be asked is, beyond quoting Dante, what use does Eliot put him to, in both poetry and literary and cultural criticism? Is it a conventional use, or does it re-read the text of the *Commedia*, and ask the reader of Eliot to do the same? Is it interesting or does it assume a reading of Dante that cannot notice Dante's own difference from the accounts of him as the poet of order, catholicism, mysticism, and the synthesis of classicism and medieval christianity?

Leavis's comments on Eliot in relation to Dante and Shakespeare, which recall the vocabulary of Eliot's claim that "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third" (Eliot 1951: 265),[1] have their own agenda. Leavis would want to assert the pre-eminence of Shakespeare over Dante in any case, and not just in relation to Eliot. Most of what Leavis has to say about Dante is in relation to Eliot. In the essay quoted above, Leavis observes that Eliot "can only contemplate the relations between men and women with revulsion or distaste —unless with the aid of Dante" (Leavis 1969: 42). Eliot's poetry can barely negotiate questions of sexuality; and can only come at the relations between men and women via Dante's relation to Beatrice. Leavis assumes the non-sexual nature of this relationship, and disapproves of the spiritualising of the woman that it implies. I assume that he is right as far as he goes, though only insofar as this judgment impacts on Eliot; but I also want to consider whether this diagnosis of Eliot is inadequate politically, and to suggest the relevance of thinking about Eliot and Dante in relation to the politics of modernism. While Eliot's dependence on Dante may reflect an American anxiety of influence about European culture, so that he never shows himself more American than in his use of Dante, he nevertheless negates the then dominant American tradition of Dante

readings. Eliot's use of Dante is a gestural refusal of that in favour of a notional European tradition and a Europe of what C. S. Lewis would call "the discarded image", in other words, a Europe of an imagined unified sensibility, in partial contrast to Shakespeare. The essay on Dante says that he "is first a European" (Eliot 1951: 239) as opposed to being "merely" an Italian. "The culture of Dante was not of one European country but of Europe" (Eliot 1951: 240). "In Dante's time Europe, with all its dissensions and dirtiness, was mentally more united than we can now conceive" (Eliot 1951: 240). Not by chance, Eliot's next sentence refers to the Treaty of Versailles for its separation of nation from nation, as part of a "process of disintegration".

American criticism of Dante before Eliot was associated with the nineteenth-century drive to translate Dante into English; after Cary, the most influential of these versions in Britain being J. A. Carlyle's prose *Inferno* (1849).[2] This was to become the basis of the Temple Classics version, for which P. H. Wicksteed translated *Paradiso* and Thomas Okey the *Purgatorio*; Hermann Oeslner edited the Italian text and the version which Eliot used appeared between 1899 and 1901. Carlyle had already influenced his more famous brother, Thomas —the results of that appear in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841), discussing "The Hero as Poet"— and the effects of Carlyle's enthusiasm are discernible in Emerson (who translated the *Vita Nuova* in the 1840s) and Melville. Interest in Dante in America was fuelled by Longfellow (1807-1882), who had been Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard, where he was succeeded by James Russell Lowell. Longfellow's blank-verse in *terza rima* translation of the *Commedia*, worked at since 1839, appeared in 1867.[3] Lowell, Longfellow and Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908), the Professor of the History of Art at Harvard, who produced a prose version of the *Commedia* (1891-1892), were instrumental in setting up the Dante Society in America. Further examples of the New England tradition of Dante translations may easily be found: in the versions by Henry Johnson (1855-1918) who rendered the whole into blank *terzine* in 1915, and Courtney Langdon (1861-1924) who did the same between 1918-1921. Norton was succeeded as Dante lecturer at Harvard by C. H. Grandgent (1862-1939), and with Grandgent we arrive at contemporary American Dante scholarship, for his edition of Dante (1909-1913) is one of the bases of the version of Charles Singleton (1909-1985), without question the most influential voice in current American thinking about Dante.

Singleton's work, beginning with *An Essay on the Vita Nuova* (1949), was from the first associated with new criticism. In 1952, he contributed to

an issue of the *Kenyon Review* edited by Francis Ferguson. Other contributors included Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Robert Fitzgerald, Eliot himself, Jacques Maritain, and Erich Auerbach. I shall return to the differences between Auerbach and Singleton; for the moment I want to signal the differences between Singleton's post-Eliot readings and pre-Eliot readings via a quotation from the Yale critic Giuseppe Mazzotta, in an obituary for Singleton. Mazzotta draws attention to the myth of the puritan settlement of New England as a new Exodus, and to Singleton's reading of the *Commedia* as dominated by the image of the Exodus —the words "*In Exitu Israel de Aegypto*" ["When Israel went out of Egypt"], the title of one of Singleton's most famous essays, being the words cited by the new pilgrims arriving at the shores of the mountain of Purgatory (*Purgatorio* 2, 46).[4] However, Mazzotta contrasts Singleton with Emerson, saying that "unlike Emerson, who sees Dante's poetry as a place of transgressions of the imaginary, as a political project for the American future, Singleton restores the *Commedia* to the role of an idyllic simulacrum of the past as legitimized by the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas" (1986: 38).[5]

Having sketched out this history, Eliot's place within it and his changes to it can be assessed. He studied at Harvard between 1906 and 1914, taking a class with Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) in 1909 on literary criticism in France, and then spending the year 1910-1911 in Paris. Babbitt, like Santayana, whose courses on the "History of Modern Philosophy" and "Ideals of Society, Religion, Art and Science in their Historical Development" Eliot also took, was one of the figures opposed to the liberalisation of the courses and the system of electives that had been introduced at Harvard by Charles Eliot, president from 1869 to 1909. These views appeared in Babbitt's *Literature and the American College* (1908), a text calling for the cultivation of the "classical" spirit and for impersonality. Eliot left Harvard in 1914, and Charles Eliot, who was a distant relation, corresponded with him in 1919, urging him to return to America, where a post awaited him at Harvard. He said that America was the only place where Eliot's talent could be nourished, and cited the example of the expatriate Henry James, whose sojourn away from America, he said, had contributed neither to the happy development of his art nor to his personal happiness (Jain 1992: 29-30). Eliot took no notice; indeed, in 1927 he became a British subject.

In Paris in 1911, under the influence of Irving Babbitt, Eliot bought *L'Avenir de l'Intelligence* (1905) by Charles Maurras (1868-1952), founder of Action Francaise, anti-semite and nationalist (he hated Germany), supporter of the Catholic Church, and royalist (for only monarchy, in his opinion, was

compatible with catholicism). The book is described by Michael Sutton as the one that "best embodied the substance of Maurras's thought" in the years before the First World War (1982: 49). Eliot's response to Maurras was decisive. In 1928, two years after much of Maurras's work had been put on the Index —Pius XI not wishing for the alliance of nationalism and royalism in France— Eliot ran in *The Criterion* his own two-part translation of Maurras's *Prologue to an Essay on Criticism*. It has been convincingly shown that Eliot's description of himself that year, in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*, as "classicist in literature, royalist in politics and anglo-catholic in religion" parrotted Maurras's self-description in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* in 1913, as "classique, catholique, monarchique" (Jain 1992: 58). Certainly, the classicism is the point of most easy contact with Maurras. In the following September, 1929, Faber issued Eliot's short book on Dante, the second piece on Dante that Eliot had written —the first appeared in *The Sacred Wood* in 1920. The book (later reprinted as a section of his *Selected Essays*) was dedicated to Maurras, and its epigraph ran: "La sensibilité, sauvée d'elle-meme et conduite dans l'ordre, est devenue un principe de perfection" ["Sensibility, saved from itself and submitted to order, has become a principle of perfection"]. The words came from Maurras's own essay on Dante, which was an introduction to a translation of *Inferno* by Mme Espinasse-Mongenet of 1912. Maurras reissued the essay in book-form, as *Le Conseil de Dante* in 1920.

Before commenting on the epigraph, and noticing that in later reprints Eliot cut it and the dedication, one should note that Eliot never dissociated himself fully from Maurras's brand of fascism plus monarchism. A modernist, European reading of Dante seemed to involve the possibility that Dante should be read as a supporter of a proto-fascist position. In 1948, in an essay entitled "Hommage à Charles Maurras", Eliot wrote; "For some of us, Maurras was a kind of Virgil who led us to the doors of the temple" (Margolis 1972: 95). It is alarming to think what temple Eliot might have considered Maurras a fit escort to; but the point is that the reference to Virgil quotes, from *Purgatorio* 22, 64-73, the words of the Christian poet Statius to the pagan poet Virgil, in which Virgil is seen as the prefigurer of Christianity who led to Statius's conversion. The passage runs, in the Temple Classics translation:

> And he [Statius] to him: "Thou first didst send me towards Parnassus to drink in its caves, and then didst light me on to God. Thou didst like one who goes by night and carries the light behind him, and profits not himself, but maketh persons wise that follow him,
> When thou saidst: "The world is renewed, justice returns and the first age of man, and a new progeny descends from heaven." Through thee I was a poet, through thee a Christian [...]. (Dante 1901, 2: 275)

No higher praise of Maurras could really be given, or could even, perhaps, have been wanted. Even the association of the French fascist with the poet of empire seems not merely fortuitous. The temple Eliot refers to is classicism, which implies not only the importance of rank, and of the non-democratic, according to Albert Thibaudet, commenting on Maurras (Howarth 1965: 177), but also a commitment to theological pessimism, to non-protestant ideas of the power of the individual, and to non-Pelagianism. Eliot's definition is "*form* and *restraint* in art, *discipline* and *authority* in religion, *centralization* in government (either as socialism or monarchy). The classicist point of view has been defined as essentially a belief in Original Sin —the necessity for austere discipline [...]".[6] Dante becomes valuable to Eliot in that he leads away from a belief in "cheerfulness, optimism, and hopefulness [which] words stood for a great deal of what one hated in the nineteenth century" (Eliot 1951: 262). Original sin and a belief that poetry must originate from suffering replaces unitarian optimism. Eliot had rejected Charles Eliot's educational reforms which favoured electives, accounting for the changes he had made by his "optimistic faith in the natural goodness of the human will [...] which perhaps a sounder theology might have corrected" (Sigg 1989: 227).[7] Belief in original sin would never tolerate romanticism (that New England product of Emersonianism), or democracy, or protestantism.

In the quotation from Maurras used in the book on Dante, the context is Dante's meeting with Beatrice, and the new accession to feeling that Dante has in her presence. But sensibility has been corrected. Order has been accepted. Maurras's right-wing "take" on Dante has little to do with Dante's own politics as expressed in *Monarchia*, for instance (nor does Eliot even mention this text in his book on Dante). As Eugen Weber says, in his account of Action Française, Maurras came to politics by way of aesthetics (an interesting variant on Benjamin's famous claim that fascism aestheticises

politics), and nationalism was a lesson that could be learned from classicism. Weber quotes Maurice Barrès that

> [N]ationalism is more than merely politics: it is a discipline, a reasoned method to bind to all that is truly eternal, all that must develop in continued fashion in our country. Nationalism is a form of classicism; it is in every field the incarnation of French continuity. (1962: 77)

Submission to order on Dante's part is, then, both in the field of a sublimated love and nationalism; these are metaphors one for the other.

Eliot's Dante criticism is heavily compromised. In the essay called "Dante" which appeared in *The Sacred Wood*, he argued that in the *Commedia*,

> [T]he emotion of the person, or the emotion with which our attitude appropriately invests the person, is never lost or diminished, is always preserved entire, but is modified by the position assigned to the person in the eternal scheme, is coloured by the atmosphere of that person's residence in one of the three worlds. About none of Dante's character[s] is there that ambiguity that affects Milton's Lucifer. (1920: 167)

Here it should be noted that the attitude is the opposite of Auerbach's in *Mimesis* (chapter 8), in his account of the damned atheists Farinata and Cavalcante in *Inferno* canto 10. The chapter has the weight behind it of Auerbach's earlier studies of Dante, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (1929, the same year as Eliot's little book), and the essay "Figura" (1944). Both are referred to in the chapter in *Mimesis*. For Auerbach, the figural realism of the figures in the afterlife exceeds their reality in life, so that:

> In the very heart of the other world, [Dante] created a world of earthly beings and passions so powerful that it breaks bounds and proclaims its independence. Figure surpasses fulfilment, or more properly: the fulfilment serves to bring out the figure in still more impressive relief. We cannot but admire Farinata and weep with Cavalcante. What actually moves us is not that God has damned them, but that the one is unbroken and the other mourns so heart-rendingly for his son and the sweetness of the light. [...] All through the poem there are instances in which the effect of the

> earthly figure and its earthly destiny surpasses or is subserved by the effect produced by its eternal situation. (1957: 174-175)

This is an Hegelian reading, whereby the art negates the systematicity of the text. Eliot's position rejects Hegelianism as romanticism; he would have agreed with Santayana in finding in Hegel a "forced optimism" (Jain 1992: 67, see also Jain 1992: 96). The importance of Dante for Eliot is that the emotions in the *Commedia* are precisely calibrated so that we are made to feel exactly to the extent that is appropriate. The absence of ambiguity is the marker of Dante's absolute control and is the reason why Eliot sets such store by Dante as a philosophical poet, for the relation to philosophy enables an objectivity in Dante which prevents the emotions becoming slanted in favour of the damned —in favour of Francesca (*Inferno* 5), or Brunetto Latini (*Inferno* 15), or Ugolino (*Inferno* 33), for instance— figures which resonate within Eliot's own poetry. Ambiguity, present in Eliot, recalling Empson's commentaries in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, is denied to Dante. There is no room for the argument that Auerbach's figuralism sanctions: that the realism that produces the art of Farinata overbears the allegorical significance the character holds, so that the *Inferno* engenders a romantic humanism with which the thesis-led nature of the text can hardly cope. "The structure is an ordered scale of human emotions", Eliot assures the reader (1951: 168). This is of a piece with the famous statement of 1919, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality" (1951: 21).

Eliot's reading is, of course, conducted under the sign of belief in original sin, which, it may be noted, is a doctrine barely discussed in the *Commedia*, whose topic is so often free will. One of the cantos discussing free will is *Purgatorio* 16, the context being the meeting between Dante and Marco Lombardo. Eliot used line 85 from this canto to begin his poem "Animula" ("Issues from the hand of God the simple soul"), and the psychological themes of this poem about the child's growth do not suggest other than that the soul becomes, under "the hand of time", necessarily "Irresolute and selfish, misshapen, lame/ Unable to fare forward or retreat/ Fearing the warmed reality, the offered good". The text closes with references to violence, including self-destruction, and the pessimism of "Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth" (1963: 113-114). Birth and death are conflated, but the determinism corresponds to comparatively little in Dante.

Eliot's use of Dante in "Animula" is Augustinian, and is at one with American criticism of Dante, thinking of Charles Singleton and a critic much

in debt to Singleton, John Freccero, whose Augustinian argument says that a theme in Dante is the deficiency of the will, and therefore sees the humanism and energy of *Inferno* as needing to be re-read and corrected by a Platonic insight. In turn, this means reading allegorically, i.e., away from the letter (literally) to the spirit. An allegorical reading continually corrects what has gone before, so that as Singleton describes reading Dante, the process is one of finding misunderstandings being introduced for the sake of a correction of them later. Freccero, in a book-review comparing Auerbach with Singleton, said that

> [T]he unparalleled success which Singleton has had in his explication of the poem is due in large measure to his conviction that the *Divina Commedia* is *one* poem, with an autonomous structure coherent in itself in each of its parts [...]. The distinguished American Dantist has stressed the poet's use of Biblical allegory, not simply in order to situate the poem in time, but also to underscore the poet's uniqueness and his daring, while Auerbach elaborates the principle of *figura* as a general cultural phenomenon. (1965: 107-108)

When the *Commedia*, seen as one, not as three *cantiche*, is made its own interpreter, the allegorical method fits with new critical procedures. Freccero adopts the same attitude as Eliot's towards seeing a hierarchy of emotions structuring the *Commedia* when he says that it "tells of the development of a *pilgrim* who became a *poet* capable of writing the story we have just finished reading" and that Dante has been "exorcised of the demon of subjectivity" (1965: 108). The same anti-romanticism we can notice in Eliot's approach.

In reading Dante for this order and correction, Eliot's modernism —his anti-romanticism and his sense of the autonomy of the work of art— goes against the earlier New England mode. Emerson had said that Dante's "praise is, that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher or into universality". He contrasted this with the situation that "we have yet had no genius in America" who would do the same (1983, 2: 21). Dante was one of the poets who would inspire America. Following on from Emerson, James Russell Lowell, in a review-essay of 1872, after summarising Dante's life and works, wrote, "The first remark to be made upon the writings of Dante is that they are all [...] autobiographic, and that all of them [...] are parts of a mutually related system, of which the central point is the individuality and experience of the poet" (1904, 3: 37). Later he says, "whatever subsidiary interpretations the poem is capable of, its great and primary value is as the

autobiography of a human soul, of yours and mine it may be, as well as Dante's" (1904, 3: 124). In opting for a view of Dante in which personality takes precedence over impersonality, and reading autobiographically suggests that the text is seen, like the life, as improvisatory, Lowell singles out the importance of Dante being "provincial" rather than universal, possessed by the theme of "liberty" —obviously a romantic stress— and by mysticism (1904, 3: 138, 148, 157), which leaves the text opaque rather than pellucidly open as it is for Eliot. Eliot's Dante by contrast is contemplative, rather than mystical, never caught up into oneness with the vision he beholds: impersonality goes that far.[8] Further, Lowell reads the episode of Ripheus in *Paradiso* 20, 67-72, where the pagan is declared to be saved, as an instance of Dante's own doubt, his uncertainty about his own system (1904, 3: 155-156). Dante as presented here becomes a poet of stops and starts, of hesitation and change, and if the poem comes out of himself, as Lowell insists (1904, 3: 163), there is no pretence that the text can be the inspired "allegory of theologians"—analogous to God's writing— which it becomes in Singleton. It makes no pretence to the absolute.

Coming back from this to Eliot, one should note that he also reads against Santayana, whose essay on Dante may be situated between those earlier New England readings and Eliot's own. Santayana stresses Dante as a philosophical poet, in which Eliot follows him (1951: 258); but he also contends for Dante's romanticism, his personal involvement in what he wrote. While Santayana thinks of Dante as "ahead of his time" in his readiness to project himself into the text (1953: 119), which is another way of casting Dante as a romantic, Santayana has few illusions, and his critiques may be read as part of his opposition to the "genteel tradition" of American letters. Thus Santayana faults Dante for his personal *vendettas* (1953: 117). Eliot briefly alludes to this critique, without naming him (1951: 248), but claims that the figures of damnation are "transformed" in Dante. They are not merely personal figures that Dante knew and hated. Secondly, Santayana takes exception to the doctrine that "the damned are damned to the glory of God":

> This doctrine [of eternal damnation] [...] is a great disgrace to human nature. It shows how desperate, at heart, is the folly of an egotistic or anthropocentric philosophy. [...] Because my instinct taboos something, the whole universe, with insane intensity, shall taboo it for ever. (1953: 106-107)

Nonetheless, he grants that Dante "saw beyond it at times". Thirdly, and here we can link Santayana's position with Leavis, he says that "love, as [Dante] feels and renders it, is not normal or healthy love" (1953: 118).

Eliot's response to Paul Elmer More will serve for a comment on Santayana's critique of the doctrine of hell. Elmer More did not like Eliot's implied justification of hell in the 1929 book. Eliot wrote back that

> I am perturbed by your comments on Hell. To me it is *giustizia, sapienza, amore*. [Justice, wisdom, love, a reference to *Inf.* 3, 4-6.] And I cannot help saying [...] that I am really shocked by your assertion that God did not make Hell. It seems to me that you have lapsed back into Humanitarianism. [...] Is your God Santa Claus? [...] To me the phrase "to be damned for the glory of God" is sense and not paradox. (Jain 1992: 227-228; see also Margolis 1972: 137-146).

The attitude that speaks here is violent rejection of individualism; and its classicism implies its refusal to recognise that there may be issues in Dante which the text itself cannot resolve. Here Eliot's aim would be to become more Dantean than Dante ever was. Yet it would be fair to say that the current state of Dante criticism, armed with the argument that Dante writes in imitation of God's way of writing, endorses Eliot's position, and not Santayana's, or the nineteenth-century view, and has foreclosed on the issue whether the doctrine of hell can ever be thought of as justified. But then, America has become the country whose authoritarianism of interpretation makes it choose to demonstrate its superior technology by its practice of capital punishment.

The objectivity that Eliot reads in Dante means that the emotions are subdued, as they are in Maurras, in obedience to Beatrice. Santayana's preemptive remarks about Dante's love being unhealthy act as a corrective to Maurras and the repression he stands for. Leavis's comments about Eliot's use of Dante will be recalled, but it will be seen too that Leavis's comments, while they may be aware of them, omit the politics that lies behind Eliot's subservience to Dante, as this demonstrates his adherence to a Maurrasian standpoint. I would like to draw towards a conclusion by considering Santayana's critiques of Dante in the light of what Eliot makes of them.

In "Dante", Eliot refers to the pageant-vision Dante witnesses in the Earthly Paradise, when Beatrice reappears (*Purgatorio* cantos 29 and 30) and he says it belongs to "the world of what I call the *high dream*, and the modern world seems capable only of the *low dream*" (1951: 262). He returns

to the theme in discussing the *Vita Nuova*, where he says Dante's attraction to Beatrice must be understood as leading to "attraction towards God". For Eliot, "the love of man and woman (or for that matter of man and man) is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals" (1951: 274). Thus he writes that

> [T]he *Vita Nuova* [...] is, I believe, a very sound psychological treatise on something related to what is now called "sublimation." There is also a practical sense of realities behind it, which is antiromantic: not to expect more from *life* than it can give or more from *human* beings than they can give; to look to death for what life cannot give. The *Vita Nuova* belongs to "vision literature"; but its philosophy is the Catholic philosophy of disillusion. (1951: 275)

Eliot gingerly misnames psychoanalysis, which talks about sublimation, as "psychology", which does not, as if to occlude psychoanalysis from his thought. Eliot's antagonism to the New England culture of Emerson and of Lowell is apparent here in the downplaying of optimism and romanticism, and protestantism, and in the distaste for Rousseauism (Rousseau is mentioned dismissively earlier in the section on the *Vita Nuova*). But the key is sublimation —that and the transfiguring of the souls of the damned. Eliot's phraseology in "Dante" may be put alongside the almost contemporary writing of "Ash-Wednesday":

> Here are the years that walk between, bearing
> Away the fiddles and the flutes, restoring
> One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing
> White light folded, sheathed about her, folded.
> The new years walk, restoring
> Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
> With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
> The time. Redeem
> The unread vision in the higher dream
> While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse. (1963: 100)

The section follows from the words "Sovegna vos" —which are Arnaut Daniel's words to Dante at the end of the cornice of the lustful (all of them are poets): "Remember [me]" (*Purgatorio* 26, 147). Dante's dream on the mountain of the two women, Rachel and Leah (*Purg.* 27, 94-108), which follows this encounter with the lustful, is remembered in the reference to the

time between sleep and waking", and the sequence continues with the reminder of the *Vita Nuova* title in "the new years" and "the new verse", and the sense that the vision of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 30 corrects, or fulfils, the drive of that earlier poetry —restores with a new verse the ancient rhyme. The Eliotic dream is of a poetry with no entropy, where the point of closure is that of completion, or else correction of what had been misunderstood: the agenda of new criticism. It entails redemption, which is sought in the poem. Redemption suggests that what is restored reappears in a higher, sublimated form, and "sublimation" is associated with what Eliot calls the "high dream". The vision may be "unread" because the modern world is only capable of the low dream, not capable of sublimating its emotions. To "redeem/ the unread vision in the higher dream" entails becoming capable of reading against the background of death ("the gilded hearse") –looking to death for what life cannot give. Sublimation is renunciation of life; time must be redeemed, because it cannot be taken as it is, and neither can experience, evoked as "the fiddles and the flutes", be taken at face value. Materiality exists in the gorgeous deadness of "jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse" (unless these strangely phallic unicorns, as animals remembered from medieval bestiaries, and perhaps associated with Dante's griffin (*Purg.* 29, 106-120), are to be seen as bearing away what speaks of death).

The beauty of the passage comes from its indirection, suggesting a certain evasion within the work, which fits with the desire for sublimation. Whatever may be said of Santayana's view of Dante on love, it seems that Eliot has deliberately opted to read against him, and to praise a view that Santayana dislikes. How Eliot's personal repression, which leads him him use the psychoanalytic term "sublimation", and the influence of Maurras intersect here, is a matter for speculation, begging questions about the psychoanalytic structure of quasi-fascist thought. Unlike Santayana, Eliot has opted to take Dante *in toto*. His essay on Dante constantly refers to the importance of the philosophy within the poetry and to the question of belief, which for him can be resolved into an issue of "poetic assent" (1951: 257), as though nothing of Dante's world-view need be lost. There has been no entropy, and no historical differences, or other marks of difference, are negated by the nostalgia expressed in the desire that the years should be restored. The "new verse" and the "ancient rhyme" suggest Eliot and Dante together, Dante's ancient rhyme being wholly available in Eliot's present. On this basis, the function of Eliot's poetry, or of modernist poetry itself, is not to re-read the texts of the past, but to repeat them. Older nineteenth-century readings of Dante had no such sense of the text being so commanding. It was

rather there as a form of inspiration, working from its own different standpoint.

Perhaps it is time for a postmodern reading of Dante, to get away from the politics of modernism, and so to do service to both Dante and to Eliot. To take two of Santayana's substantive points: objection to the doctrine of eternal damnation, and objection to Dante's sense of love. Eliot in his letter to Elmer More shows that he reads the Dantean text entirely referentially, as though the orthodox Christian hell and Dante's could be used to explain or justify each other. A reading of Dante which did not justify the text philosophically by reference to some outside scheme would start with the point that the textual nature of the *Commedia* separates it from being judged in a continuum with the schemes of theology or philosophy. Neither Santayana nor Eliot register this. Indeed the text, with Eliot, is in danger of becoming authoritative, just as its authority is elevated by Singleton's stress on the work as the "allegory of theologians", whereas Auerbach's method gives the text no such singularity or privilege.

A second point might be made with regard to gender-issues. To locate Dante's positions on love solely with regard to Beatrice is to miss the omnipresence of the question of sexual difference within the text. It is everywhere, especially when it is not referred to openly. The issue of Beatrice needs confronting, but it is not the necessary place to start in considering Dante in relation to sexuality, and this may be an instance of the margins of a text being more interesting than the ostensible centre. A famous article by John Peter assumed that Eliot could be read in terms of a suppressed homosexual interest in Jean Verdenal (1969: 140-175).[9] Certainly, Eliot's reference in "Dante" to "the relations between man and man" lends some weight to this possibility, and it would explain the place given to sublimation in his readings. John Peter recalled, in his article, the special place that Eliot gave in his poetry to Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* 15, source for the "familiar compound ghost" of "Little Gidding", and a sodomite; just as Dante gives a special place to the sodomites by assigning them two cantos (*Inf.* 15 and 16), and shows no sense of distantiation from them. Arnaut Daniel, similarly privileged within Eliot's text, and quoted constantly, also suggests the pathos and the joy of a sexuality which may also be homosexual, or which is called "hermaphrodite" (*Purg.* 26, 82). The sodomites certainly rush by in this particular canto, joyfully accusing themselves in carnival manner, and sodomy and poetry, or rather the hermaphrodite interest and poetry, are inextricably linked together. Lovers are poets and poets must be lovers.

But it is not necessary to read Eliot biographically to make the argument that sexuality in Eliot is never reducible to the symmetry of man and woman, that it evades such polarisation throughout, as, for instance, with Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, and that if Eliot learned anything from Dante, he certainly learned this. Peter's argument belongs to a system which works from the life to the text. His points could be better made by reference to Eliot's text, in particular, to its commitment to the fragmentary, where the fragment does not stand in for a whole that can be made up and completed, implying instead that sexual relations cannot be thought of in terms of completion, and that gender-distinctions cannot be firmly established. That point would lead to another, final, one: "Ash-Wednesday" may be an example of the wish for sublimation, but sublimation remains a desire and a source of anxiety, not an achieved state. The lines, for instance, which allude to awakening a state of desire remain evocatively sexual themselves. Maurras might have been used by Eliot to suggest that sublimation was possible as well as necessary, but the text denies it, even in its assertions of the spiritual. Eliot's poetry foregrounds the sexual in Dante, which elevates Dante beyond nineteenth-century, romanticist readings. But in attempting to close such down, Eliot attempts also to regulate the text and its reading. The hegemony of an Eliotic orthodoxy in contemporary readings of Dante might be relativised and put in its place, if the opening up of the text towards plurality and difference were recognised as a countervailing, and less orthodox, aspect of his use of Dante.

NOTES

[1] On the topic of Eliot and Dante, see generally Manganiello (1989); see also Suchard (1973) and Torrens (1974). In my discussions of Eliot, I do not refer to his third essay on Dante, "What Dante Means to Me" (1965).

[2] See, for instance, Margaret Fuller's review of Cary's translation, in Michael Caesar (1989: 561-564).

[3] On these translations of Dante, see Cunningham (1965).

[4] For Singleton's essay, see John Frecerro (1966: 102-121). I quote from the Temple Classics commentary on this line: "According to Dante (*Epistle ad Can Grande* sect. 7), the anagogical meaning of this Psalm (114) is "the exit of the

sanctified soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory"". The Temple Classics edition, like Singleton, assumes Dante's authorship of this Epistle; the matter is by no means certain, and has implications for the way the poem is read as allegory —"allegory of theologians"— as Singleton insists it is; i.e. writing that claims for itself the same truth as God's writing.

[5] The same issue has other articles on Singleton, including a biography, by Richard Macksey (1986: 45-57). Other material relevant to this paragraph appears in De Vito (1982: 99-118). I discuss Singleton's work in detail in relation to Freccero, Mazzotta and Auerbach in Tambling (1988) and Tambling (1999: 1-16).

[6] Quoted, from "Syllabus of a Course of Six lectures on Modern French Literature" (1916), in Sigg (1989: 19).

[7] Eliot's essay, "The Christian Conception of Education" (1941) quoted in Sigg (1989: 277).

[8] The point is derived from Jain (1992: 221-227), partly based on a reading of Eliot's Clark lectures of 1926, on seventeenth-century poetry.

[9] The implications of Santayana's own homosexuality for his arguments, and the place given to masculinity in the Harvard that Charles Eliot presided over, need developing: a beginning may be made with Townsend (1996).

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VIRGINIA WOOLF AND POST-IMPRESSIONISM: FRENCH ART, ENGLISH THEORY, AND FEMINIST PRACTICE[1]

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"On or about" November 1910, Roger Fry invented the term post-impressionism to describe the departure from impressionism by French-based artists "out of the cul-de-sac into which naturalism had led them" (MacCarthy 1910: 10). Desmond MacCarthy, the secretary to Fry's notorious exhibition, "Manet and the post-impressionists", recalls that here "for the first time the British public saw the works of Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, Picasso and other now familiar French painters. No gradual infiltration, but —bang! an assault along the whole academic front of art" (1945: 123). The spectacular colourism of this new French art was the point at which the assault was most brutally felt by the many hostile members of the public and outraged critics who came to deride the exhibition.

When reactionary critics were not pouring scorn on the primitivism and insanity they saw represented on the walls of the Grafton, they were snorting in disbelief at the most obvious symptom to them of such degeneracy: the "barbaric" colours.[2] Most furore is aroused where women are depicted in exotic and "unnatural" colours:

> In a typical [Gauguin] hideous brown women, with purple hair and vitriolic faces, squat in the midst of a nightmare landscape of drunken palm trees, crude green grass, vermilion rocks, and numerous glaringly coloured excrescences impossible to identify. [...] A revolution to be successful must presumably revolve; but, undeniably clever as they often are, the catherine-wheel antics of the Post-Impressionists are not likely to wake many responsive chords in British breasts.[3]

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