

CHAPTER 18

Dante

Massimo Bacigalupo

Speaking of Dante in 1950 to the Italian Institute in London, T. S. Eliot said: 'I still, after forty years, regard his poetry as the most persistent and deepest influence upon my own verse' (*TCC*, 125). Poets' statements about their own work are not always to be trusted, but it is true that Eliot found in Dante a continuous source of inspiration, as probably only a non-Italian poet could. Inevitably, his reading developed over the decades, with his style and outlook, and within the context of contemporary culture and society. But certain passages remained 'touchstones' (as Matthew Arnold called them), to which he returned again and again.

The poet Arnaut Daniel, caught in the purgatorial fire and speaking in his arcane and melodious tongue, remained an Eliot persona, perhaps *the* Eliot persona. In *Purgatorio* xxvi another poet, Guido Guinizelli, tells Dante that 'questi ch'io ti cerno col dito . . . fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno' ['he whom I point out . . . was a better craftsman of the mother tongue'] and Eliot appropriated the sobriquet '*miglior fabbro*' in the generous dedication of *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound. He used the final line of this canto, narrated by Dante, 'then he hid in the fire that refines them', among the fragments 'shored' at the end of his masterpiece, in the original Italian. But he had already borrowed from Arnaut's Provençal speech the title of his second poetry collection, *Ara Vos Prec* (1920), and was to return to it in the original section titles and the line '*sovegna vos*' ['remember'] of *Ash-Wednesday* (1930). The 'refining fire' was to appear again in *Four Quartets* (1943).

Arnaut describes himself in 'superb verses' (*SE*, 256) as 'Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan; / consiros vei la passada folor, / e vei jausen lo jorn, qu'esper, denan'. Eliot renders this as 'I am Arnold, who weeps and goes singing. I see in thought all the past folly. And I see with joy the day for which I hope, before me' (*SE*, 256). The image of the suffering poet who weeps and sings would be recognised by Eliot as a portrait of his own

ordeals. The fact that Arnaut was punished among the lustful also played a role, since Eliot's sexuality was more than usually conflicted. The attention devoted by Eliot in his 1929 pamphlet on Dante to *La Vita Nuova*, the allegorised account of young Dante's meeting with and love for Beatrice, shows how interested he was in the varieties (adolescent and mature) of love and in the relation between private experience and literary form.

Eliot insisted that 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood' (*SE*, 238). He approached Dante 'with a prose translation beside the text' (*TCC*, 125) in the small Temple Classics volumes (translated 1909–10), which have ample commentary and marginal captions but no general critical introduction. They present the three canticles – *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* – unadorned, and were often reprinted. Eliot explained in 1950 that 'forty years ago', that is when he was a student at Harvard, 'I began to puzzle out the *Divine Comedy* in this way'. He would parse a favourite passage with the help of the Temple crib, then memorise it and repeat it 'lying in bed or on a railway journey' (*TCC*, 125). Thus he acquired some knowledge of Italian, a reading rather than a speaking knowledge, though paradoxically it was the sound of Dante's words that kept echoing in his mind.

Of the shock of recognition upon first encountering a fellow spirit like Laforgue or a master like Dante, Eliot wrote: 'There is a first, or an early moment which is unique, of shock and surprise, even of terror (*Ego dominus tuus*): a moment which can never be forgotten, but which is never repeated integrally' (*SE*, 250). The Latin quotation from *La Vita Nuova* is itself an example of the shock that Eliot is speaking of and of his use of a foreign language to suggest a revelation. This prose statement recalls the lines in *The Waste Land*, 'My friend, blood shaking my heart / The awful daring of a moment's surrender' (*CPP*, 74). Eliot's criticism is appealing because he brings his personal experience to bear, but always to illuminate what he generally believes to be the case. He shows more readiness to reveal his feelings than he is usually given credit for. An anthology of memorable aphorisms could easily be compiled from his remarkable prose output.

The first-hand encounter with Dante's text could not have occurred if Eliot had not been born into a book-loving family and into a late Victorian milieu where volumes such as the Temple Classics were available, sought after, studied and read for pleasure. F. O. Matthiessen pointed out that Eliot's Puritan background played a role in attracting

him to Dante's stern moral vision and that at Harvard he found a flourishing school of Dante studies:

From Longfellow through Charles Eliot Norton, Santayana, and Charles Grandgent there was an unbroken line of Dante scholarship at Harvard. It may be that in the end Eliot gained a more challenging insight into the technical excellences of *The Divine Comedy* through conversations with Ezra Pound, but ... in the preface to his own introduction to Dante he lists as his principal aids all the names which I have just mentioned.¹

George Santayana's *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910) was particularly important as an aid in Eliot's search for an explanation of the relation of poetry and philosophy, a question which recurs in all his essays on Dante. He agrees with Santayana that philosophy is central to the great poems of Lucretius and Dante, that it is integral to the poetry, or realised by the poetry, and that a clearly held philosophical vision enhances a poem. He is less sure whether the merits of a given philosophical system play a role in the valuation of poetry, but finally seems to decide that Dante's line 'E'n la sua voluntade è nostra pace' ['And in His will is our peace'] is more '*literally true*' than Shakespeare's line 'Ripeness is all' (*SE*, 270). Here, Eliot's growing conviction that man's lot was hopeless without an appeal to God played a central role. Instead, Shakespeare's line from *King Lear* suggests (and in a dramatic context) that the best one can do is to live fully and maturely (Eliot would have agreed with that, adding only that it is not *enough*).

Eliot took an active interest in Dante scholarship. Before composing his lectures and papers he read scholars such as Charles Grandgent and Mario Praz. He even deferred to Praz when deciding not to publish his 1926 Clark Lectures, some of whose generalisations Praz had questioned (see *VMP*, 19–21). But Eliot drew a distinction between criticism and scholarship. He made no pretence to the latter, asserting that his view of Dante was that of a poetic practitioner. However, he was formally educated in philosophy, and this gave his criticism a wider appeal, enabling it to approach general and personal questions that are of lasting interest. Add to this his brilliant, concise and powerful style and it will be seen why René Wellek called Eliot 'the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world'.²

Although enamoured of the sounds of poetry and a master of rhyme, rhythm and language, Eliot is always concerned with the content of poetic statement. In the Clark Lectures it is easy for him to prove that the opening metaphors of John Donne's 'The Extasie' form 'one of the most

hideous mixed figures of speech in the language' (VMP, 109), as against Dante's absolute appropriateness of image. On these occasions Eliot can sound pedantic, since you cannot really compare Dante's Gothic cathedral to Donne's baroque somersaults. This lack of historical perspective would have perplexed a scholar like Praz. But Eliot was searching for a true use of language beyond shifting movements and tastes. To him, poets are not like painters in a gallery, whom we can enjoy without enquiring if Giovanni Bellini is more or less true to life than Francis Bacon. They are to some extent moral guides (the Puritan tradition again), and we read them in our search for poetic knowledge and for a method that writers may still apply. When Eliot read James Joyce's *Ulysses* he found there 'a method which others must pursue' (SP, 177), and which he himself went on to pursue in *The Waste Land*, and more consistently but less successfully in his plays. When he read Laforgue and Dante ('*Ego Dominus Tuus*') he went on to write 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', where the opening simile – the evening spread out 'Like a patient etherised upon a table' (CPP, 13) has a Dantesque immediacy, realism, clarity and unexpectedness. (In *Purgatorio* VI, Dante did compare, less fancifully, ailing Italy to a sick patient 'che non può trovar posa in su le piume, / ma con dar volta suo dolore scherma' ['who finds no rest on her bedding, / but by turning shields herself from pain'].)

To return to the moment of discovery. According to Mario Praz, Ezra Pound played an essential role in Eliot's approach to Dante: 'Arthur Symonds revealed to him Laforgue; Ezra Pound, through his book on *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), and still more through his table-talk, made him aware of the greatness of Dante, gave him that shock of surprise that no recognised authority on the poet could have communicated'.³ Praz proceeds to show how many of the points made by Eliot in his 1929 study *Dante* are anticipated by Pound's enthusiastic account of the poet in *The Spirit of Romance*. Speaking of Arnaut's lines, Praz notes with his usual gusto and acumen:

One may doubt whether, without the stimulus of the actual delivery of those lines on the part of such a gourmet of pure sounds as Pound, Eliot's imagination would ever have crystallized round them. For, I think, one may trace to Pound that aspect of Eliot which consists in investing a quotation in a foreign language with a significance infinitely more potent than its verbal import, a significance which in Eliot achieves an emblematic pregnancy.⁴

Never a great admirer of Pound (as the final qualification 'in Eliot' makes clear), Praz may be right in seeing Pound's fingerprints on such passages

as the final shoring of fragments in *The Waste Land* and even in the more chastened use of foreign tags in *Four Quartets*. This may be an instance of Eliot's maxim: 'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal' (*SE*, 206).

It may safely be concluded that Pound's passionate advocacy of Dante and his love for certain passages, such as the Glaucus simile in *Paradiso* xxxiii, confirmed Eliot's youthful admiration, though he carefully pointed out in one of his last lectures, 'To Criticize the Critic' (delivered in 1961), that Dante 'impressed me profoundly when I was twenty-two and with only a rudimentary acquaintance with his language', and added that 'Dante's astonishing economy and directness of language ... provided for me a wholesome corrective to the extravagances of the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline authors in whom I also delighted' (*TCC*, 23). Thus in 1910, when *The Spirit of Romance* was published in London, Eliot was reading Dante alongside the Elizabethans and the French Symbolists. These are the three areas of poetry to which he returned again and again, claiming that they amounted to three manifestations of 'metaphysical poetry'. Possibly the age of modernism constituted a fourth manifestation. Eliot moved from his personal taste for poets whom he found essential to his own development, to a generalisation that he presented as his version of literary history. Such was his persuasiveness and the acuteness of his taste, that this version gained ascendancy, so much so that these periods and writers are still more popular and widely studied than others. The opening essay in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), entitled 'The Perfect Critic', has an epigraph from Remy de Gourmont that suggests precisely and perhaps ironically Eliot's progress from the personal to the general: 'Eriger en lois ses impressions personnelles, c'est le grand effort d'un homme s'il est sincère' (*SW*, 1). The critic's personal impressions are to be transformed into objective laws. Though it should be added that Eliot was at pains to suggest that his critical statements should not be taken too literally or too seriously, being occasional, and in any case subordinate to his main artistic effort.

Eliot's poetry and prose are framed by Dante. His first collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) is dedicated to his late friend Jean Verdenal with an epigraph from *Purgatorio* about a love so strong as to overcome death, taking '*l'ombre come cosa salda*' ['shadows for solid things'] (*CPP*, 11). The closing line of *Four Quartets*, and of a lifetime's poetic effort, 'And the fire and the rose are one' (*CPP*, 198), evokes the White Rose which in *Paradiso* gathers as in an amphitheatre all the souls of the blessed, now at last united with Arnaut's penitential fire that Eliot never really escaped. Likewise, the title of Eliot's first collection of critical

prose, *The Sacred Wood*, alludes to Dante's forests – *Inferno*'s dark wood and the divine forest at the end of the *Purgatorio*, described in cantos that Eliot loved and mined in *Ash-Wednesday*. His final prose volume, *To Criticize the Critic* (1965), includes 'What Dante Means to Me' as well as the statement (in the title essay) about his discovery of Dante at the age of 22. Within this comprehensive relation to Dante, which informs Eliot's oeuvre, it is possible to distinguish at least three phases, roughly corresponding to the three canticles of the *Divine Comedy*.

Eliot and Pound were unusual in emphasising the greatness of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, with their more philosophical and less corporeal poetry, since for many lay readers Dante is primarily the author of *Inferno*. Both poets, however, had been brought up on the Romantics and the Victorians and had imbibed a Pre-Raphaelite vision of the Middle Ages as an unsullied time of great art, poetry and theology. Eliot reacted against Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blessed Damsel* and even more strongly against the cheerfulness of Robert Browning, which he detested. 'We have', he said, presenting as usual his view as that of an informed majority, 'a prejudice against beatitude as material for poetry' (*SE*, 264). In his case, however, the attraction for suffering as a subject was connected with the main thrust of his personality and his art, which is the story of a quest starting with the abject and the sordid. The concluding essay of *The Sacred Wood*, 'Dante' (polemically titled 'Dante as a "Spiritual Leader"' when it first appeared in the *Athenaeum*), is already concerned with the vexed relation of poetry and philosophy, and stresses the necessity of Dante's theoretical 'scaffold', taking issue with Paul Valéry's dismissal of philosophical poetry. But the central point of this brilliant discursive essay is taken from a statement made in an imaginary dialogue by Walter Savage Landor: 'Dante is the great master of the disgusting'. 'That is true', Eliot says, though he adds: 'The contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative impulse toward the pursuit of beauty. But not all succeed as did Dante in expressing the complete scale from negative to positive. The negative is the more importunate' (*SW*, 169). When writing this, Eliot was himself a 'great master of the disgusting', having just published *Poems* (1920), with its vignettes of Sweeney and company, and the dark musings of Geron-tion. He was composing his *Inferno*, which begins with the observations of Prufrock and was to continue in the symphonic *The Waste Land*, a trip through a modern hell with a glimpse of Purgatory at the end ('*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*' [*CPP*, 75]). Eliot's hell is not, however, a place 'for the other people' (*ASG*, 43), as Eliot astutely remarked of Pound's Hell

Cantos, but populated by figures with whom he feels a bond. Between the silly blessed damozel and the vulgarian narrator of 'Portrait of a Lady', he would possibly prefer the latter. Degradation attracts the fastidious and puritanical Eliot like the haunted characters in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Hence the puzzling (and rather Byronic) statement in his 1930 essay on Baudelaire (whom Eliot continually compares with Dante), that 'it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist' (*SE*, 429).

It is possible to think of Eliot's early poetry as a journey through hell in which he meets ghosts who tell their sorry stories (Prufrock, Gerontion or the Hollow Men, who are incapable of good or evil). He describes the journey, landscape and its inhabitants. In the widely admired study *Dante* (1929), published in Faber's 'The Poets on the Poets' series, Eliot moved on, as a Christian convert, to a more Purgatorial phase.⁵ The poetic version of this can be found in *Ash-Wednesday*, which is heavily indebted to the final cantos of *Purgatorio*, with their pageantry and the apparition of Matilda gathering flowers. Here, Eliot the convert invokes a Lady who partakes of aspects of both Beatrice and Mary. It is ironic that *Ash-Wednesday* was originally dedicated to Vivien Eliot, his first wife, who had little of Beatrice, which would lead a psychologist to question the motives behind Eliot's conversion. However, *Ash-Wednesday* is a moving religious poem in which Dante's example is again evident in the use of clear visual images and diction ('Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree . . .' [*CPP*, 91]).

The year 1929 was when the lackadaisical mood of the 1920s gave way to the Wall Street Crash and then the Great Depression. Artists and writers became politicised in the following decade, which would see first the Spanish Civil War and then the Second World War. Eliot, in turn, became more concerned with order and government, and his 1929 *Dante* should be read in the context of the general movement known as the Call to Order or *Rappel à l'ordre*.⁶ *Dante* bore a telltale dedication to the reactionary political activist and thinker Charles Maurras of the Action Française, an anti-Dreyfusard disgraced in old age because of his support of Marshal Pétain's Vichy government. For an epigraph, Eliot quoted from Maurras's lengthy introduction to a French translation of the *Inferno*: 'La sensibilité, sauvée d'elle-même 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'].⁷ This indicated Eliot's desire for order or submission to a larger order (the Church) as a refuge from the errors of unguided sensibility. In 1920, Eliot had

stressed that 'Dante's is the most comprehensive, and the most *ordered* presentation of emotions that has ever been made' (SW, 168). The dedication to Maurras is preceded by an Italian epigraph, the opening statement of *La Vita Nuova*: 'Early on in the book of my memory – almost before anything else can be read there – is a rubric which says: "The New Life begins"'. This anticipates the hopeful conclusion in *Dante*: 'There is almost a definite moment of acceptance at which the New Life begins' (SE, 277). Eliot believed he had found a new life of austerity and acceptance, thus actually reprising in another key his Arnaut persona. When Faber published a new edition of *Dante* in 1965, the dedication, epigraphs and the preface (containing Eliot's confession of a lack of scholarly credentials) were not reprinted, thus removing the essay from its topical context. This was only right, since Eliot had by now moved into his third, 'classic' phase.

Before turning to this I would draw attention to the discussion in *Dante* (1929) of allegory and vision, as conducive to clear visual images (the 'three leopards'). This material 'belongs to the world of what I call the *high dream*, and the modern world seems capable only of the *low dream*' (SE, 262). One of the plangent lines of *Ash-Wednesday* reads: 'Redeem the time, redeem the dream' (CPP, 95). While the denunciation of modernity, anticipated by Santayana and Grandgent, fits in with Maurras's reactionary creed, the '*high dream*' is a good definition of Eliot's attempt in *Ash-Wednesday*, though the unsympathetic might say that his use of striking images, tortuous wordplay (especially in part 5), Catholic pageantry, biblical snippets and Dantesque visions is a sublimation of the tradition of Rossetti and Edgar Allan Poe, from which he took such care to distance himself.

In the years leading up to the Second World War, Eliot pursued a less visionary poetry. The results were the prosaic and meditative *Four Quartets*. Here the diction is mostly straightforward and the music is a subtle series of phrases and themes recurring at intervals. As his later prose writings show, Eliot was seeking a classic voice. He wished to interpret European culture as Virgil and Dante had before him, especially in a period of crisis, without animosity, but with goodwill to all. In 'What Dante Means to Me' he placed himself among Dante's English followers and quoted from Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life', commenting: 'this is better than I could do' (TCC, 132). He was referring to his own rewriting of *Inferno* xv – Dante's meeting with Brunetto Latini – in 'Little Gidding', where patrolling the London streets during the Blitz, Eliot imagines an encounter with a 'familiar compound ghost' (CPP, 193), the ghost of

several masters, but chiefly of W. B. Yeats, who had recently died. The episode is also meant to recall Hamlet's encounter with his father's spirit at Elsinore. A striking feature of this stately and quietly eloquent passage is that the conversation with the ghost (reverting to *the* typical Dantesque situation) wholly ignores the war. Instead, the ghost tells Eliot about the sorrows and regrets of old age. There is no hope 'unless restored by that refining fire' (*CPP*, 195). The poets take a very long view of human history and while London Bridge might be literally falling down (during the Blitz), consider (as did Dante and Brunetto Latini) 'come l'uom s'eterna' ['how man becomes eternal'].

It is instructive to compare this episode in 'Little Gidding' with two cantos Ezra Pound wrote in Italian at about the same time from the other side of the front. Here Pound imagines meeting the ghosts of Guido Cavalcanti, of his old ally and adversary F. T. Marinetti (recently dead like Yeats, but mentioned here by name), and of Ezzelino da Romano, a truculent figure straight out of Dante, just as Pound's language is a free imitation (in Italian) of Dante's *terza rima*. All the spirits encountered by Pound speak with passionate intensity of the current war and denounce 'Churchill's bankers', the Pope and other wrong-doers who have betrayed Mussolini's 'effort'.⁸ If Pound used Dante to present to an imaginary Italian audience his partisan politics, and produced a wild old man's Yeatsian invective, Eliot erred, if anything, by not taking sides. This is not to question his wartime loyalty to England, only to point out his detachment from current events while describing the present-day tragedy. In this respect Pound was more Dantesque, for the *Divine Comedy* is full of political passion. Eliot shared the philosophy that he detected in the *Vita Nuova* – 'the Catholic philosophy of disillusion' (*SE*, 275). It is strange that he should characterise this as Catholic. However, Eliot's disillusion did not keep him from strenuously supporting, after the war, his vision of literature and society. Enough of the Puritan spirit remained in the self-declared Anglo-Catholic.

Eliot did not reach a Paradiso, though it would be tempting to say this about his last phase. There was perhaps a decrease of passion, unlike Dante, whose last cantos of the *Divine Comedy* are, as Eliot said, the most passionate. Instead, *Four Quartets* offer their solemn and slow ruminations, and a sequence of visions and similes that are nothing if not Dantesque: 'As, in a theatre, / The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed' (*CPP*, 180). They present the sober wisdom of age in a language that aspires to the universality of Dante's Italian. Only an American, like Henry James and himself, said Eliot, can become that

admirable thing, a true European.⁹ Eliot's last phase was a process of identifying and coalescing England and America in a larger European culture, which he hoped to transmit to us, his grateful readers.

NOTES

1. F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 10.
2. René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750–1950*, vol. v (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 176.
3. Mario Praz, 'T. S. Eliot and Dante' (1937), *The Flaming Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 349. Praz refers to a letter from Eliot as his authority for this statement.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
5. However, Samuel Beckett, another follower of Dante and tireless visitor of infernos, found Eliot's *Dante* (1929) to be 'insufferably condescending'. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 531.
6. Eliot published an English translation of Jean Cocteau's *Le Rappel à l'ordre* in Faber's spring 1926 list as *A Call to Order*.
7. Quoted in James Torrens, 'Charles Maurras and Eliot's "New Life"', *PMLA* (March 1974), 315.
8. See Ezra Pound, *Cantos* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), pp. 425–41.
9. See 'In Memory of Henry James', *Egoist* (January 1918), 1.