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Imitatio Dantis: Yeats's Infernal Purgatory

*Ille. And did he find himself,
Or was the hunger that had made it hollow
A hunger for the apple on the bough
Most out of reach? and is that spectral image
The man that Lapo and Guido knew?
(W. B. Yeats, Ego Dominus Tuus)*

In theory, there are few things which might be held in common between two poets whose poetry could not be more dissimilar in terms of time, topics, sources and purposes. However, I intend to focus on two poets of this kind: the Italian *sommo poeta*, Dante Alighieri and the Anglo-Irish symbolist, *fin de siècle* poet, William Butler Yeats, to shed light on part of Dante's afterlife in Ireland, and more precisely, on the influence of Dante's *Inferno* on 20th century Irish drama. Seamus Heaney, in his essay on Dante's afterlife, "Envies and Identifications", stresses that "when poets turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures" (qtd. M.G. Kratz: 14). Yeats had recourse to Dante and his afterlife in this way, for he absorbed his influence but, at the same time, reworked it in his own way, turning to Dante as to an image of his own creation. Thus, their apparent irreconcilability is only the mere surface of their *oeuvres*, since Dante did have a significant influence on Yeats, whose poetry had two main Dantean decades. The first was characterized by the influence of the Romantics and also by the impact of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, while in the second Yeats managed to create his own interpretation of Dante. Consequently, it is not by accident that "Yeats mentioned Dante over ninety times in his published prose [...] and adapted Dante's work for parts of at least ten poems, three plays and a story" (Bornstein: 93).

Even though Dante occupies a central position in the Yeatsian *oeuvre*, in relation to his epic, dramatic or lyric works, rarely does one think immediately of the Florentine *sommo poeta*. Yet George Bornstein argues that both Yeats and Dante shared devotion to an unattainable woman (Maud Gonne for Yeats, Beatrice Portinari for Dante); furthermore they each performed an important political role (Yeats senator for six years, while Dante prior of Florence) and both were characterized by an abstruse system of belief and philosophy and by a profound interest in cosmological-astrological areas (Bornstein: 93).

Thus, in the present essay I aim to demonstrate that “the man that Lapo (Gianni) and Guido (Cavalcanti) knew” and Yeats were in effect genuine kindred spirits. In doing so, I am going to compare Yeats’s play, *Purgatory* with the First and Second Kingdom of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (in the following I am going to allude to the second canticle of the *Comedy* with its Italian title so as to differentiate it from Yeats’s *Purgatory*). More precisely, I intend to cast in bold relief how Yeats’s *Purgatory* has an infernal rather than a purgatorial nature. Moreover, I also assume that the analogies that exist between Yeats’s *Purgatory* and Dante resulted in a sort of *imitatio Dantis* in Yeats’s work, namely in the inclusion of certain characteristic images or ideas of the *Comedy* and of its First Kingdom. Of Yeats’s several plays I chose *Purgatory* as a work abounding in Dantean traces.

The most common approach to Yeats’s plays is to analyse them in light of Irish history, mythology and Yeats’s philosophy of history in general. Also unmistakable is the influence of the Japanese Noh-plays on Yeats due to their typical scenery and plot. However, I will elucidate Yeats’s *Purgatory* in view of its differences with the *Purgatorio* or out of consideration for its similarities with the *Inferno*.

At first glance, Yeats’s *Purgatory* seemingly refers to Dante’s *Purgatorio*. However, if we undertake a more detailed reading both of the *Divine Comedy* and of the play, we become aware of the fact that the scenery, the characters and the plot itself correspond almost

exactly to Dante's *Inferno* and does not recall the real moral system of the *Purgatorio*. Hence to enlighten the resemblances and the discrepancies which exist between the above mentioned works of the Italian and the Irish poets, I aim to provide a brief introduction to the plot of the play first, and then describe the moral system of the two Dantean canticles in what follows.

Purgatory delineates the deterioration of an Irish family brought about by the marriage between the daughter of the house and a 'drunken groom'. Some years later their son, the Old Man of the play, stabbed his father with a knife in the burning house (set ablaze by the father), leaving him in the fire. From that moment on he took to the roads and became a pedlar. The destruction of the house and the subsequent murder of the father by his son constitute the background of the play which begins with the Old Man's return to his ruined house haunted by his mother's ghost. Subsequently, the living can assist how the dead relive their past. The ghosts are seen as participants in a vision.

In a similar way, Dante-the-traveller in his supernatural voyage is a human being who can escape from his dream (vision) once he reaches the purpose of his journey. The fact that Dante is a human being among the myriad of souls is declared also by Virgil in canto III of the *Purgatorio*. He says to the souls who are coming towards them: "Without you asking, I confess to you / This is a human body which you see, / Whereby the sunshine on the ground is cleft" (*Purg.* III, 97-99). Similar to Dante, who can get involved in what the ghosts are doing, Yeats's Old Man also tries to affect his mother's reliving of her past experience with the drunken groom, and it means that the Old Man endeavours to affect his own conception. He seems to be the eyewitness to this vision, but in fact, he proves to be much more than a witness: it is the Old Man who is dreaming, it is he who is having a vision. And thus, he is directly involved in the dreaming, for it is the moment of his own conception—a moment to which he wants to put an end. The point I would

liketo stress is that the Old Man can get involved in what the ghosts are doing, because they, the mother and the drunken groom, are participants in the Old Man's dream. Similarly, the *Divine Comedy* including all three canticles is regarded as Dante's dream, so the dream of a human being and therefore all of the souls of the *Comedy* are participants in Dante's vision instead of being part of one of the ghosts' dream. Both Dante and the Old Man are regarded as human beings in their own visions, both of them are in the process of dreaming, and what is more, both have the same purpose, that is, to achieve purification: Dante, similar to all of the souls in *Purgatorio*, aims to achieve his own purification, while the Old Man aspires to gain purification to his mother's soul and put an end to her reliving of that terrible night when she let the Old Man's father enter the house.

As for the means of achieving purification, however, there is a significant difference: purification of the souls in *Purgatorio* is achieved through suffering, preparing the souls for eventual unity with God, whereas in *Purgatory*, the Old Man attempts to help the purification of his mother's soul by killing. In *Purgatorio*, purification is a long process, since the souls have to pass through all the seven ledges of the Holy Mount until they can finally reach the Earthly Paradise, and the length of their sufferings can be shortened and alleviated by the living if they pray for the souls of the dead. In *Purgatory*, however, the Old Man expected that he could gain purification for his mother at once, and it was only after realizing the failure of his attempt that he started beseeching God to give mercy to his mother's soul. This distinction between the two works is highly important, since it indicates how Dante belonged to the Middle Ages—a time when Christian morality was more influential in society. This Christian morality, however, lost its power and efficacy in Yeats's age, that is, in the first half of the 20th century, when traditional Christian religious teaching and confidence in a benign God was seriously undermined by the horrors of the First World

War.

More importantly, not only the means of achieving purification, but also the type of sin may reveal significant differences between Dante's and Yeats's way of representing the living and the dead. In *Purgatory*, the Old Man in his endeavour to liberate his mother from purgatorial torment, commits a more grievous sin, by murdering his drunken father first and eventually, in his final despair, stabbing his own son with the same knife used to murder his father. If we attempt to classify the sins of the living and those of the ghosts in *Purgatory* to certain circles of *Inferno*, we may say that in Yeats's play the deeds of the living are more serious than those of the ghosts. First, I would classify the drunken father (who is a ghost in the play, like the mother) to two circles: he may belong to the third circle where there are those who were incontinent in drinking; but he belongs to the second round of the seventh circle as well, namely to those who were violent against their own property. The reason for my classification is that the father set their house on fire and ruined it entirely. However, if we take into consideration the Old Man's crime in relation to Dante's system, that is the transgression of a living character, he would belong to the first round of the seventh circle of *Inferno*, namely, to violence against neighbours, but more importantly also to the last circle (near Lucifer), to traitors of the family, one of the gravest sins in the entire *Inferno*. As opposed to Yeats's *Purgatory*, in the First and Second Kingdom of the *Divine Comedy*, those who committed a less or a more serious transgression are the expiating souls in *Purgatorio* and the condemned ones in *Inferno*, but Dante, who represents the living, does and did not commit a sin during his visionary voyage. Consequently, there is an outstanding discrepancy between the gravity of sins committed by living and dead characters insofar as Dante-the-traveller in his *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* does not commit a sin; he only contemplates and forms an opinion on the various deeds of the souls, while in *Purgatory*, the living transgress a graver deed in

order to influence the destiny of the souls.

Yeats wrote to Edith Shackleton Heald that “I have a one-act play in my head, a scene of tragic intensity” (qtd. Wilson: 137). This tragic nature, however, excludes the possibility of having many features in common with Dante’s Second Kingdom “Wherein the human spirit doth purge itself, / And to ascend to heaven becometh worthy” (*Purg.* I, 5-6). As Erich Auerbach explains, *Purgatorio* is an enormous Holy Mount which emerges from an island inhabited by spirits who gained salvation, but who need to purify themselves before entering the Earthly Paradise (13). Moreover, the souls are waiting joyfully for the imminent beatitude and blessedness. The main issue of Dante’s *Purgatorio* is the self-purification of the souls who confessed and repented their deeds. It is a process and not a place which is described in the Second Kingdom.

This is, however, not the case in *Purgatory*. In *A Vision* Yeats asserts “[n]either between death and birth nor between birth and death can the soul find more than momentary happiness” (236). This concept might have had an influence on how the play presents the souls even though Yeats did not mention *Purgatory*. While in Yeats’s conception, souls are not capable of reaching permanent happiness, the souls in Dante’s *Purgatorio* are there to reach eternal beatitude after a lasting expiatory phase. More significantly, *Purgatory* depicts a place, rather than a process; the souls do not seem to show any sign of regret and therefore they do not gain salvation. And as a consequence, the process of purification could not come into being. Instead, they live through their deed again and again as a sort of punishment and they are incapable of liberating themselves from this vicious circle—they are stuck in a state and in a dream. In *Purgatorio*, however, the souls must pass through all the seven deadly sins represented by the seven terraces of the purgatorial mount and as an end result they gain liberation from their sins and entry to *Paradise*. In contrast, in this play the souls are not able to escape and therefore they resemble the infernal spirits rather than

those of *Purgatorio*.

At this point, we have come to the definition of a crucial phenomenon which determines the whole play and has an important role in the comparison with Dante's *Comedy*. This phenomenon is the so-called 'dreaming back'. At the beginning of *Purgatory* the Old Man explains to his son that in the ruined house he can see "The souls in Purgatory that come back / To habitations and familiar spots" (431) as an expiation. The underlying theory of the above mentioned phrase is explained by Yeats in *A Vision* where he divides the period between death and birth into two phases and six states. These two phases are the expiatory and the purified ones. The former includes the states of 'dreaming back' and Return, Phantasmagoria and Shiftings. Those who belong to this phase are considered dead. The latter phase consists of the states of Beatitude (Marriage), Purification and Foreknowledge. Those who appertain to this phase are regarded as spirits. Consequently, the ghosts in *Purgatory* are correctly referred to as dead due to the fact that they got stuck in the first phase and are unable to approximate the purification. They resemble Dante's infernal souls, while the ones in his *Purgatorio* are on their way to the purification and reach it eventually. Yeats himself declares that

[i]n the *Dreaming Back*, the *Spirit* is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it; there can be nothing new, -but the old events stand forth in a light which is dim or bright according to the intensity of the passion that accompanied them (*A Vision*, 226).

This is the phenomenon which takes place in *Purgatory* with the mother and her drunken groom. In *Purgatory* it is the mother who is 'dreaming back' by living over and over again the terrible night, and her son, the Old Man, is directly involved in this process. What is relevant here, however, is that the mother is entrapped in this 'dreaming back'. One could define her reliving of the past as a purgatorial process only if the soul after 'dreaming back' relived the

event in the Return, a state in which it lives over its past life in a reverse order, and after that it passed to the Shiftings, a state in which it experiences the opposite of its life, "it's a reversal not in knowledge but in life, or until the *Spirit* is free from good and evil" (*A Vision*, 232). After Shiftings the next state, Marriage or Beatitude, refers to a union with God which is supposed to result in reincarnation into the world. However, some souls are not capable of this Marriage, such as the mother in *Purgatory* who has started the first phase but the purification is not available for her. In order to reach it, she would need the mercy of God or at least her own will to escape from her entrapped state. That is why her son, the Old Man, is unable to release his mother. He is convinced that if he puts an end to their family line with the murder of his own son, he can save his mother's soul and stop the 'dreaming back'. After murdering his son, however, nothing changes: the Old Man hears the hoof beats again and the dream continues to repeat itself. F. A. C. Wilson argues that "not until she has purified her own memory of all emotion can she 'unloose the knot': the dreamer must find a footing in a world beyond pleasure and pain" (147). It follows that Yeats's play is a sort of unfinished purification and owing to this incompleteness it remains an infernal place rather than a purgatorial process.

In Dante's moral system of *Inferno*, the lower Dante descends the graver the transgressions and the punishments are, while in *Purgatorio* this process reverses. In both cases, however, the gravest transgressions are the furthest from *Paradiso* and its skies; what is more, they are very close to Dis, the city of evil, the real "civitas diaboli" (Auerbach: 19).

The first significant feature of *Inferno* with regard to Yeats's *Purgatory* is that it is the world of darkness in contrast to *Purgatorio*, which is a sort of continuance of human, earthly life due to the presence of days and light and owing to its closeness to the surface of the Earth. Yeats's *Purgatory*, however, recalls an infernal landscape insofar as Yeats utilized a simple, almost bare stage and minimal

light. As Wilson observes, "the play is acted in almost total darkness, and this is symbolic of evil . . . , faint moonlight leads the two beggars up the path to their ancestral house" (157). By faint moonlight Yeats intended to signify that the Old Man and his son were led there by "a dim perception of the divine will" (157). This kind of dimness amid almost total darkness, more precisely permanent darkness is not typical of *Purgatorio*, except the overnight period when it is prohibited to go up to the Mount, when all souls must halt and find a place where they can spend the night. The scenery of the play consists merely of a ruined house and a bare tree (both of which were prosperous in the past). The dry tree occupies a symbolic role in the play in many crucial ways mainly in connection with the purification. After having stabbed his son, the Old Man says to himself "Study that tree. / It stands there like a purified soul, / All cold, sweet, glistening light. / Dear mother, the window is dark again, / But you are in the light because / I finished all that consequence" (Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 435). This excerpt from the Old Man's final monologue which he gave, before realizing that his efforts have had been in vain, describes the sole light that emanates from that tree, which symbolizes hope, goodness and, therefore, also the hope in the mercy of God. But it is only an illusion since his mother is not in the light; she starts to live over the past deed again. In my view, the tree symbolizes the purification of the mother which, however, remained unfinished. As Wilson rightly points out "[i]t is now the symbol of the soul of man, purified of all suffering, as the Old Man imagines his mother's soul now is, by the expiatory process after death" (15). Due to the fact that it is only an illusion and the symbol of something that has not been realized, neither the scenery of *Purgatory* allows us to associate it clearly with the Dantean *Purgatorio*. Apart from the tree, it remains an infernal landscape and scene.

The second prominent characteristic of Dante's *Inferno* is its penal system. The First Kingdom takes into account deeds only and

offences against the system established by God instead of propensities or individual faults such as pride, envy or sloth, vices which are missing from *Inferno*. In *Purgatory* in addition to the propensities (inclination of the Old Man and of his son to murder, propensity of the mother to feel both pleasure and remorse as she relives the 'sexual act' from which the Old Man was born (Wilson: 147); and the father's propensity to drink and to be violent) there are serious deeds as well, since all of the inclinations turned out to be acts, deeds convicted. More importantly, Dante's *Inferno* punishes not merely the committed act, but the one which had not been regretted. The mother in her dream does not show any sign of regret yet, since she is unable to liberate herself from the emotion and therefore she continues to relive the past. Similarly, as Karl Witte argues "the punishments of Dante's Hell consist in the unceasing continuance of the sinful activity itself" (Karl Witte qtd. in Dinsmore: 627). In my view, this unceasing continuance appears in Yeats's *Purgatory* in the form of the continuous recurrence of the dream which is the clear consequence of the mother's entrapped state in 'dreaming back'. As a result the final recognition of *Purgatory* is based on the characters' deed, I assume that it evokes the penal system of Dante's *Inferno*. It is significant that in Dante's *Inferno* the punishment is similar to the severity of the transgression therefore the punishment is the continuance of the transgression, while in *Purgatorio* the final purpose is the liberation from the sinful propensities which means that the punishment is the opposite of the sin. If we take a glance at Yeats's *Purgatory*, we realize that there is intention and reality. The Old Man's intention is to liberate his mother, but finally he must become aware of the inadequacy of his intent and of his own action. Consequently, the purpose might be purgatorial, but the end result remains infernal due to the entrapment in 'dreaming back'.

The third argument for Yeatsian *Purgatory* corresponding to Dante's *Inferno* rests on the violence and brutality in which *Purgatory* abounds. In his review of W. H. V. Reade's *The Moral System of*

Dante's "*Inferno*", Dinsmore argues that in his *Inferno*, Dante was free to follow his genius, which resulted in an incredible variety of frightful or downright repulsive or disgusting means of punishments; while in *Purgatorio* the Church had determined the number and grade of the sins (627). The transgression committed by Yeats's Old Man does not fit in the system of *Purgatorio* due to its relentless brutality. This relentlessness can be exemplified by the importance of the knife in the play. When the Old Man tells his son the way he murdered his drunken father, he declares unashamed that "I stuck him with a knife, / That knife that cuts my dinner now, / And after that I left him in the fire" (Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 432). This kind of undisguised cruelty would be impossible in Dante's purgatorial system. More interestingly, in *Purgatorio* the souls show true repentance which destroys malice (including violence). Hence, sins of malice have no place in the purifying process and as a result they are omitted from *Purgatorio* (Dinsmore: 627). Consequently, the violence and brutality which characterise the Old Man are undoubtedly infernal ones; they cannot be purgatorial. In this case the motives of the murder are irrelevant, what counts is the deed and its severity which is one of the most important reasons for the infernal nature of *Purgatory*.

As I have already mentioned, I consider this play a kind of unfinished purgatorial process and in this process God occupies a central position, more precisely the belief in the mercy of God. The Old Man in *Purgatory* evokes God two times: at the very beginning and at the end of the play. At the beginning he explains how souls expiate their past:

[...] Re-live
 Their transgressions, and that not once
 But many times; they know at last
 The consequence of those transgressions
 Whether upon others or upon themselves;
 Upon others, others may bring help,
 For when the consequence is at an end

The dream must end; if upon themselves,
There is no help but in themselves
And in the mercy of God.

(Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 431)

At this point the Old Man did not know that in his mother's case the second possibility would come true. If he had been aware of the uselessness of his action, he would not have stabbed his son to end his mother's 'dreaming back' and suffering by eliminating the family line. The gist of the process of 'dreaming back' is to liberate the soul from emotion, but in *Purgatory* it does not take place. If it happened, the mother's soul could pass to the next state which is the Return and after that to the Shiftings, both of which mean the acquisition of knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge is equal to being aware of seeing things as they are and thus seeing good. In the words of Susan E. Blow "[t]he source of all goodness is God. Man becomes good by opening his heart to receive the stream of influence always pouring toward him from God" (61), and "[m]an is free when he knows, loves and wills the good" (62). And this is the state which is not available for the mother in *Purgatory*. The explanation can be found in Yeats's two phases of which the second is the purifying process beginning with the Marriage. The Marriage means Beatitude and more precisely the union with God.

However, in *Purgatory* this kind of closeness to God is only an unfulfilled expectation of the Old Man. It seems as if the mother were condemned to remain entrapped in the first state which is far away from purification. Consequently, in my view, this play may be considered to be closer to *Inferno* than to *Purgatorio*. Similar to Yeats's *Purgatory*, God plays a dominant role in Dante's *Comedy*, which seems to move toward God, whose love affects the whole world and every soul. Dante in *Paradiso* asserts the omnipotence of God declaring "Goodness Divine, which from itself doth spurn / All envy, burning in itself so sparkles / That the eternal beauties it unfolds" (*Par.* VII, 109-111). Both Dante and Yeats had a strong belief in God

and in his potency and mercy, but the difference is that in the *Comedy* some of the souls can reach beatitude after passing through the seven ledges of the Holy Mount in *Purgatorio* and after gaining entrance to the Earthly Paradise. By contrast, the souls in *Purgatory* are extremely distant from beatitude and salvation and hence the Old Man comprehends that the only thing he can do for his mothers' liberation and beatitude is having a strong belief in God and praying for his assistance and forgiveness. Therefore he cries "O God, / Release my mother's soul from its dream! / Mankind can do no more. Appease / The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead" (Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 436).

In the middle part of *Purgatory* the Old Man becomes the eyewitness of his own conception. He notices his father as he arrives home where his wife is waiting for him: "She has gone down to open the door. / This night she is no better than her man / And does not mind that he is half drunk, / She is mad about him" (Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 433). What is significant is the phrase she "does not mind" which made me think of the third canto of Dante's *Inferno* where Dante and Virgil are among the indifferent. In *Purgatory* the mother proves to be indifferent; she does not mind that night and her indifference had a serious consequence. In my opinion, she herself and her unconcern are the cause of her entrapment. The indifferent are the most detested group in Dante's *Inferno* because they did not take sides when Lucifer rebelled against God. Indifference does not result in a real vicious deed and therefore it does not fit the moral system of *Inferno*, but according to Aristotle and St. Thomas indifference must be regarded as a transgression. Dante's disdain towards the indifferent is more than conspicuous. Their moral punishment is based on the fact that both compassion and justice turn away from them (Auerbach: 20). The mother in *Purgatory* to some extent may appertain to Dante's third canto inhabited by the indifferent and this is why she seems not to gain God's compassion since "Misericord and Justice both disdain them" (*Inf.* III, 50.). Those

who are indifferent do not deserve either the Mercy or the Justice of God. On the one hand, they cannot rely on God's Justice, since their life was anything but guiltless and on the other hand, nor can they count on God's Mercy, because they did not show repentance, but indifference. In *Purgatory* God's mercy could save the mother's soul from the entrapment in 'dreaming back', but she remains condemned probably due to her indifference and owing to the fact that she does not show any sign of repentance.

In addition, there is one more common trait (a concept which could be related to Ireland as well), namely humanity which is the main theme of *Purgatory* and of Dante's *Comedy*. Both of these texts are symbolic literary works. More importantly, both in the *Comedy* and in *Purgatory* the characters have a literal and an allegoric meaning. For instance, Dante is a transgressor, in the literal sense, who regretted his transgressions and was allowed to travel in the underworld. Allegorically, however, he symbolizes the whole of humanity, and therefore he exemplifies the process of how man becomes aware of his sins and turns out to be worthy of beatitude. In a similar way, Yeats's *Purgatory* abounds in symbols and allegories: we may consider the ruined house, the dry tree and the mother. This play concentrates upon the condition of humanity and these symbols serve as examples of decline in Ireland. According to F. A.C. Wilson, there was a time when the unity of culture was attainable and this particular unity is symbolized by the house and the pine-tree. As for the house, it "becomes not merely the symbol of the deterioration of the aristocratic tradition within a single family, but the emblem of Ireland itself" (154). It follows that the house in the literal sense epitomizes the process of the decline of a family, while allegorically it is Ireland, and in a broader sense it exemplifies the decline of the whole of humanity. The house has already lived through three states, namely its own efflorescence, decline and eventually death caused by the drunken Father. Similar to the ruined house, the bare tree becomes a central symbol as well which "calls the image of a ruined

land” (Wilson: 158) into mind. In the words of Wilson the bare tree is the symbol of individual and family ruin and beyond this of the ruin of all culture and order throughout the world, at the end of a cycle, when civilisation is riven by the thunderbolt of the divine will (158).

Wilson’s interpretation evokes the gyres. However, it is not my intention to go in details in terms of Yeats’s astrology and philosophy. It is worth mentioning here that the gyres represent the continuous and repetitive interchange of history. This means that every single cycle ends with a cataclysm followed by the revelation of the next cycle. Thus, the transition from a green tree to a dry one and the transition from a prosperous house to a ruined one are significant. Yeats intended to draw attention to the fact that his generation is very close to the end of the cycle. As a result, we may concede that *Purgatory* is deeply concerned with the destiny and with the condition of humanity. As for the *Divine Comedy*, Dante mentions humanity at the beginning and at the end of his work. However, he does this rather in an implicit way: he enlightens the importance of humanity only by possessive pronouns. Dante begins the first canto saying “Midway upon the journey of our life . . .” (*Inf.* I, 2) and in the canto XXXIII of *Paradiso* he declares

That circulation, which being thus conceived
Appeared in thee as a reflected light,
When somewhat contemplated by mine eyes,
Within itself, of its own very colour
Seemed to me painted with our effigy,
Wherefore my sight was all absorbed therein.
(*Par.* XXXIII. 127-132)

It follows that Dante saw the whole of humanity integrated in and unified by God since it is “our effigy” which is reflected in his vision of God. In a similar way, in *Purgatory* it is not only the mother for whom the Old Man is praying, but also the whole of humanity which began its decline. In the case of Dante, the place where this decline takes place is mainly Florence, while for Yeats it is evident

that what is in decline is Ireland. Both of these places may become the symbol of the whole world and the decline of their inhabitants is interpreted as the decline of mankind is general.

In addition, both Dante and Yeats had a belief in a succeeding golden age which they supposed would turn deterioration into a new efflorescence. Dante alludes to this new era in a prophecy which depicts a greyhound as a sort of saviour who is able to defeat the Wolf and send her back to Hell. In a similar way, Yeats imagines the beginning of a new era by the arrival of a bestial creature, a Great Beast, which is pictured among others in 'The Second Coming'. Taken together, both artists felt the presence of the decline of their own epoch, but at the same time had a strong belief in God and in Humanity and therefore in the arrival of a new golden age, in the beginning of a new "cycle".

What I have described is only a small portion of Dante's influence on Yeats. There is a wide range of Yeats's works which bear Dantean traces, but it is almost impossible to touch upon every single potential similarity between their writings in a paper of this nature. We may confirm that in most cases Yeats comes into discussion with regard to a range of issues ranging from occultism, mysticism, Eastern philosophy, Platonism to the representation of Irish mythology and landscape, Irish nationalism and the Easter Rising or his devotion to Maud Gonne, but only rarely do readers identify him with Dante. Yet few poets show as many similarities as Dante and Yeats do. What is more, in Yeats's philosophy Dante embodies the Man from Phase 17, the Daimonic man, an anti-self who managed to attain to the unity of being and consequently "as poet saw all things set in order [...] and was content to see both good and evil" (*A Vision*, 144). Yeats considered both himself and Dante an anti-self. Thus, we may conclude that together they constitute a certain unity. Both were also in search of a certain unity: Dante sought the unity of language and national unity, while Yeats searched for the Unity of Being, which was for him Dante. More

importantly, both of them intended to draw the world's (or at least their country's) attention to a deepening social, political and spiritual decline and degradation thus becoming prophets of the end of an age, end of a 2000-year long cycle. All things considered, we may conclude that these two poets, who at first glance could not be more unlike, were genuine kindred spirits and what is more, these similarities nicely support David Cane's belief that Yeats "truly was, in more ways than one, the second coming of Dante" (82).

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Dante and Yeats—a Comparative Analysis

– Abstract –

Dante's modern afterlife in the *oeuvre* of William Butler Yeats has been remarkable. Yeats, however, though absorbing his influence, turned to Dante as to an image of his own creation and formed his own interpretation of Dante. In my paper I argue that there exist certain analogies between Dante's *Comedy* and Yeats's play, *Purgatory*, which resulted in a sort of *imitatio Dantis*. However, I assume that Yeats's *Purgatory* echoes Dante's *Inferno* rather than the *Purgatorio*. To illustrate my point, I elucidate *Purgatory* in view of its differences with Dante's *Purgatorio* and its similarities with the *Inferno*.