

Seeking God in the Works of T. S. Eliot and Michelangelo

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Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.

If I thought that I was replying
To someone who would ever return to the world,
This flame would cease to flicker.
But since from these depths
No one ever returns alive, if what I've heard is true
I will answer you without fear of infamy.¹

In its title the poem establishes the context of it being a love song, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.² The epigram in the original Italian from Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* immediately establishes a specific Christian context, one that will involve *agape*, *amour* and *eros*.

If read as a dramatic monologue, it is a lyric poem to a woman for the purpose of revealing Prufrock's private thoughts. As convention dictates, when he begins *Let us go then, you and I*, he is not directing his words to the reader but to this woman.

If the reader expects a love song on the level of *amour*, the standard expression of the love of a man for a woman common to lyric poetry, those expectations quickly fall apart. These images are *not* the words of a man in love with a woman at the level of the heart, not romantic in either the *agape* or the *amour* sense of the term, instead suggestive of a journey through a seedy, red-light district of prostitutes and vagrants, the world of erotic, sexual drives. *One-night cheap hotels* are where one-night stands take place between strangers with no interest in one-another beyond sex, that physical drive of the libido or, as Joseph Campbell states, *the zeal of the organs*, certainly not the kind of love that the troubadours sang about. *Sawdust* on the floor of a restaurant is there to absorb spilled drinks and food, evocative of crude, rough taverns. The purpose of *oysters* (certainly the literary, symbolic purpose) is to increase sexual desire and performance. *Muttering retreats* and *restless nights* are suggestive of furtive, unsavory activities. If this is a romantic once-upon-a-time world of *amour*, it is going to be a dark, dangerous one, one not likely to end happily ever after. These are images of *eros*, not *amour*.

The invitation becomes even more ominous when some of the other phrases are woven into the fabric. *Like a patient etherized upon a table* jumps off the page, a jarring image inconsistent with a love song. A careful read connects this with the evening. It is the *evening spread out against the sky* that is like *a patient etherized upon a table*. Prufrock is inviting the woman to a world as mentally sterile and unaware as an etherized, unresponsive patient:

Let us go then, you and I,
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherized upon a table;
 Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells;
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
 Oh do not ask, "What is it?"
 Let us go and make our visit.

The *streets that follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent* are literal and mental streets of *insidious intent* that lead to the kind of love that takes place in *one-night cheap hotels*, in simple terms, the satisfaction of sexual desires. The *tedious argument* is implied by stating the intent is *insidious*. Put into the established frames of a love song and Dante's *Divina Commedia*, the *argument* is clearly over whether a visit to the world of *eros* is a sin.

Not only has the love song immediately established that it is more than a traditional expression of *amour*, it has *led to an overwhelming question*. He waits, pauses – the ellipsis is a clear signal he has paused. And the next line suggests he has heard her ask him to explain, to which he responds *Oh, do not ask, "What is it? / Let us go and make our visit."*

It seems likely the woman also understands this love song as a straightforward invitation to satisfy the desires of the flesh. The only aspect that she does not grasp is why he claims it will lead her to *an overwhelming question*. Most likely realizing she will not understand and certainly not wanting to delay matters trying to explain it, he dismisses her question and quickly initiates the visit.

It will begin at twilight as the conscious world of the day intersects the unconscious world of the night, similar to being in an etherized state (the conscious world has been put to sleep). If not the world of the dream, a world similar to that world.

This is followed by a central couplet:

In the room the women come and go
 Talking of Michelangelo

It is separated by a space from the descriptions before and after, as if an aside, a parenthetical remark. The first line clearly connects to the

thoughts that come before it and establishes that the speaker is meeting with *women* in a room, most likely referring to the cheap motel room he is taking his current woman to visit, *the room where the women come and go* – an obvious pun on women *cumming* and then leaving.

Unfolding as a stream of consciousness, it immediately connects these thoughts to Michelangelo, a seemingly random juxtaposition the result of the rhythm and rhyme of the couplet, similar to how dreams and the figurative language of poetry interlace such thoughts.

At the time Eliot writes this poem, partially influenced by Sigmund Freud, poets and artists in all mediums are consciously employing stream of consciousness or free association techniques to structure their works, and though Eliot does not reduce his poetry to Freud's theories, even condemns others for losing some of their creative power by becoming too influenced by those theories, he stresses connections with all possible levels of meaning and clearly employs a stream of conscious structure that is meant to communicate in a manner similar to free association theories of a dream.

After the interrupting couplet indicating that something about Michelangelo weaves into this visit, Prufrock's thoughts return to the hotel room:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

The *yellow fog* or *smoke* acts like a cat making its way about the streets, rubbing its muzzle and back against the window panes, licking the corners of the evening and eventually falling asleep on a soft October night. Just what the foggy air represents cannot be ascertained for certain, but it is a dirty air that prevents a clear vision, a corrupt air that is rubbing against the window pane. Furthermore, the reference to it as a cat that *slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap*, suggests his own sexual sudden leap, and this is extended in it *falling asleep*. Whether or not the *sudden leap* followed quickly by it *falling asleep* indicates ejaculation or the failure to do so is unclear.

After a space between lines to indicate a break in thoughts, the yellow smoke imagery gets intertwined with the previous hesitations about facing

the ultimate question in a series of lines that *there will be time for a hundred indecisions and a hundred visions and revisions*. It is clear Prufrock is succumbing to his sexual desires but feels tremendous guilt (perhaps resulting in an inability to satisfy them). He knows he needs to face the *tedious* argument that leads to the *overwhelming question*, but he keeps putting it off. Then the couplet is repeated, insisting on attention:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo

It is obvious Prufrock is struggling to bring these two worlds together. Again, he tries to push Michelangelo's world aside, immediately retreating back into his excuse for avoiding it:

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and 'do I dare?'
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair –
(They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin –
(They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Eliot begins the poem with a quote from Dante's *Divina Commedia*. It needs to be translated. Critics have debated this. Is it positive or negative that Eliot keeps the quote in its original Italian? Certainly each word, each phrase, each syntactic twist has numerous connotations and textures that get lost as the original contexts disappear. Are such subtleties important for this poem? Probably not. Eliot does not grow up in Dante's world where this particular form of Italian is spoken, written and lived. His use of the passage has to be for its meanings beyond such refined timbres. Nevertheless, he *does* know Dante's work, its theological and philosophical contexts, and the recorded histories of that world well, often referring to them in his poems, and it is clear that he means this epigram in these contexts, especially in the context of the *Divina Commedia* and the views of Christianity expressed there. Furthermore, leaving the passage in its original language adds a certain gravitas to the poem, that learned, intellectual elitism Eliot obviously desires. At the very least, a solemn tone

is justified because the poem is dealing with the most serious, the *overwhelming* question.

Dante's quote is spoken by Guido da Montefeltro, a man condemned to the eighth level of Hell:

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.

If I thought that I was replying
To someone who would ever return to the world,
This flame would cease to flicker.
But since from these depths
No one ever returns alive, if what I've heard is true
I will answer you without fear of infamy.

This is a sophisticated context for a love song. J. Alfred Prufrock must be a complex man. His evening journey to a cheap hotel room in the red light district and his fear of exposure and guilt over his sexual desires are not as easily dismissed when Dante's important work is emphasized before the journey even begins.



Dante by
Botticelli

Dante completed *The Divina Commedia* in 1320. It is considered the pre-eminent work of Italian literature and one of the greatest works of world literature of all time.

In it Dante travels through the Inferno, Purgatory and Paradiso in an allegory of the soul's journey towards God as represented in the Western Church of the time (The Roman Catholic Church), especially as put forth by St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, such that *The Divine Comedy* is referred to as "the *Summa* in verse."³

It is important that Aquinas does not reject the views of non-Christian theology and philosophy. Just the opposite, he embraces them, claiming that truth should be accepted no matter where it is found. This allows him to access the truths of Greeks, Romans, Jews, Muslims and numerous other theologians and philosophers. His main source is Aristotle, whom he thinks so highly of he refers to simply as the Philosopher. He employs Aristotle's terminology and metaphysics, writes lengthy commentaries on Aristotle, and affirms Aristotle's claims with his

own independent arguments. He also embraces a number of Plato's principles, including that "it is absolutely true that there is first something which is essentially being and essentially good, which we call God . . . [and that] everything can be called good and a being inasmuch as it *participates* in it by way of assimilation."⁴

In Dante's allegorical expression of these views, he assumes the role of the main character. The journey begins the night before Good Friday and lasts to the Wednesday after Easter in 1300. His guide through Hell and Purgatory is the great Roman poet Virgil. His guide through Paradiso is Beatrice, a Florentine woman he knew from childhood and admired from afar in the tradition of *amour*.

The work is carefully structured. The three large sections (*canticas*) each consist of thirty-three cantos. An initial canto, serving as an introduction to the poem, brings the total number of cantos to one hundred. In addition to the use of three *canticas* and their lengths, the verse employs three in its structure. It is a *terza rima*, hendecasyllabic (eleven syllables), with lines composing *tercets* in the rhyme scheme aba, bcb, cdc, ded

The three realms have a common numerical pattern of nine plus one for a total of Ten. There are nine circles of the Inferno, followed by Lucifer contained at its bottom; nine rings of Mount Purgatory, followed by the Garden of Eden at its summit; and nine celestial bodies of Paradiso, followed by the Empyrean containing the essence of God. Within each group of nine, there are seven elements corresponding to a specific moral scheme, subdivided into three subcategories, and two others of greater particularity to total nine. Thus, the seven deadly sins of the Catholic Church that are cleansed in Purgatory are joined by special realms for the late repentant and those excommunicated by the church. The core seven sins within Purgatory correspond to a moral scheme of love perverted, subdivided into three groups corresponding to excessive love (Lust, Gluttony, Greed), deficient love (Sloth), and malicious love (Wrath, Envy, Pride).

In the spirit of Aquinas, it is noteworthy that Dante clearly mixes Classical Roman literature into his version of Christianity. As noted above, his wise guide for the first two sections is Virgil, author of the great epic of the Roman Empire, *The Aeneid*.

Since *Divina Commedia* is an allegory, everything in it is meant to be understood both literally and as a symbolic representation of Christianity. With this in mind, it begins when Dante as the main character is thirty-five, exactly half the biblical lifespan of seventy, as stated in Psalms 89:10. He is lost in a dark wood (a place of sin), assailed by beasts (a lion, a leopard, and a she-wolf), unable to find the right path to salvation (the sun

that would light up this path is behind a mountain) and realizes that he is ruining himself and falling into a low place where the sun is silent (an intellectual and thus spiritual darkness).

Dante believes man must always *intellectually* be aware of his own need to perform the righteous act. In this sense, *sin is a perversion of the intellect*. When Dante finds himself in a *dark wood*, he is speaking allegorically for any man who is not constantly conscious of the *right path*. If every waking moment is not consciously devoted to morality, man will find himself in a dark wood. (This is also central to both Eliot and Michelangelo.)

Virgil appears and the two of them begin their journey through the levels of the underworld of the Inferno, encountering people who are being punished for the sins based on *contrapasso*, symbolic forms of poetic justice. For example, fortune-tellers and soothsayers must walk with their heads on backwards, unable to see what is ahead, because that was what they had claimed to do in life.

Dante depicts Virgil as a *shade* residing in the Limbo section of Hell, also known as the first circle. Since Dante admires Virgil as the great poet of antiquity who wrote the pre-Christian epic of the founding of Rome, including a visit to Hell in the person of Aeneas, he is the perfect choice as a guide for the character of Dante in the allegory. As such, he represents human reason and wisdom, and he performs as a strong and competent guide. However, since he lived prior to Christ, he needs divine intervention to complete the journey safely. As such, he can only be Dante's guide through the first two sections of the journey.

It is Beatrice who entices Virgil to be Dante's guide. Though the real Beatrice the character is based on died at a young age and there is no evidence that her relationship with Dante ever amounted to more than passing conversation, she remained the object of Dante's affection and desire throughout his life and became his personal version of *amour* as represented in the sense of courtly love providing a man a means to salvation through devotion to an unattainable woman.

In *Divina Commedia*, Beatrice initiates Dante's journey to salvation, leaving her seat in Heaven and descending to Hell, where she persuades Virgil to serve as Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory. Then she replaces Virgil, connecting with Dante at the end of this journey through Earthly Paradise (Purgatorio) and serving as his guide through the levels of Heaven.

In standard amour tradition, there are numerous times during his travels through Hell and Purgatory that Dante suffers doubts, believing he can go no further, but the promise of meeting Beatrice inspires him to

continue. In the end, his devotion to and love for Beatrice is rewarded when she meets him and leads him into Heaven, which grows in radiance and beauty as they ascend toward God.



Lucifer, King of Hell by Gustave Doré

As an allegory of Christianity, the *Inferno* represents the soul seeing sin for what it really is. The three beasts represent three categories of sin: the self-indulgent, the violent, and the malicious. As such they are the three main divisions of Hell: Upper Hell, outside the city of Dis, for the four sins of indulgence (lust, gluttony, avarice and anger); circle one for the sins of violence; and circles eight and nine for the sins of malice (fraud and

treachery). Added to these are the two unlike categories that are specifically spiritual: Limbo, in circle one, contains the virtuous pagans who were not sinful but were ignorant of Christ, and circle six contains the heretics who contradicted the doctrine and confused the spirit of Christ. As noted above, the circles total nine, with the addition of Satan's realm completing the total of ten.

The quote Eliot uses comes from Guido da Montefeltro, one of the characters in the eighth circle, where some of the worst of the worst are stuck for eternity. Guido is one of many characters in the *Inferno* taken from a real person. In this case, he is a military leader who falls out of favor with the Catholic Church. In the end, Pope Boniface VIII admits him back in, restoring his position as lord of Montefeltro, and he enters the Franciscan order, dying two years later in the monastery of Assisi.

As Dante tells it in the *Inferno*, Guido overhears Virgil and Dante talking, recognizes Dante's Lombard dialect of Italian and asks for news of his homeland. Dante tells him that Romagna endures violence and tyranny but not war. In turn, Dante asks him his name, and that is when he states the quoted passage. *If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.*

Guido does not have a body – part of the punishment. Instead, he is a flame that moves when he speaks, so when he says “*this flame would remain without further movement*,” he means “*I would not talk anymore*.”

Convinced he need not fear exposure, he introduces himself as Guido da Montefeltro and says that he was originally a member of the Ghibellines. After a time, he had a religious conversion and joined a Franciscan monastery. Later, he was persuaded by Pope Boniface VIII to re-enter politics on the opposing side. At one point, Boniface asked him for advice on how to conquer Palestrina, the fortress of the Ghibelline Colonna family. Guido claims he was reluctant to betray his family, but Boniface promised him absolution in advance, even if his counsel were to prove wrong. With this assurance, he agreed to give his advice, which turned out to be incorrect.

When he died, St. Francis came for him, but a devil in the form of a cherub pulled him away, saying that a man could not receive absolution before sinning, for absolution cannot precede repentance and repentance cannot precede the sin. Preemptive absolution he deemed “contradictory” and thus invalid. He took Guido da Montefeltro to Minos, who judged him guilty of fraudulent counsel and assigned him to the Eighth Pouch of the Eighth Circle of Hell.

Unfortunately for Guido, Dante becomes the first human ever to be allowed to pass through Hell and return to earth. Not only that, but Dante is a writer and exposes Guido to the entire world.

While the connections of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* with *Divina Commedia* are important and complex, it is unlikely Guido’s personal story has much relevance for Eliot’s love song beyond its rejection of preemptive absolution and the connections with revealing oneself as a sinner. Prufrock is going to reveal his own sins in his love song, but as with Guido, he does it because he believes the person he is telling them to will not expose him.

On one level, this can be taken as Prufrock saying to the woman that their illicit sexual encounter in the cheap hotel room must be kept a secret from others in his social world. However, it is clear this is not what he means when he refers to the overwhelming question.

It is important that these words are embedded in Christian doctrine. Having them spoken by a sinner in *Divina Commedia* connects them to that. Keeping them in the original Italian language emphasizes it.

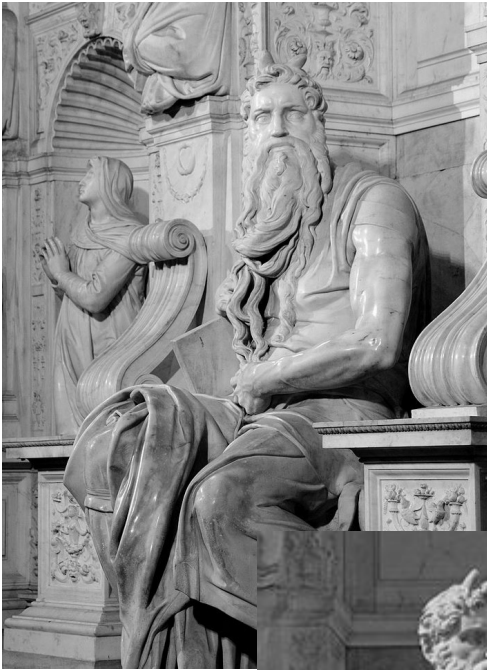
The rejection of preemptive absolution in Guido’s story applies to the extent Prufrock does or does not satisfy his desires. This is even more complicated if *lusting in the heart* is a sin.

Notes

1. Danti Albergeti, originally titled simply *Commedia* to distinguish it from a Tragedy, *The Divine Comedy* was written in Italian, circa 1300 A.D. The title was changed to *The Divine Comedy* by Giovanni Boccaccio and first printed as such by Lodovico Dolce, 1555. There are numerous translations of it available; one respected one is John Ciardi's, Alighieri Press, December 23, 2011.
2. T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Poems*, Amereon, Ltd., December 6, 2002; first published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* June 1915, subsequently published as part of a twelve-poem pamphlet, *Prufrock and Other Observation*, 1917.
3. Fordham University, Vol XL, Dec., 1921, p. 76.
4. *Summa*, I, Q.6, art.4.



Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*
Inferno XVIII
 Virgil and Dante in the eighth circle of Hell
Panderers, Seducers, Flatterers, and Whores
 Sandro Botticelli, circa 1490



Moses
Michelangelo

Church of San
Pietro

1513-1515

The depiction of a horned Moses stems from the description of Moses' face as *cornuta* (horned) in the Latin Vulgate translation of the passage from Exodus in which Moses returns to the people after receiving the commandments for the second time. The Douay-Rheims Bible translates the Vulgate: "And when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he held the two tables of the testimony, and he knew not that his face was horned from the conversation of the Lord."



CHAPTER TWO

ADULTERY



Minos judging sinners at the start of Canto V
Gustave Dore

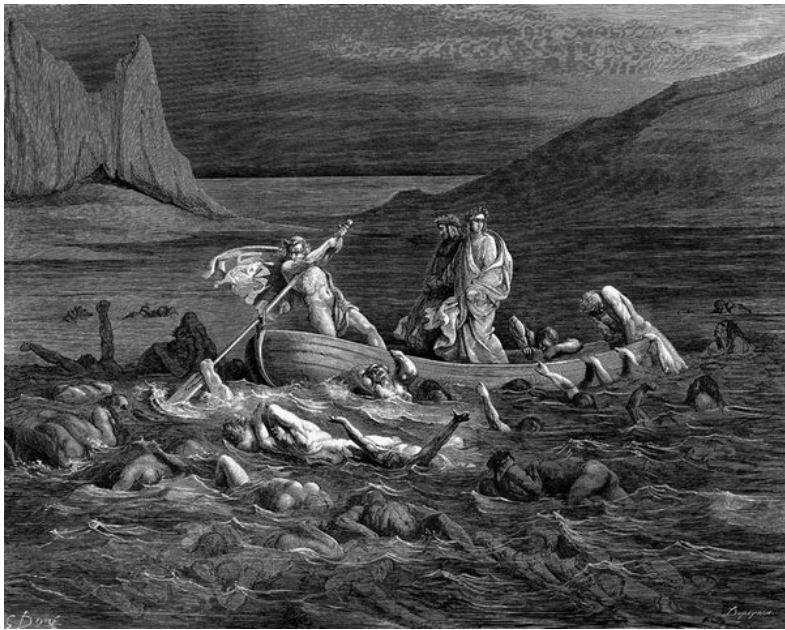
*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not
commit adultery:*

*But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after
her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.*

Jesus
Matthew, 5:27-28
King James Bible

Dante categorizes *eros* as *lust*, his second circle of *Inferno*, the beginning of Hell and the least of the evils there:

I descended from the first circle to the second, one enclosing a smaller space, and enough pain to provoke screams. With his horrible grin, Minos looms at the entrance, examines and judges the severity of the crimes, determining how far down the circles the guilty need to go and indicates it with his coils. In other words, when the evil spirit comes before him and confesses everything, he determines the proper place in hell for it, and makes as many coils with his tail as the circles he will force it to descend. A great number of sinners are always waiting to appear before him, be judged, and be whirled down.



Charon, Canto III
Gustave Dore

When Minos saw me as I passed by the actions of his great office, he said: "O you, who come to the house of pain, take care how you enter, and in whom you trust, do not let the width of the entrance deceive you."

And my guide replied: "Why do you cry out? Do not obstruct his destined journey: so it is willed, where what is willed is done: demand no more." Now the mournful notes begin to reach me: now I come where much sorrowing hurts me, and he let me pass.

I then came to a place devoid of light moaning like a tempestuous sea buffeted by warring winds, a hellish storm that never ceases to drive and molest the spirits with its force. When they come to the ruins, they shout, moan, cry, and blaspheme against the divine power. I learnt that the carnal sinners, the ones who allow lust to overcome their reason, are condemned to these torments.

Just as their wings carry the starlings in a vast, crowded flock in the cold season, so that wind carries these wicked spirits, thrusting them here and there, and up and down. There is no hope of rest or even lesser torment, to comfort them. Just as the cranes go, making their sounds and forming a long flight of themselves in the air, so I saw these moaning shadows come, carried by that war of winds. "Master," I asked, "who are these people that the black air so cruelly chastises?"

He replied: "The first of those you wish to know of was Empress of many languages, so corrupted by the vice of luxury that she made license lawful in her code to remove her own guilt. She is Semiramis, wife and successor of Ninus, ruler over the countries that the Sultan rules.

The next is Dido, who killed herself for love and broke faith with Sichaeus's ashes. She is followed by licentious Cleopatra. Then comes Helen, cause of a lengthy war. Then there is the great Achilles, who fought in the end with the love of Polyxena. And there is Paris and Tristan. He pointed out more than a thousand shadows with his finger, naming those whom love had severed from life.

After I had heard my guide name the ancient knights and ladies, pity overcame me and I said, "Poet, I would speak willingly, to those two who go together and seem so light upon the wind." And he to me, "When they are nearer to us, you can beg them by the love that leads them, and they will come."

When the wind brought them to us, I called to them, O weary souls, come and talk with us, if no one prevents it." As doves, claimed by desire, fly steadily with raised wings through the air to their nest, so the spirits flew from the crowd surrounding Dido, coming towards us through malignant air.

"O gracious and benign living creature that comes to visit us through the dark air, if the universe's king were our friend, we who tainted the earth with blood would beg him to give you peace, since you take pity on our sad misfortune. While the wind is silent, we will talk with you.

The place I was born is by the shore where the River Po runs down to rest with his attendant streams. Love quickly caught in the gentle heart

filled him with my once fair form, and the nature of that love still afflicts me. Love seized me so fiercely with desire for him it still will not leave me. Love led us to one death. Caïna, in the ninth circle waits for him who quenched our life.”

After I heard those troubled spirits, I bowed my head and kept it bowed, until the poet asked, “What are you thinking?” I replied, “O, alas, what sweet thoughts brought them to this sorrowful state?” Then I turned to them and said, “Francesca, your torment makes me weep with grief and pity. But tell me, how did love allow you to know these dubious desires?”

She said, “There is no greater pain than to remember happy times in misery, as your teacher knows. But if you wish to know the beginning of our love, we read of Lancelot and how love constrained him, and those words pushed our eyes to meet and colored our cheeks. But it was a single moment that undid us. When we read how that lover kissed the beloved and smiled, he who will never be separated from me kissed my mouth all trembling. That book was a Galeotto, a pimp, and he who wrote it that day we read no more.”

While the one spirit spoke, the other wept, so that I fainted out of pity, and fell as a dead body falls.

While the Dante in the poem is sympathetic and, as he does too many times, faints out of pity, the Dante writing the *Divina Commedia* sees lust as a sin in the sense of allowing one's emotions to overcome one's intelligence. In other words, these sins of desire are seen as a weakness of the will, an inability to control one's desires (especially sexual) rather than more serious sins involving deliberate actions consciously done in full awareness of the evil involved. It is not hard to understand his reluctance to apply strict condemnations to this amour form of adultery, as his writings prior to this have included a number that fit the category of courtly love, amour in the sense of Beatrice as a means to salvation, rather than as a sin. The line between the two is a thin one.

Eliot immediately stresses his love poem takes place in the context of Christianity, especially as it is expressed in Dante's classic allegory. As with Dante, it is not meant to be a love song in the sense of the Georgian love poems common at the time. It is not a love song in the sense of courtly love danced out in Viennese Waltzes or the personalized amour of such operas as *La Bohème* by Giacomo Puccini. While it includes the love between a man and a woman, that love needs to be put into Christian doctrine. Furthermore, while Eliot quickly moves it into the world of sexual desires and lust, it is certainly not an erotic poem meant to embrace and perhaps spark the physical desire of *eros*. No, this is a love song about facing the *overwhelming question*.

Three important contexts need to be fleshed out and delineated before that confrontation can take place: first, *agape*, the spiritual love of God, especially as established by the Catholic Church and expressed in Dante's work; second, *amour*, the romantic love between a man and a woman; and third, *eros*, the love of the organs, sexual desires.

Eliot's personal views of religion evolve. At a young age he establishes himself as the poet expressing dark depictions of European civilization in such poems as *The Wasteland*. However, after reading Bertrand Russell's essay, "A Free Man's Worship," expressing an agnostic position common to intellectuals of the time, Eliot decides the logic is shallow and surprises his contemporaries by moving in the opposite direction, embracing the traditional religious structure his group has rejected. He gets confirmed in the Church of England in 1927 and takes a vow of chastity in 1928. This is not a whimsical decision. In 1930, he publishes *Ash Wednesday*, a poem struggling with the difficult search for the higher truth within the structure of Christianity: "Where shall the word be found, where will the word / Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence." This search is a search for a faith that will last, as emphasized in the repeated phrase, "Because I do not hope to turn again." In 1943, he writes *Four Quartets*, a religious poem exploring a large landscape of religious concerns, including incarnation, time and eternity, spiritual insight and revelation, and cumulating in an allusion to the Pentecost:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

In *The Idea of a Christian Society* in 1939, he argues that the humanist attempt to form a non-Christian, "rational" civilization is doomed. "The experiment will fail, but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the world from suicide." These views are not couched in the embracement of a church structure, but instead focus on an application of Christian principals, Christians being "the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation."

While there is always a danger psychoanalyzing an author and applying that to his poetry, Eliot clearly struggles *intellectually* with the three

categories of love, especially as they fit into the Church's construct of meaning and salvation. Furthermore, at the time of writing *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the Catholic and Protestant views on these issues are much closer than they are today, so attempts to claim his views as expressed in the poem do not match those of the Catholic Church but some protestant religion, i.e., the Church of England he would eventually join, misrepresent rather than elucidate what is being expressed in the poem, especially since he insists on using the views as expressed by Dante.

What, then does the Catholic Church have to say?

Catholic theology of sexuality, like Catholic theology in general, is based on natural law, canonical scripture, divine revelation and sacred tradition, as interpreted authoritatively by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.

Sexual morality evaluates sexual behavior according to standards laid out by Catholic moral theology and provides general principles by which Catholics are able to evaluate whether specific actions meet these standards. Central to these is the belief that sexual pleasure is corrupt when it has no purpose beyond itself. In other words, the purpose of sex is procreation, and such procreation must take place in the context of a marriage sanctioned by the Church.

Human life and human sexuality are inseparable. Since God created human beings in his own image and he found everything he created to be very good, the human body and sex must also be good. Furthermore, the expression of love between husband and wife elevates life, because it joins them as husband and wife in complete, mutual self-giving. Sex between a husband and wife that is intimate and chaste is the means for the transmitting of human existence and as such is noble and worthy. However, sex outside of marriage or deliberately preventing procreation is bad. Sexual intercourse has a purpose, and sex outside marriage is contrary to its purpose.

Strong sins contrary to chastity are masturbation, fornication, pornography, homosexuality and artificial contraception. Furthermore, abortion is seriously contrary to canon law, carrying the penalty of excommunication.

Here are the central portions of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on these concerns:

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not commit adultery.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

I. “MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM . . .”

2331 “God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image. ... God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the *vocation*, and thus the capacity and responsibility, *of love* and communion.”

“God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them”; He blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply”; “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.”

2332 *Sexuality* affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.

2333 Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual *identity*. Physical, moral, and spiritual *difference* and *complementarity* are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life. The harmony of the couple and of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs, and mutual support between the sexes are lived out.

2334 “In creating men ‘male and female,’ God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity.” “Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God.”

2335 Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way. The *union of man and woman* in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator's generosity and fecundity: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” All human generations proceed from this union.

2336 Jesus came to restore creation to the purity of its origins. In the Sermon on the Mount, he interprets God's plan strictly: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” What God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

The tradition of the Church has understood the sixth commandment as encompassing the whole of human sexuality.

II. THE VOCATION TO CHASTITY

2337 Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman.

The virtue of chastity therefore involves the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift.

The integrity of the person

2338 The chaste person maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him. This integrity ensures the unity of the person; it is opposed to any behavior that would impair it. It tolerates neither a double life nor duplicity in speech.

2339 Chastity includes an *apprenticeship in self-mastery* which is training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy. "Man's dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint. Man gains such dignity when, ridding himself of all slavery to the passions, he presses forward to his goal by freely choosing what is good and, by his diligence and skill, effectively secures for himself the means suited to this end."

2340 Whoever wants to remain faithful to his baptismal promises and resist temptations will want to adopt the means for doing so: self-knowledge, practice of an asceticism adapted to the situations that confront him, obedience to God's commandments, exercise of the moral virtues, and fidelity to prayer. "Indeed it is through chastity that we are gathered together and led back to the unity from which we were fragmented into multiplicity."

2341 The virtue of chastity comes under the cardinal virtue of *temperance*, which seeks to permeate the passions and appetites of the senses with reason.

2342 Self-mastery is a *long and exacting work*. One can never consider it acquired once and for all. It presupposes renewed effort at all stages of life.¹²⁹ The effort required can be more intense in certain periods, such as when the personality is being formed during childhood and adolescence.

2343 Chastity has *laws of growth* which progress through stages marked by imperfection and too often by sin. "Man . . . day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves, and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth."

2344 Chastity represents an eminently personal task; it also involves a *cultural effort*, for there is interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society." Chastity presupposes respect for the rights of the person, in particular the right to receive information and an education that respect the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life.

2345 Chastity is a moral virtue. It is also a gift from God, a *grace*, a fruit of spiritual effort. The Holy Spirit enables one whom the water of Baptism has regenerated to imitate the purity of Christ.

The integrality of the gift of self

2346 Charity is the *form* of all the virtues. Under its influence, chastity appears as a school of the gift of the person. Self-mastery is ordered to the gift of self. Chastity leads him who practices it to become a witness to his neighbor of God's fidelity and loving kindness.

2347 The virtue of chastity blossoms in *friendship*. It shows the disciple how to follow and imitate him who has chosen us as his friends, who has given himself totally to us and allows us to participate in his divine estate. Chastity is a promise of immortality.

Chastity is expressed notably in *friendship with one's neighbor*. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion.

The various forms of chastity

2348 All the baptized are called to chastity. The Christian has "put on Christ," the model for all chastity. All Christ's faithful are called to lead a chaste life in keeping with their particular states of life. At the moment of his Baptism, the Christian is pledged to lead his affective life in chastity.

2349 "People should cultivate [chastity] in the way that is suited to their state of life. Some profess virginity or consecrated celibacy which enables them to give themselves to God alone with an undivided heart in a remarkable manner. Others live in the way prescribed for all by the moral

law, whether they are married or single.” Married people are called to live conjugal chastity; others practice chastity in continence:

There are three forms of the virtue of chastity: the first is that of spouses, the second that of widows and the third that of virgins. We do not praise any one of them to the exclusion of the others. . . . This is what makes for the richness of the discipline of the Church.

2350 Those who are *engaged to marry* are called to live chastity in continence. They should see in this time of testing a discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity, and the hope of receiving one another from God. They should reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love. They will help each other grow in chastity.

Offenses against chastity

2351 *Lust* is disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes.

2352 By *masturbation* is to be understood the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure. “Both the Magisterium of the Church in the course of a constant tradition and the moral sense of the faithful have been in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.” “The deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside of marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose.” For here sexual pleasure is sought outside of “the sexual relationship which is demanded by the moral order and in which the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love is achieved.”

To form an equitable judgment about the subjects' moral responsibility and to guide pastoral action, one must take into account the affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors that lessen, if not even reduce to a minimum, moral culpability.

2353 *Fornication* is carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of persons and of human sexuality which is naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children. Moreover, it is a grave scandal when there is corruption of the young.

2354 *Pornography* consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties. It offends against chastity because it perverts the conjugal

act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other. It does grave injury to the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, and the public), since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others. It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world. It is a grave offense. Civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic materials.

2355 *Prostitution* does injury to the dignity of the person who engages in it, reducing the person to an instrument of sexual pleasure. The one who pays sins gravely against himself: he violates the chastity to which his Baptism pledged him and defiles his body, the temple of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁰ Prostitution is a social scourge. It usually involves women, but also men, children, and adolescents (The latter two cases involve the added sin of scandal.). While it is always gravely sinful to engage in prostitution, the imputability of the offense can be attenuated by destitution, blackmail, or social pressure.

2356 *Rape* is the forcible violation of the sexual intimacy of another person. It does injury to justice and charity. Rape deeply wounds the respect, freedom, and physical and moral integrity to which every person has a right. It causes grave damage that can mark the victim for life. It is always an intrinsically evil act. Graver still is the rape of children committed by parents (incest) or those responsible for the education of the children entrusted to them.

Chastity and homosexuality

2357 Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity,¹⁴¹ tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.”¹⁴² They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.

2358 The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the

sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.

2359 Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.

III. THE LOVE OF HUSBAND AND WIFE

2360 Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion. Marriage bonds between baptized persons are sanctified by the sacrament.

2361 "Sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is not something simply biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and woman commit themselves totally to one another until death."

Tobias got out of bed and said to Sarah, "Sister, get up, and let us pray and implore our Lord that he grant us mercy and safety." So she got up, and they began to pray and implore that they might be kept safe. Tobias began by saying, "Blessed are you, O God of our fathers. . . . You made Adam, and for him you made his wife Eve as a helper and support. From the two of them the race of mankind has sprung. You said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; let us make a helper for him like himself.' I now am taking this kinswoman of mine, not because of lust, but with sincerity. Grant that she and I may find mercy and that we may grow old together." And they both said, "Amen, Amen." Then they went to sleep for the night.

2362 "The acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste union of the spouses takes place are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude." Sexuality is a source of joy and pleasure:

The Creator himself . . . established that in the [generative] function, spouses should experience pleasure and enjoyment of body and spirit. Therefore, the spouses do nothing evil in seeking this pleasure and enjoyment. They accept what the Creator has intended for them. At the same time, spouses should know how to keep themselves within the limits of just moderation.

2363 The spouses' union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life. These two meanings or values of marriage cannot be separated without altering the couple's spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family.

The conjugal love of man and woman thus stands under the twofold obligation of fidelity and fecundity.

Conjugal fidelity

2364 The married couple forms "the intimate partnership of life and love established by the Creator and governed by his laws; it is rooted in the conjugal covenant, that is, in their irrevocable personal consent." Both give themselves definitively and totally to one another. They are no longer two; from now on they form one flesh. The covenant they freely contracted imposes on the spouses the obligation to preserve it as unique and indissoluble. "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

2365 Fidelity expresses constancy in keeping one's given word. God is faithful. The Sacrament of Matrimony enables man and woman to enter into Christ's fidelity for his Church. Through conjugal chastity, they bear witness to this mystery before the world.

St. John Chrysostom suggests that young husbands should say to their wives: I have taken you in my arms, and I love you, and I prefer you to my life itself. For the present life is nothing, and my most ardent dream is to spend it with you in such a way that we may be assured of not being separated in the life reserved for us. . . . I place your love above all things, and nothing would be more bitter or painful to me than to be of a different mind than you.

The fecundity of marriage

2366 Fecundity is a gift, an *end of marriage*, for conjugal love naturally tends to be fruitful. A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment. So the Church, which is "on the side of life," teaches that "it is necessary that each and every marriage act remain ordered *per se* to the procreation of human life." "This particular doctrine, expounded on numerous occasions by the Magisterium, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act."

2367 Called to give life, spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God. "Married couples should regard it as their proper mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should realize that they are thereby *cooperating with the love of God the Creator* and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters. They will fulfill this duty with a sense of human and Christian responsibility."

2368 A particular aspect of this responsibility concerns the *regulation of procreation*. For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to make certain that their desire is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood. Moreover, they should conform their behavior to the objective criteria of morality:

When it is a question of harmonizing married love with the responsible transmission of life, the morality of the behavior does not depend on sincere intention and evaluation of motives alone; but it must be determined by objective criteria, criteria drawn from the nature of the person and his acts criteria that respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love; this is possible only if the virtue of married chastity is practiced with sincerity of heart.

2369 "By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and the procreative, the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its orientation toward man's exalted vocation to parenthood."

2370 Periodic continence, that is, the methods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods, is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality. These methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them, and favor the education of an authentic freedom. In contrast, "every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible" is intrinsically evil:

Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality. . . . The difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle . . . involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality.

2371 “Let all be convinced that human life and the duty of transmitting it are not limited by the horizons of this life only: their true evaluation and full significance can be understood only in reference to *man's eternal destiny*.”

2372 The state has a responsibility for its citizens' well-being. In this capacity it is legitimate for it to intervene to orient the demography of the population. This can be done by means of objective and respectful information, but certainly not by authoritarian, coercive measures. The state may not legitimately usurp the initiative of spouses, who have the primary responsibility for the procreation and education of their children. In this area, it is not authorized to employ means contrary to the moral law.

The gift of a child

2373 Sacred Scripture and the Church's traditional practice see in *large families* a sign of God's blessing and the parents' generosity.

2374 Couples who discover that they are sterile suffer greatly. “What will you give me,” asks Abraham of God, “for I continue childless?” And Rachel cries to her husband Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!”

2375 Research aimed at reducing human sterility is to be encouraged, on condition that it is placed “at the service of the human person, of his inalienable rights, and his true and integral good according to the design and will of God.”

2376 Techniques that entail the dissociation of husband and wife, by the intrusion of a person other than the couple (donation of sperm or ovum, surrogate uterus), are gravely immoral. These techniques (heterologous artificial insemination and fertilization) infringe the child's right to be born of a father and mother known to him and bound to each other by marriage. They betray the spouses' “right to become a father and a mother only through each other.”

2377 Techniques involving only the married couple (homologous artificial insemination and fertilization) are perhaps less reprehensible, yet remain morally unacceptable. They dissociate the sexual act from the procreative act. The act which brings the child into existence is no longer an act by which two persons give themselves to one another, but one that “entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Such a relationship of domination is in itself contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children.” “Under the moral aspect procreation is deprived of its proper