

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?¹*

In theory, there are few things which might be in common between two poets whose poetry could not seemingly be more dissimilar in terms of time, topics, sources and purposes and who are divided from each other by more than six centuries. However, this essay intends 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. In fact, their apparent irreconcilability is only the mere surface of the opinion formed on 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 Romantics² and also by the impact of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, while in the second one 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.”³

I chose to draw a parallel between Dante and Yeats because in spite of the fact that they share almost a myriad of common features, this kind of approach to Yeats and his works has been overshadowed by other fascinating topics in which Yeats’s poems and plays abound. This aspect of his poetry, however, is seemingly neglected by critics. Even though Dante occupies a central position in the Yeatsian oeuvre, in relation to his epic, dramatic or lyric works rarely does one think forthright of the Florentine *sommo poeta*. However, George Bornstein argues that both Yeats and Dante shared devotion to an unattainable woman (Maud Gonne for Yeats, Beatrice Portirani for Dante); furthermore they also performed an important political role (Yeats became a senator for six years, while Dante filled the position of the prior

¹ W. B. YEATS, “Ego Dominus Tuus”, in: *Selected Poetry*, ed. Timothy Webb, London: Penguin Books, 1991. p. 105.

² Mainly William Blake, George Gordon Byron, John Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth.

³ George BORNSTEIN, “Yeats’s Romantic Dante”, in: *Colby Library Quarterly*, vol. 15, iss. 2, art. 4, The Berkeley Electronic Press, 1979. p. 93.

of Florence) and both of them were characterized by an abstruse system of belief and philosophy and by a profound interest in cosmological-astrological areas.⁴

Thus, the present essay aims to demonstrate through the comparison of Yeats's play, *Purgatory* (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*) and the First and Second Kingdom of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that the "the man that Lapo (Gianni) and Guido (Cavalcanti) knew" and Yeats were in effect genuine kindred spirits. More precisely, I intend to cast in bold relief the fact that the Yeatsian *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 peculiar plays I chose *Purgatory* because - in my view - it is a work abounding in Dantean traces and thus it could be a proper choice in exemplifying the bonds between Yeats and Dante by analysing its plot, scenery and characters.

The most common approach to Yeats's plays is to show them in light of the Irish history, mythology and Yeats's philosophy of history in general and also as unmistakable examples of the influence of the Japanese Noh-plays on Yeats due to their typical scenery and plot. However, in this essay I would make an attempt to elucidate Yeats's *Purgatory* not in the light of "the collapse of the aristocratic Ireland"⁵ but either 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 in question, we shall easily become aware of the fact that the scenery, the characters and the plot itself correspond almost evidently to the Dantean *Inferno* and under no circumstances does it 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.

First and foremost, *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

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁵ F. A. C. WILSON, *W. B. Yeats and Tradition*, London: Methuen, 1958. p. 137.

and became a pedlar. The destruction of the house and the subsequent murder of the father by his son constitute the background of the plot which begins with the Old Man's return to his ruined house haunted by his mother's ghost. Subsequently, in this play the living can assist the dreaming of the dead. The ghosts are seen as the participants of a vision.

In a similar way, Dante-the-traveller in his supernatural voyage is considered a human being who can escape from this dream once he reached the purpose of his journey. The fact that Dante is a human being among the myriad of souls is declared also by Virgil in the 3rd canto of the *Purgatorio* (ll. 97-99). 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."⁶ Similarly to Dante, who can get involved in what the ghosts are doing, Yeats's Old Man also tries to affect his mother's dream. At this point, however, I feel obliged to draw attention to a significant difference: in *Purgatory* it is the ghost of the mother who dreams and her son, the Old Man, together with his own son (the Boy), are eyewitnesses to this dream. In contrast, 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 the participants of Dante's vision instead of being part of one of the ghosts' dream like in the Yeatsian play where the two living characters, the Old Man and the Boy, indirectly take a share in the mother's dream whereby they are able to see that vision and the ghosts (the mother and her drunken groom) in the distance.

More importantly, not only the type of dream, but also the type of sin can reveal significant differences between Dante's and Yeats's way of representing the living and the dead. To start with *Purgatory*, the Old Man in his endeavour to liberate his mother from the purgatorial torment, commits a more grievous sin, a crime by murdering his drunken father first and eventually, in his final despair, stabbing his own son with the same knife used in the murder of his father. After all, 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 the former one 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, similarly to the mother) to two circles: on the one hand he may belong to the 3rd circle where there are those who were incontinent in drinking; on the other hand, however, he belongs to the 2nd round of the 7th circle as well, namely to those who were violent against their own property. The reason for my classification is the fact that the father set their house on fire and ruined it entirely. However, if we take into consideration the

⁶ Dante ALIGHIERI, *Purgatorio*, in: *Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth LONGFELLOW, 2008. p. 17.

Old Man's crime, that is the transgression of a living character, in Dante's system he would belong to the first round of the 7th circle of *Inferno*, namely to the violent against neighbours, but more importantly also to the last circle (nearby Lucifer), to the traitors of the family, which is 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 anything. After all, we can come to the conclusion that there's 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 once wrote in a letter to Edith Shackleton Heald that "I have a one-act play in my head, a scene of tragic intensity."⁷ 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.⁸ 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.

In contrast, it is not the case in *Purgatory*. In *A Vision* Yeats asserts "Neither between death and birth nor between birth and death can the soul find more than momentary happiness."⁹ This concept might have had an influence on how the play presents us the souls even though Yeats did not mention it with regard to *Purgatory*. As a conclusion, according to Yeats's own conception, the souls are not capable of reaching permanent happiness, while the souls in *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

⁷ qtd. in: F. A. C. WILSON, p. 137.

⁸ My translation from: ERICH AUERBACH, "Az Isteni színjáték szerkezete", in: *Dante a középkorban*, translation by Norbert MÁTYUS, Budapest: Balassi kiadó, 2009. p. 13.

⁹ W. B. YEATS, "The Soul in Judgement", in: *A Vision*, Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1981. p. 236.

again as a sort of punishment and it is essential that 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 the ones 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"¹⁰ 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, similarly to Dante's infernal souls, while the ones in his *Purgatorio* are on their way to the purification and they reach it eventually. Hence, it can be another proof of the infernal nature of Yeats's *Purgatory*. Yeats himself declares that

In 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.¹¹

This is the phenomenon which takes place in *Purgatory* with the mother and her drunken groom. What is relevant here, however, is the fact that the mother is entrapped in this Dreaming Back. One could define her dream 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, namely "it's a reversal not in knowledge but in life, or until the *Spirit* is free from good and evil"¹². After Shiftings the next state is called Marriage or Beatitude

¹⁰ W. B. YEATS, "Purgatory", in: *The collected plays of W. B. Yeats*, New York: Macmillan, 1968. p. 431.

¹¹ W. B. YEATS, *A Vision*, Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1981. p. 226.

¹² W. B. YEATS, *A Vision*, p. 232.

which refers to a union with God which is supposed to result in a 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. According to F. A. C. Wilson "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."¹³ 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.

After examining Yeats's *Purgatory* in light of Dante's Second Kingdom, now I intend to approach it from the point of view of the moral system of the First Kingdom. As for its general description, Auerbach explains that *Inferno* takes the form of a cone which consists of nine circles of which the 8th one includes ten subdivisions (bolgia). The lower Dante descends the graver the transgressions and the punishments are, while in *Purgatorio* this process takes place in a reverse order. In both cases, however, the gravest transgressions are the furthest from *Paradiso* and its skies; what is more, they are very close to Dis which is the city of evil, the real "civitas diaboli"¹⁴.

The first significant feature of *Inferno* with regard to Yeats's *Purgatory* is the fact that it is considered 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. The scenery of Yeats's *Purgatory*, however, recalls an infernal landscape insofar as Yeats utilized a simple, almost bare stage and minimal light. As stated by Wilson "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"¹⁵. According to his view, by the faint moonlight Yeats intended to signify that the Old Man and his son were led there by "a dim perception of the divine will."¹⁶ This kind of dimness and 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

¹³ F. A. C. WILSON, p. 147.

¹⁴ My translation from: Erich AUERBACH, p. 19.

¹⁵ F. A. C. WILSON, p. 157.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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. The Old Man after having stabbed his son said 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.”¹⁷ This passage is an excerpt from the Old Man’s final monologue which he gave before realizing that his efforts had been in vain. These lines clearly describe that in the darkness the sole light emanates from that tree. It symbolizes hope, goodness and therefore also the hope in the mercy of God. 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. “It 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.”¹⁸ Due to the fact that it is only an illusion and the symbol of something that has not been realized, we may concede that 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 in relation to its penal system. The First Kingdom takes into account deeds only and offences of 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 born¹⁹; and the father’s propensity to drink and to be violent) there are serious deeds as well, since all of the above listed 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 dream. Similarly, as Karl Witte argues in one of his essays which appeared in *Dante-Forschungen*, “[...] the punishments of Dante’s Hell consist in the unceasing continuance of the sinful activity itself.”²⁰ In my view, this unceasing continuance appears in Yeats’s *Purgatory* in the form of the continuous recurrence

¹⁷ W. B. YEATS, “Purgatory”, p. 435.

¹⁸ F. A. C. WILSON, p. 158.

¹⁹ F. A. C. WILSON, p. 147.

²⁰ qtd. in: Charles Allen DINSMORE, “The Moral System of Dante’s „Inferno” by W. H. V. Reade”, in: *The American Journal of Theology*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, vol. 13, No. 4, (Oct. 1909). p. 627.

of the mother's dream which is the clear consequence of her entrapped state in *Dreaming Back*. As a result of the fact that the final recognition of *Purgatory* is based on the characters' deed, I assume that it evokes the penal system of Dante's *Inferno*. What is significant here is the fact 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. Now, if we take a glance at Yeats's *Purgatory*, we can realize a certain dichotomy. There is an intention and the 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 which I am convinced that the Yeatsian *Purgatory* corresponds to the Dantean *Inferno* rests on the violence and brutality in which *Purgatory* abounds. Dinsmore in his review of W. H. V. Reade's *The Moral System of Dante's "Inferno"* 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.²¹ The transgression committed by Yeats's Old Man does not fit in the system of *Purgatorio* due to its relentless brutality or downright bestiality. 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."²² 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*²³. 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 here 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 above, I consider this play a kind of unfinished purgatorial process and in this process God occupies a central position, more precisely the

²¹ Cf.: Charles Allen DINSMORE, p. 627.

²² W. B. YEATS, "Purgatory", p. 432.

²³ Cf.: Charles Allen DINSMORE, p. 627.

belief in the mercy of God. Hence, in this paragraph I intend to elucidate Yeats's play and Dante's *Comedy* from this point of view. 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.²⁴

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 dream 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. Now, in the words of Susan E. Blow "The 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"²⁵ and "Man is free when he knows, loves and wills the good."²⁶ 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 the purification. Consequently, in my view, this play may be considered to be closer to *Inferno* than to *Purgatorio*. Similarly to Yeats's *Purgatory*, God receives a dominant role in Dante's *Comedy*, which seems to move toward God, whose love

²⁴ W. B. YEATS, "Purgatory", p. 431.

²⁵ Susan E. BLOW, "Dante's Purgatorio", in: *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January, 1885), Penn State University Press. p 61., JSTOR., PDF file.

²⁶ Susan E. BLOW, "Dante's Purgatorio", p. 62.

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). Consequently, both Dante and Yeats had a strong belief in God and in his potency and mercy. The difference between the two cases is that in the *Comedy* some of the souls can reach the 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.”²⁷

In the middle part of *Purgatory* the Old Man becomes the eyewitness of his own conception and he makes a remark which I found particularly interesting. 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.”²⁸ What is significant here 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 anything 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* due to the fact that 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.²⁹ My concept would be that 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.). This phrase means that 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.

²⁷ W. B. YEATS, “Purgatory”, p. 436.

²⁸ W. B. YEATS, “Purgatory”, p. 433.

²⁹ My translation from: Erich AUERBACH, p. 20.

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. It is the reason why I endeavoured to contrast the role of God in Yeats's play and in Dante's *Comedy*, more precisely in his *Inferno*.

In addition to the above mentioned aspects, I intend to shed light on one more common trait (a concept which could be related to Ireland as well), namely on humanity which is the main theme of *Purgatory* and of Dante's *Comedy*. Both of these texts are regarded as symbolic literary works. More importantly, both in the *Comedy* and in *Purgatory* the characters have a literal and an allegoric meaning as well. For instance, Dante in the literal sense is a transgressor who regretted his transgressions and was allowed to travel in the underworld. Allegorically, however, he symbolizes the whole of humanity, every single person 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 importance of the ruined house, of the dry tree and that of the mother. This play concentrates upon the condition of humanity and these above mentioned symbols serve as examples of the 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."³⁰ It follows that the house in the literal sense epitomizes the process of the decline of a family, while allegorically it is Ireland which is symbolized here or 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. Similarly to the ruined house, the bare tree becomes a central symbol as well which "calls the image of a ruined land"³¹ 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.³²

Wilson's interpretation evokes another relevant concept, the one of the gyres. However, it is not my intention to go in details in terms of Yeats's astrology and philosophy. What is worth mentioning here is the fact that the gyres represent the continuous and repetitive interchange

³⁰ F. A. C. WILSON, p. 154.

³¹ F. A. C. WILSON, p. 158.

³² Ibid.

of history which 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 and worth mentioning for this very reason. 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 33rd canto 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. More interestingly, in the case of Dante, the place where this decline takes place is mainly Florence, while as 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.

However, as a final conclusion, both Dante and Yeats had a belief in a succeeding golden age which is supposed to 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 an animal, namely of 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’. This is the reason why I decided to touch upon this concept which concerns not only Yeats’s *Purgatory* and Dante’s *Comedy* but in part the philosophy and world view of these two artists in general.

Before concluding my discussion concerning the search for resemblances or any kind of bonds between the “sommio poeta” of the Italian Trecento and the fin de siècle Irish poet of the 20th century, I find it important to state that what I have described above was only a small portion of Yeats’s Dante-reception. I could have discussed a wide range of Yeatsian works which bear Dantean traces, but, in my view, it is quite impossible to touch upon every single potential similarity between their writings in a paper of this nature. Moreover, we may confirm that in most cases Yeats’s name comes into discussion with regard to a myriad 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 rarely does one associate him with Dante. In turn, very 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, namely the Daimonic man, an anti-self who managed to attain to the unity of being and consequently he “as poet saw all things set in order [...] and was content to see both good and evil.”³³ Yeats considered both himself and Dante an anti-self. Thus, we may come to the conclusion that together they form one, more precisely they constitute a unity. And in fact, both of them were in search of a certain unity: Dante sought the unity of language and national unity as well, 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 reach the conclusion that these two poets, who at first glance could not seemingly be more unlike, were genuine kindred spirits and what is more, these above mentioned similarities have nicely supported David Cane’s statement according to which Yeats “truly was, in more ways than one, the second coming of Dante.”³⁴

³³ W. B. YEATS, “The Great Wheel”, in: *A Vision*, Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1981. p. 144.

³⁴ David CANE, *The Falcon, the Beast and the Image: Dante’s “Geryon” and W. B. Yeats’ The Second Coming*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007. p. 82.

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