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The key to this observation, however, is the distinction between the spiritual and the religious. Without going into the details of Florence's fractured civic life and factional strife during this period, Dante who continues as the speaker's guide
through his purgatorial ritual of "Ash-Wednesday," exactly as Virgil had guided Dante, then Eliot is free to use the concept of Dante's Purgatorio as the scaffolding, or rather staircase, on which to construct the rising movement that must now succeed the annihilation and reconstitution of self that has just taken place in Part II. The Lady is like
Prufrock's mermaids, who will not sing to him. However, instead of writing a poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry that merely laments the absence of a serious poetry than the ab
poem, however, had he not, to this point in the rest of the poem, run the gamut of a poetry that muses about faith as a topic for poetry as much as, or even more than, it may express it, and muses as well about what sorts of conditions not just of self but of one's culture permit the proper expression of belief in poetry. The prayer continues, "show unto
us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus," though the poem does not. Portrayed as an old man's "drivelling" mouth or the "toothed gullet of an agèd shark," it is characterized in images of a consuming force that would feed on and devour the speaker's flagging hope much more cleanly than the three leopards of part II had reduced his fleshy self to
bone. He had begun to experiment with a more direct poetic style as far back as some of the spiritually clairvoyant. Still, the poem works if the speaker is accepted as a fictive projection, no more real as a personality
than, say, Prufrock or the hollow men or Gerontion. Again, his speaker resolves that problem in part VI finally by addressing the issue of belief in and of itself, but only after having muddied those waters in the preceding five parts by struggling with the devil of the stairs, which was as much an aesthetic, cultural, and literary historical problem as a
spiritual and personal one. In a normal narrative or dramatic context, one can move such a dual agenda forward fairly easily, either by means of clearly plotted antagonistic elements or conflicting characterizations. Part V How otherwise can the fifth part of "Ash-Wednesday" begin than with its great and ominous conditional clause: "If the lost word is
lost. Child of the modern world that he is, however, he knows that he can hope only to be able to approximate the vision that once had seemed to flow as freely and easily as music from the poets' lips. Here the speaker echoes the question the Lord asks in 1 Kings 19 of Ezekiel, who also had sat down under a juniper tree in his flight from Jezebel and
requested that he might die: "Shall these bones live?" And like Ezekiel, the speaker will find that they can live and more, a far cry from The Waste Land's "rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones" but got nothing in return for the experience. The Virgin will not speak, although she does bend her head and make a sign to him, admitting his
presence and, so, acknowledging his request. A reader discovering that Eliot had undergone a profound spiritual conversion experience is
precisely what the poem is all about. He continues: "It is difficult to conceive of an age . At the very least, it would make sense that a poet whose career had been devoted up to this point to commenting on major social and cultural issues, as Eliot's had, would eventually find himself addressing the matter of belief—both its personal and its socially and
culturally structured dimensions— in his poetry, and as poetry. If he is claiming that his is not an age easily given to the expression of the religious sentiment as if it were some ancient clarion call. That crisis would take on new dimensions for Eliot as he now began to see in it the
manifestation of a far deeper and far more pervasive spiritual crisis. It is absolutely fitting then that the poem ends in total humility as the speaker recites a key passage from the Anima Chisti (Spirit of Christ). Eliot, Themes of Ash Wednesday, Themes of T.S. Eliot's Ash Wednesday Memory, regret, doubt, and despair all persist, however, as in part III,
the speaker ascends from those lingering elements of the self he no longer wishes to be toward the person that he fears he may, through a lack of courage and perseverance, fail to become. And so, appropriately enough, part I of "Ash-Wednesday" ends not with poetry but with prayer. It is a fall from which, in Christian terms, Christ's death on the
cross redeems humankind, and that Good Friday event begins the close of the Lenten season that the observance of Ash Wednesday opens, all of it culminating in the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning. The same may not always be said of other examples of the genre, especially since there is no
prescribed way of executing such a biography, nor should there be one. This, too, is in keeping with the great, tried-andtrue spiritual poetry of the past, particularly Dante's. Dante and Cavalcanti, however, were, in Eliot's view, not as much exiled in that other sense. Filled with a "strength beyond hope and despair," the speaker, thus inspired and
refreshed, climbs the third step, intoning the words, "Lord, I am not worthy." In the Catholic Mass, these words are the opening of the communion rite on which the Liturgy of the Eucharist draws to a close. / Desiring this man's scope." The speaker seems to be expressing a desire to reform his life by renouncing his former ways,
but only because he has no other choice—"I do not hope." While that desire is appropriate to the religious observance that the title has announced as the poem's topic, each half of the equated impulse as stated owes its source to a poem of attachment. In any event, Part II of the completed poem, "Ash-Wednesday," would first appear
as "Salutation" in 1927, Part I as "Perch' io non spero" in 1928, and Part III as "Al som de l'escalina" in 1929. It is, as ashes suggest, a poetry of waste, but the question must be: What has been wasted it? So, then, Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, ostensibly addressed to a beloved unknown to history but alleged to be a young man, is,
like Guido's brave lament, another expression of hopelessness on the part of a speaker who also "all alone beweep[s his] outcast state," but who is as well so displeased with himself and what he has become that he finds himself recklessly envying all others around him: "Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, / Featur'd like him, like him with
friends possess'd, / Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope, . He knows that he shall not know "the one veritable transitory power," which is that moment of grace—that he shall not drink, that place is only ever place, that he must renounce in order to accept. Here he comes to recognize his shortcomings and failings, which are by and large self-
centeredness, so that by the end of part II, he has been reduced to little more than the remnant of his former self—bones picked cleaned by these remorseless leopards of self-analysis. However, there is a subtext involving Dante upon which Eliot may also be playing. Those, too, are vast distinctions. Indeed, that moment from Dante had already
provided Eliot with a fitting note among the various "fragments . There is also the suggestion, since these words now come immediately after the cultural critique of part V, that, along with its spiritual austerity, the
speaker does not hope to turn the tide of the spiritual emptiness that he imagines to be assaulting the present moment in which he lives. Speak but the word and my soul shall be healed." This prayer is taken virtually verbatim from the words of the Roman centurion whose story is recounted in both Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:2-10. In the passage in
question from the Purgatorio, Dante, still guided by Virgil, has continued to ascend the purgatorial mountain at whose base he had found himself on leaving the Inferno, or hell. Homer did. For all the eroticism of the imagery, the meaning is clear and wholly pure: Love permits the self to be consumed in selflessness by virtue of a complete devotion to
another. Still, the suspicion persists that "Ash-Wednesday" is quite different from anything that had come from his pen before. Needless to say, the next phase, the purgative, has already begun once the speaker has been reduced to far less than even the figurative shadow of his former self. Eliot. Even the architectural detail through which this vista is
witnessed—a "slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit"—calls up the image of a pregnant woman about to give birth, in keeping with the processes of a spiritual rebirth which Eliot is either alluding or attempting to revive when, in part IV, the
speaker continues by speaking of the "unread vision in the higher dream / While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse." What the speaker both misses and muses on is the "ancient" capacity of poetry, as the 17th-century English poet and cavalier Sir Philip Sidney once put it, to take our brass world and give us back a golden one in return. It is
this precarious tightrope act, balancing the demands of the flesh, and of love, with the demands of the spirit, and of love, that Eliot hopes to exemplify in the poetry of "Ash-Wednesday." He is aware of the paradoxes in the lonely, because isolated, search for spiritual balance and worldly contentment. The speaker's self and its attachments and
animosities, jealousies and envy, all having been extinguished by the flame of love, there must now be, if not resurrection or rebirth, at least the creation of a spiritual life for this new self to take up. By doing so, Eliot justifies not his vision—few poets have ever felt the need to defend what they see or how they see it—but his technique for
accomplishing such an intensely religious vision in what remains nevertheless a poem. In the worldliness that he still suffers from even in hell, Cavalcante wonders why his son Guido is not accompanying Dante, since as a parent he imagines that his son ought to be as worthy of such a distinguished honor as Dante is. Dante may well have suffered a
grievous and possibly professional guilt for having been instrumental in bringing about the death of Cavalcanti. (Like a good investigative reporter, a poet will stop at nothing to get a great poem for his readers.) Nevertheless, that such a love had a profound effect on the poet is testified to by both La vita nuova and, more particularly, La commedia
divina, wherein it is Beatrice in the spirit, she having since passed away, who guides Dante, by virtue of his lifelong devotion to love and by virtue of affairs aloud in his own poetry, however, the speaker also runs the risk of seeming to endorse,
or at least lend his own efforts to identifying, the very lack that one is ostensibly hoping to remedy. These must have a single focus, for the man a woman, and this woman must be both the objective and the mere emblem of the objective, the focal point. Perhaps such a reading would be a bit too melodramatic
for some tastes, but this is poetry, after all, and there are such things as the little murders, of self and of others, of dreams and of hopes, that every human being commits with regularity along life's way, or so must it surely seem to the Dantes and Shakespeares and Eliots of the world. Based on those kinds of cues, "Ash-Wednesday" falls
conveniently into a genre of literary composition that is relatively common, being what might be called the spiritual biography. By that poem's closing, as the reader hears the injunctions from the Upanishads in "What the Thunder Said," there can be no doubt that the thrust of the poetry has been moved wholly into spiritual realms—but not the realm
of what is normally perceived of as religious. So, then, he proposes, "redeem the dream / The token of the word unheard, unspoken." The words with which part IV end come from the prayer to Mary in her manifestation as the Queen of Heaven, "Salve, Regina" or "Hail, Holy Queen." "And after this our exile," in the prayer, alludes to
humanity's exile from the rewards of paradise following the Fall in the Garden of Eden. What Dante adds to that literature, especially in La vita nuova, is his poignantly beautiful commentary on the power of love to transform the individual not just in terms of his devotion to the female object of his love, but especially in terms of his interaction with the
entire world around him. It is fair, then, for Eliot's beliefs but of his vision of the world and of the individual's place in it. Each of those three titles gives some insight into Eliot's intentions by identifying,
through a direct allusion, a particular literary source and figure for each. He is noticeably referred to, nevertheless, in a particularly telling episode in the Inferno, the first part of the Divine Comedy, when, in canto X, Dante encounters Guido's father, Cavalcanti, in Circle Six. Cavalcanti wrote the ballatetta in question when he was in
exile from his native Florence, a state of affairs brought about by the actions of his good friend and fellow poet Dante Alighieri. Recognizing Christ's divinity and miraculous powers to heal one of his servants but does not want to presume upon Jesus' time or scruples (as a Jew, it would have
been unclean for Jesus to enter a Roman's home). Then, if thoughts turn to the religious context at all, it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications but toward what permanent human impulses the religious context at all, it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications but toward what permanent human impulses the religious context at all, it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications but toward what permanent human impulses the religious context at all, it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications but toward what permanent human impulses the religious context at all, it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications but toward what permanent human impulses the religious context at all, it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications but toward what permanent human impulses the religious context at all, it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications at all it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications are not all it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications are not all it is done not with an eye toward some sort of doctrinal classifications are not all it is done not all i
spending this part of his time in eternity regarding past follies but looking forward with joy to that day when, purged of these remnants of his worldly sinfulness, he shall be joined at last with God. In its broadest conceptualization, Dante's Divine Comedy is his "Ash-Wednesday," a poem not only designed to take place at the very end of the Lenten
season during Easter weekend but one in which the poet confesses to his sinfulness and his desire for repentance and salvation. Porter's daughter, or the Archduke Rudolph and Marie, or Tristan and Iseult, or Elizabeth and Leicester. For them, love for a lady was both akin to and a deliciously mind- and spirit-opening rival to one's love for the divine.
Just as Love fed Dante's heart to Beatrice, three white leopards devour every consumable part of Eliot's speaker, down to his bones. The remainder of part I continues in this same vein of an emptying, a conscious process voiding the spirit of worldliness and vanity that is required if the individual is to be made open and ready for the acceptance of
grace. This process of renewal or regeneration will be, in part III, represented appropriately enough by the speaker's mounting steps "al som de l'escalina"—to the top of the stairs. The Waste Land and Ash Wednesday: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism. The speaker instead divides himself, according to his interests, into three distinct parts,
as it were. From the preceding synopsis, however, the reader will understand that such a conclusion could not be further from the truth. For Eliot, this last phase, the unitive, is never quite achieved. Only the last of the supplicant. Even here it is necessary
to distinguish between the idea of personal experience and the idea of spiritual experience. Considering that in April 1300 Guido was but months away from exile and death as a result of Dante's actions, one must wonder what ghosts Dante was exorcising those 20 or more years later as he penned this scene, one in which it is suggested that Guido is
as great a poet as Dante and in which, too, Guido's death a short time later is rather dramatically adumbrated. Since much of the rest of Eliot's poetry from his conversion on is nominally religious in nature, such is a critical problem that needs especially to be addressed inasmuch as his poetry is concerned. As the priest raises the sacramental host,
which in the Anglican rite would represent the body and blood of the Christ, the faithful, who are about to take communion, kneel to say some variation of the following prayer: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. Read as an Ash Wednesday exercise, that is, as a penitential entry into a state of mind and spirit suitable for the Lenten season, with its
overtones of mourning and death and requirements for abstinence and selfdenial, the poetry no doubt goes over the top and may be even regarded as a dismal failure. Dante encounters a fellow Italian poet, Guido Guinizzelli, whom he finds suffering in the purgative or refining, as opposed to infernal or damning, fires, where he is being cleansed of
the sin of a bestial carnality. How refreshingly life-giving it is, then, to encounter this different poetic landscape in "Ash-Wednesday," where even though he has been reduced to nothing but, literally, a bare-bones reality, the speaker finds that the rose and the garden are near enough in spirit to be one's song. The majority of readers generally resent
such a requirement, even if they happen to be strongly religious or perhaps even share the very belief system that is ostensibly being expounded. It must be they who, having somehow lost the capacity not only to dream the high dream but to express it effectively and suitably in verse, have been instrumental in leaving their brothers and sisters in
darkness despite, or because of, all of our technological advances. The believer already familiar with the religious tenets and devotions being expressed misses the value of their poetic function and wonders instead what the fuss is all about; the nonbeliever, meanwhile, imagines himself or herself wrongly being excluded from the experience of the
poetry by virtue of its being channeled through religious experiences for which that reader most likely has no personal reference points. "Sweeney Agonistes" had been Eliot's last word on the philosophic mind that could live even remotely successfully alone, at a psychological distance from the rest of humankind. He tells Dante that this poet, Arnaut
Daniel, was "was a better craftsman [il miglior fabbro] in the mother tongue." Since Arnaut Daniel was also a poet whom Eliot's good friend and erstwhile mentor Ezra Pound, in the earliest phases of his own career as both a language scholar and poet, had studied and translated, Eliot had put himself in the position of Guinizzelli in his dedication to
The Waste Land by complimenting Pound as il miglior fabbro, and Eliot then returned to the same section of the Purgatorio one last time in line 428 of The Waste Land. There are her colors now, white and blue, just as the hawthorne of part III had signaled the coming of May, her month. So much, indeed, did Dante invent the discourse of love's
transformative powers that his language in this regard may seem commonplace nowadays. Sex serves as an emblem of the unbridled desire that binds us to this world at the expense of any focus on our hope for the other. He was in fact allowed to return to Florence because he had contracted in his exile a fatal case of malaria, from which he
succumbed in August of that same year. The Irish novelist James Joyce (1881-1941), Eliot's contemporary, delved into the most fascinating aspects of an individual's moral and spiritual growth by thinly veiling an autobiography of his coming of age as a young poet in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Categories: American Literature, Literary
Criticism, Literary Theory, Modernism, PoetryTags: American Literature, Analysis of Ash Wednesday Plot, Ash Wednesday Plot, Ash Wednesday Simple
Analysis, Ash Wednesday Study Guides, Ash Wednesday, Character Study of Ash Wednesday, Character Study of Ash Wednesday, Criticism of Ash Wednesday, Criticism of T.S. Eliot's Ash Wednesday, Character Study of Ash Wednesday, Criticism of T.S. Eliot's Ash Wednesday, Criticism of T.S. 
eliot, Eliot's Ash Wednesday, Essays of Ash Wednesday, Plot of Ash W
Wednesday, Study Guides of Ash Wednesday, Summary of Ash Wednesday, Synopsis of T.S. Eliot's Ash Wednesday, Synopsis of T.S. E
While there is no doubt that there really was a Beatrice Portinari whom Dante knew as a young man and in whom he may have had a romantic interest, there may be some doubt that she was in fact a person whom the poet Dante loved in this extremely rarefied way. As much as these are relationships harder to portray, they are zones of reference in
which it is difficult to make the true objective and point clear, and that is that one seeks union not with the period following the publication of The Waste Land in late 1922 and the renown that it brought him, the first three parts
of the poem that posterity would come to know as "Ash-Wednesday" (in keeping with Eliot's own practice, the hyphen is retained here) were published as separately titled poems in the years preceding the complete poem's publication in a volume of its own in the spring of 1930. Dante reports how, it being the first time that her words were addressed
the action of the poem is supposedly unfolding. To the uninitiated reader, the lines may express perfectly the sudden realization of the speaker that he has come to the end of a lifeline and must, if he wishes to go on, change his ways or at least his values. Surely, the psychology of this kind of love literature is all that matters finally, for it is the
spiritual essence of the record that remains in the poetry, rather than the veracity of its details, that itself is capable of inspiring others. Unfortunately, in art, the useful is seldom the purposeful. Instead of prophesy, there is the Christian fulfillment of "the Rose / . Here, incidentally, Eliot typically proves to be generously unstinting, so much so as to
make readers occasionally question the poet's motives, perhaps rightly, shored against my ruins" at the conclusion of The Waste Land, so it is especially intriquing that Eliot should feel obliged to revisit it here, at another critical juncture in a poem that seems to be putting the vision of The Waste Land, with its painful and painstaking search for a
reader's attention from either theme. It is this addition on Eliot's part not of superfluous requirements so much as of his excessively objectifying what must remain, nevertheless, an essentially private spiritual process that makes the poem peculiarly modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modernism entails and or necessively objectifying what must remain, nevertheless, an essentially private spiritual process that makes the poem peculiarly modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modernism entails and or necessively objectifying what must remain, nevertheless, an essentially private spiritual process that makes the poem peculiarly modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modernism entails and or necessively objectifying what must remain, nevertheless, an essentially private spiritual process that makes the poem peculiarly modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modernism entails and or necessively objectifying what must remain an extension of the poem peculiarly modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it ironically illustrates the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it is into the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it is into the very sort of fragmenting of focus that modern while it is into the 
that the poetry decries. And so this traveler, this pilgrim, fares forward. Approaching "Ash-Wednesday" in this way, the reader can sort out the biographical from the poetry all along. Eliot surely knewn to see how much the poem is not any break from but a continuance of issues and themes that Eliot had been essaying in his poetry all along. Eliot surely knewn to see how much the poem is not any break from but a continuance of issues and themes that Eliot had been essaying in his poetry all along.
original Italian when its source is brought to have begun to compose La vita nuova in 1293, although there is no precise dating of how long he was engaged in writing it. Such a supposition, however, requires that the layering of this transitional device be given its full due. Many contemporary followers of Eliot's poetry had
regarded him as a forceful voice of dissidence in his critiquing of the cultural and social status guo of the postwar world. Therefore, it can be demonstrated that the literary historical analysis implicit in part IV, the reflections on the distractions of the modern world addressed in Part V, and the personal submission to God's will and the mercies of
Christ of Part VI each forms a part of the speaker's needs for achieving a satisfactory spiritual resolution. They, too, come under a withering scrutiny, for once the world and all its empty promises is seen for the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world and life do go on. BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS A Majority of the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world and life do go on. BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS A Majority of the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world and life do go on. BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS A Majority of the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world and all its empty promises is seen for the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world and all its empty promises is seen for the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world and all its empty promises is seen for the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world and all its empty promises is seen for the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world and all its empty promises is seen for the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although that world any seen for the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real, although the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real and all its empty promises and all its empty promises any seen again as anything real and all its empty promises and all its empty promises are shaded to the sham that it is, it can never be seen again as anything real and all its empty promises and all its empty promises any seen again as anything real and all its empty promises and all its em
of Allusions In the first case, "Salutation," Eliot appears to be alluding to Dante Alighieri's La vita nuova, a poem in which he celebrates both the beginning of his love for Beatrice and, with his love for Beatrice and, with his love for Beatrice and, with his love for her, the introduction of the great theme of love into his poetry as well. He describes it as one wherein "every word is at home" and there is "[a]n easy
commerce of the old and the new," with common words that are exact but not vulgar, formal language that is "precise but not pedantic," to the end that the "complete consort danc[es] together." Students of Eliot know that this is a description of the style that he had been utilizing all along in composing the poetry of the four long poems that had
become, finally, the Four Quartets. Like the voices of older poetry and a more vital belief in belief, such an ancient tree can offer a thousand whispers as the wind rustles its leaves, but to be able to hear those whispers is not in and of itself sufficient. In one of his hands, Love holds a burning object, which he says is Dante's heart, and then feeds it to
the lady. They were far closer in their capacity for vision, if not in time as well, to a belief system and culture that supported and encouraged a poetry of faith in the supernal, whereby the use of metaphor to reach beyond the mere mundane without abandoning its accountrements was recognized as a proper domain for poetry, perhaps even its only
proper domain. That poetry is still more than a decade away, however, and in 1930 and "Ash-Wednesday," the speaker calls up words and images that do not look forward but hark back instead to the critical turning point in The Waste Land, "Death by Water," where the drowned Phoenician sailor, Phlebas, "[f]orgot. There the heretics, those who
denied the immortality of the soul, are being punished. Alfred Prufrock" to "The Hollow Men," but represents the coming together as well of his experimentation with simplification. Often poets can express themselves. Indeed, because of
the kind of double-think and double-speak that Eliot had exercised in his earliest poetry and had been exercising thus far in "Ash-Wednesday," he is able, in part VI, to do the unspeakable. Even to begin to approach a satisfactory answer to that question, it would be wise to begin by taking to heart that signal from Eliot himself regarding the distinction
between the personal and the poetical whereby "truth" and "fiction" often meet and change places, first in that crucible that is the poem. Throughout the poem, Eliot has been employing a technique that seems to run the risk of erasing the
boundary between poetry and belief, whereas his is really a poem about the poetry of belief. Thus, echoing both Christ's rebuke and the phrase with which Dante reputedly began a public letter to his fellow Florentines following his exile, the speaker seems to take the brunt of the failure on himself, but leaves open the possibility that the failure of a
poetry that is capable of finding the means of expressing belief must ultimately be a failure of the culture itself: "O my people, what have I done to you." It is a double-edged question: What have I done to you." It is a double-edged question that have I done to you." They have, he explains elsewhere in his "Dante" essay, the capacity only to dream what he calls the low dream. Resisting those temptations
however, the soul can run the risk of denying the fact that creation is a spiritual gift of God as well, a place in which the soul can come to know God through his creation. She is naked, although her body is covered lightly with a crimson cloth. As a result, Dante's fellow and doomed poet Guido Cavalcanti does not appear in Dante's Divine Comedy. He
contrasts that with what he calls the "'pageantry' of the high dream of which poets and readers to at least the time of Dante were capable. Although Dante wrote his masterpiece nearly 20 years after his own 35th year.
the Garden / Where all loves end." In "Sweeney Agonistes," Sweeney could neither imagine nor promise any earthly paradise where he and Doris could be in love and at peace "under the bamboo tree." The hollow men, too, could see the "multifoliate rose" only as a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their hollow valley, "the broken jaw of their lost kingdoms," is a distant star from the pit of their lost kingdoms, and the pit of 
harking back to an image of bones again. The common element binding all the historical and literary details in the opening lines of "Ash-Wednesday" is the restless spirit of factitiousness and competition, ambition and envy, and the poet seems to ask the eternal question of a mortal humanity: Where is there an end to it, and when, the ceaseless spirit of factitiousness and competition, ambition and envy, and the poet seems to ask the eternal question of a mortal humanity: Where is there an end to it, and when, the ceaseless spirit of factitiousness and competition, ambition and envy, and the poet seems to ask the eternal question of a mortal humanity: Where is there are end to it, and when, the ceaseless spirit of factitiousness and competition, ambition and envy, and the poet seems to ask the eternal question of a mortal humanity.
wailing of the disconsolate chimera? are somehow dramatizing, in no obvious form, an action or struggle for harmony in the soul of the poet." Imagining that the speaker of "Ash-Wednesday" is no more the poet than Prufrock or the hollow men were and is instead a characterization invented by Eliot for the sake of giving the poetry purpose and
direction, then it would seem that the operative words there in Eliot's observation are "in no obvious form." Eliot had always been the dramatic, or at least dramatizing, poet. Readers have long been used to hearing poets lament a lost love or bare the innermost parts of themselves in their longing for beauty or human brotherhood or liberty or
countless other common enough themes, but let a poet speak about events or feelings that give even a hint of the religious, as opposed to the spiritual, that is to say, and the level of both intellectual tolerance among readers drops dramatically. Eliot: Moments and Patterns. To keep the peace, Dante was ultimately forced to
exile Cavalcanti. To do so, however, Eliot had to realize that, even for the poet, the task is to set one's own house in order—to see the beam in his own eye, as it were—if he ever hopes to come to peace with himself and achieve a meaningful way to address the same doubts and struggles with faith that may well be afflicting everyone else. Still faring
forward, the speaker comes to the second turn, where the prospect is now, if possible, worse than the prospect of vacillation that had just assaulted him. The Religious Observance In the Christian religious calendar, Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, the 40 days of fast and abstinence preceding Easter. To this plea the speaker appends the
response of the faithful, "And let my cry come unto Thee." On that note, "Ash-Wednesday," itself a cry, a plea, a critique, and a lament, comes to an end. The idea is that death of self is alone not itself the sufficient action. Their song is not Ezekiel's, however, for Eliot's speaker is the child of a new dispensation. Self-conscious modernist that he is
Eliot's speaker has till now felt more obliged to establish his literary credentials than to present the drama of his quest for redemption in poetic form. The silent sister cannot speak because people of Eliot's time cannot "hear" her. What have I done to deserve your reproach? He cautions, however, that it is a "mixture according to a recipe not
available to the modern mind," which he then defines as the minds of readers capable only of reading "confessions." That is because ours is an age that thinks in terms of "facts as they are" and of "personalities," he written of both
— primarily of experience with its greatest possible significance.) All that the speaker can ask by this point is some blessing on his own vision, that it may not prove to be wrong: "Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood"—the greatest danger being to accept what Eliot will call in After Strange Gods "attractive half-truths." Those need not be
only doctrinal matters. The line reads: "Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina [Then he hid himself in the fire that cleanses them]," and with this line Dante ends canto 26. FURTHER READING Hinchliffe, Arnold P. SYNOPSIS Part I The famous opening four lines of part I of "Ash- Wednesday," in keeping with the poem's theme of representing in poetic
terms the human yearning for union with a love that is divine, combines two celebrated love poems by two celebrated love poems by two celebrated love poets, as well as, by association, a third. The reception of ashes is also a way, however, for them to signal their recognition, through their faith in Christ, that the world and all its worth, including the flesh, is but dross, ash, in
comparison to the glory of God and of the individual soul's eternal place with him in paradise. It is a request that is rather bluntly stated: "Redeem the time." If Eliot's speaker has already declared himself unworthy, it is not of salvation (that would be a presumptuous usurpation of God's judgment) but, as a modern man, of the sort of vision Dante had
been capable of having in an earlier age and time. This effort toward a measured simplicity and directness is in keeping with and may have inspired the turn toward a more clearly pronounced thematic intent as well.; but important in themselves; and therefore they seemed to him to have some philosophical and impersonal value." The astute reader
may quickly observe that this premise could be applied to a poet like Eliot himself as well, at least if the position on impersonality in poetry that he had staked out some 10 years before in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was more than one to which he was simply paying critical lip service. "The infirm glory of the positive hour" is no less
a pain to be reckoned with than the pains of shame or guilt. More, it is by that very awakening to a selfless devotion to another that the soul is prepared for its own awakening to a selfless love for God. In a later (1932) essay on the 17th-century English playwright John Ford, Eliot is heard to observe that "a dramatic poet
cannot create characters of the greatest intensity of life unless his personages. The notion of "desiring this man's art" suggests an artist who recognizes a superior talent in the other. Temptations that call the individual soul to sins of the flesh are as relatively easy to overcome as they are poetically to depict, after all, compared with temptations that
ask of the soul nothing more than that it pay the world its due through the individual's nurturing a love of created things. To reiterate, Eliot's speaker has no Beatrice of his own, only the abstract lady (although Eliot did dedicate the poem to Vivien, his first wife, from whom he was by then virtually estranged). Eliot and Dante. He has no desire to turn
back to whatever he had to this time been, and he says quite clearly and boldly, "I no longer strive to strive toward motion into purgation and renewal, for there is no end to it, not as long as one is alive. As Part II ends, the idea is further
expressed that, if nothing else, "[w]e have our inheritance," a vast part of which, surely, is the continuing poetry of that love whose history has been recorded by Ezekiel, by Dante, by St. John of the Cross, and now by Eliot. On Ash Wednesday, Catholic Christians, for example, receive ashes in the sign of the cross on their forehead as a reminder of that love whose history has been recorded by Ezekiel, by Dante, by St. John of the Cross, and now by Eliot. On Ash Wednesday, Catholic Christians, for example, receive ashes in the sign of the cross on their forehead as a reminder of that love whose history has been recorded by Ezekiel, by Dante, by St. John of the Cross, and now by Eliot. On Ash Wednesday, Catholic Christians, for example, receive ashes in the sign of the cross on their forehead as a reminder of the cross of th
repentance and penitence that will be required of them as they prepare to celebrate the spiritual fullness of Christ's coming resurrection from that prayer to end this part of "Ash-Wednesday" for that reason alone, but the words also connote what Eliot sees as the modern
world's exile from the ancient rhyme and high dream that a poet of Dante's time could both know and convey so well. The turning is into a poem, and a poetry, that is, rather than a lament for the failure of vision, an expression of acceptance and communion with what vision there is that is available not just to the poet but to any mere mortal. Eliot's
speaker, having survived the purgatorial passage that has brought him to this shore and having transcended the allure of "[t]he empty forms between the ivory gates," which are, in Greek mythology, the gates through which false dreams come, is ready to stand in the "tension between dying and birth." There dreams cross, seeking to know the dream
next few stanzas, images from earlier moments in the sequence—the lilac, the window, the rock, the yew-tree, the garden—are intermingled with yet more sea imagery and the movement of sails, the flight of birds, all of it calling more and more to mind not only Phlebas but the seashore and sailing imagery near the conclusion of The Waste Land's
fifth part, "What the Thunder Said." (They also call to mind "Marina," another, more recent poem of Eliot's dealing with one who was lost but now is found.) In The Waste Land, however, the spirituality was couched in the terms of an Eastern religious tradition, the Upanishads, whereas here the tradition in which the spiritual quest is rendered is
wholly Christian and by and large Catholic in nature, in keeping, possibly, with the poet's own reversion to his own orthodox roots in the years during which he was composing the various parts of "Ash-Wednesday" as apparently separate poems. Her back is turned to him, and she is not yet in Mary's colors (that will come in part IV), but in the light
that she brings, as if into a painting from the Renaissance whose own brilliance poetic visions like Dante's had ushered in, the previous darkness and threats of defeat are dispelled. In this cultural context, the "veiled sister" becomes a trope for all that is mysterious and thus draws humanity out of the mere mundane with the tedium of its attractions,
distractions, and demands. That salvation need not be eternal (although, again, Eliot's private interest may at this time seem to have taken a decided turn in that direction) as long as it be, at the very least, salutary to the spirit. This is the celebrated "salutary to the spirit. This is the celebrated urn in that direction as long as it be, at the very least, salutary to the spirit. This is the celebrated "salutation" to which Eliot apparently is making reference. Either way, it is as if the poet has violated
some unspoken rule of what topics and approaches constitute proper modes for poetic discourse. If Eliot's last previous major poem, "The Hollow Men," ended with a refrain taken from the Lord's Prayer, the prayer to God admitting that his, not the world's, is the kingdom and the power and the glory, then it is a significant indication of how humbled
the speaker of "Ash-Wednesday" is in comparison that his prayer is from the Hail Mary, the prayer addressed to the Virgin Mary as the human mediator and advocate between Eliot's and the poetry of belief of the past may be that he, through his speaker, feels compelled to
analyze the problem of writing about believing rather than facing head-on the larger problem of writing belief itself. " of part I has become, by part VI, "Although I do not hope to turn. Unger, Leonard. When it was first published separately in 1929, part III was entitled just that: "Al som de l'escalina." The phrase comes from remarks made to Dante
in canto 26 of the Purgatorio by the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel, the greatest of the French troubadours, who were Dante's precursors in the poetry of courtly love. "Let my cry come unto Thee" is a plea, not a poetic resolution. In the first, the initiate quite literally awakens to the perilous state of his soul or the sorry state of his life, which is pretty
much the same thing. There is a subtext to Dante's querulous relationship with Guido that is carried on by implication into the second of the literary allusions with which Eliot opens "Ash-Wednesday." That one is virtually a direct quote from William Shakespeare's Sonnet 29: "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." This may seem to be a
rather circuitous route for Eliot in a poem that is supposed to convey a directness of treatment, to go from an early 14th-century Italian poet to make an elliptical point. Thanks to the labor of producing "Ash-Wednesday," he developed a poetic tool, sharp and pliant
and capable of accomplishing this more formidable task as before him loomed the disastrous economic, political, and military conflagrations of the tone, the speaker vacates his ties to the world with a methodical precision mirroring his
determination to yield everything ultimately for the paradoxical sake of everything—the world for eternity. That said, something of Eliot's plans for the larger work that may then have been taking shape can be seen in the fact that the other two sections of the poem that were also published as separate pieces, "Perch'io non spero" (Part I) and "Al something of Eliot's plans for the larger work that may then have been taking shape can be seen in the fact that the other two sections of the poem that were also published as separate pieces, "Perch'io non spero" (Part I) and "Al something of Eliot's plans for the larger work that may then have been taking shape can be seen in the fact that the other two sections of the poem that were also published as separate pieces, "Perch'io non spero" (Part I) and "Al something of Eliot's plans for the larger work that may then have been taking shape can be seen in the fact that the other two sections of the poem that were also published as separate pieces, "Perch'io non spero" (Part I) and "Al something of Eliot's plans for the larger work that may then have been taking shape can be seen in the fact that the other two sections of the poem that were also published as separate pieces, "Perch'io non spero" (Part I) and "Al something of Eliot's plans for the poem that were also published as separate pieces, "Perch'io non spero" (Part I) and "Perch'
de l'escalina" (Part III), hark back to two other troubadour poets, Guido Cavalcanti and Arnaut Daniel, both of whom are also closely connected with Dante. Several commentators have also identified in the poem's stress on exercising severe self-abnegation to achieve spiritual salvation the influences of the 16th-century Spanish Christian mystic St.
John of the Cross, whose program of fleshy austerity had already played a significant role in Eliot's epigraph to "Sweeney Agonistes." John's particular emphasis, in his Dark Night of the Soul, on a complete emptying of self through a denial of personal will and a renunciation of worldly pleasures for the sake of receiving God into one's soul may play a
role in the excessive purgative processes that the poetry of "Ash-Wednesday" proposes, particularly in Part II, in which the speaker is reduced to bones. The Commedia is not a treatise on the difficulties of writing religious poetry; it is a poem on the difficulties attendant upon seeking personal salvation. In "The Hollow Men," however, Eliot had played
itself split into two rival factions of its own, the Blacks and the Whites, to the latter of which both Dante and Guido belonged. That harmony of soul, or balance, is what all great art and artists seek to achieve and to exemplify. Theirs was an age nearer to heaven because it was more in tune with the imaginative necessity of such an idea. So virtually
inextricably are these strands of thought and feeling, allusion and memory, hopefulness and despair, that constitute the individual existence intertwined in the poem, in fact, that to try to isolate any one of those elements from a consideration of the speaker's state of mind and spirit leaves the poetry flat and, at times, almost pointless, little more than
a series of rhythmic musings that seem to go nowhere. The poetry points instead in one direction, and that is toward completion and resolution. Upon Guinizzelli's calling Dante's attention to him, the figure in the purgatorial flames freely identifies himself as Arnaut. Dante was a poet, after all, and the testimony in La vita nuova of his love for Beatrice
may be controlled more by the conventions of the literary tradition in which Dante was writing than by biographical fact. Regarded in that manner, "Ash-Wednesday" is a resounding success, though one that the reader cannot easily share in, since it requires an aesthetics of failure to achieve its aim. Here, all are exiled from being in the perpetual
presence of the Word, none more than another. Those are vast distinctions, nevertheless, and in parts IV and V, the two parts of the poem that were not published until the poem was released as a completed piece, the poem that were not published until the poem was released as a completed piece, the poem that were not published until the poem was released as a completed piece, the poem was released as a completed piece, the poem that were not published until the poem was released as a completed piece, the poem was released as a completed piece.
experience on which the entire poem has been constructed. The strange, almost ritualistic action of "Ash-Wednesday," as much as its religiosity may seem to point obviously toward events in Eliot's own life, far more likely only dramatizes, for the sake of universalizing, not the process of Eliot's personal conversion experience but the results of its
effects upon his poetic outlook. Such works virtually always entail three stages of dramatic development, or, in the case of mystics such as John of the purgative, and the unitive. Virgil did. What may sound like paradox or circular
reasoning or even nonsense makes perfect sense in the double meaning of "this our exile" that the closing of part IV has just established. S. Resigned to the fact that he can manage only his own case in resigned self-abnequation. So, instead, the centurion
tells Jesus: "Lord, I am unworthy that you should come under my roof. The contemporary speaker seems to be all too painfully conscious, as the poem continues, that his is a lesser age than most, not for a lack of religiosity necessarily but for a lack of sufficient clarity and vision with which to experiences of his time. I too much
discuss," that the judgment may "not be too heavy," that he may learn "to care and not to care," to "sit still." That is the most difficult of spiritual tasks: to relinquish even the passion for salvation, since it is impatience, and impatience and impatience is no less an unwillingness to yield and let be. Rendered appropriately as the mounting of a circular staircase, this
the lady, both emblem of the attraction through the flesh to perfect mother and second Eve in and through whom humanity experienced a second birth. In the original Italian, the line reads, "Perch'io non spero di tornar giammai," and would
translate into English as "Because I do not hope ever to return." There is, of course, a considerable difference between turning, as in the sense of altering direction, and returning, which has to do with coming back to a place one has left. To say that it is an ennobling and pure love is putting it mildly. It is important to reiterate at this juncture,
however, the earlier observation that "Ash-Wednesday" is not prayer, nor is it poetry about the need for prayer or to pray. In keeping with the poetry of the troubadours that celebrated the traditions of courtly love that had originated in Provence, a region of France adjacent to Italy's northwestern borders, in the late 12th century, such poetry
requires that the beloved be worshiped from afar. So, then, echoing Lancelot Andrewes, the 17th-century English clergyman and prose stylist, the speaker acknowledges that the Word is always within the world and, though unspoken and unheard, remains a focus, a presence, a "centre" that the "unstilled world still whirled / About." When the
speaker asks, however, where the word will be found, he knows one thing emphatically and with a certainty that is far more desperate than reassuring, that it will be "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place, where there is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place, where there is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place, where there is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place, where there is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place, where there is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place, where there is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place, where the words is not all the place is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place, where the words is not all the place is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place is not all the place is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place is not all the place is "Inlot [be] here"—not be found, in other words, in his own time and place is not all the place 
—take on a new range of meaning, too. La vita nuova is a series of love lyrics framed by a continuing this man's scope"—take on a new range of meaning, too. La vita nuova is a series of love lyrics framed by a continuing this man's art and that man's art and t
chronological narrative of Dante's various encounters with Beatrice and their effect on his growth as a person who is consumed by a single passion, love. Similar again to The Waste Land and almost like a symphonic musical composition, as "Ash- Wednesday" rolls to a close, the speaker continues to reiterate past themes, particularly from part I with
its plea to "[t]each us to care and not to care." Echoing Dante one last time, this time in the words of Piccarda di Donati from canto V of the Paradiso (suggesting that the speaker abandons falsehood and fixes his mind on a single truth: "Our
peace in His will." The poetry continues to summarize the quest, the spiritual ordeal, that has taken place to this point. For Eliot, a poet like Dante "had experiences which seemed to him of some importance . "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death," he repeats, throwing himself as he does
so, like any and every other sinner, on the mercy of the court of heaven itself. It is precisely Dante's devotion to his lady as the embodiment of otherness and therefore of pure love that links her, in the person of Beatrice, to the Virgin in his Commedia. That lack of clarity of purpose may have very well been Eliot's purpose, however. From the time of
Plato onward, poetry had been recognized as the most unique human endeavor for giving utterance to the soul's great silence. That focus, on the surface, may seem to be a sharp turn toward religious themes, whereas in fact it is a turn toward a faith in a communal rather than a personal foundation to individual
salvation. The interjection of the parenthetical "Bless me father" into the second stanza, with its "dreamcrossed twilight" reminiscent of another intervening poem, "The Hollow Men," calls immediately to mind for a Catholic the formulaic prayer of greeting and submission by which the penitent sinner begins his confession to a priest, which may also
call to mind Arnaut Daniel's farewell greeting to Dante "Ara vos prec" ("Now I pray you"). And so, surrendering the egotistical will, the self-centered vision, he nevertheless can rejoice just in "having to construct something / Upon which is what life still remains to him. This despair, instead, is capable of swallowing him whole and
leaving not a trace. "Ash-Wednesday," in that regard, makes far more sense as the spiritual biography of a carefully designed and delineated speaker, totally unrelated to the "real" T. As the speaker of "Ash-Wednesday," now begins, in part III, his own purgatorial ascent out of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, the reader is asked to be mindful of the
contrast between Arnaut and Dante's condition. It is one of literary history's bitter ironies that Guido's despair proved to be unfounded. T. Those passions were of the lover's spirit, although the greater too must be
the lover's pain caused by his secret beloved's unintended whims and slights. Smith, Grover. (In "Little Gidding," Eliot describes the choice between a worldly and a heavenly desire as one of being "saved from fire by fire.") Since it is a spiral staircase that the speaker seems to be ascending, each turn brings a different vista on a journey that, fraught
with danger though it may be, is nevertheless upward. The significance of this emphasis in the poem on the cult of the Blessed Mother in both Roman Catholicism and the High Church Anglicanism to which Eliot was drawn cannot be overemphasized. In the fifth and final section of Little Gidding, the last part of the Four Quartets (1943)—the last
major poetry he wrote—Eliot speaks of what he apparently regards to be the characteristics of a perfectly balanced poetic style. In quick order of short bursts of poetry, always calling to mind, ultimately, the spirit of desolation
figured in Christ's 40 days in the wilderness), the female figure that is identified as both sister and mother and that has consistently represented the saving grace of an engagement with otherness, and finally the sea, age-old emblem of the rebirth and renewal that the speaker has been seeking, or at least verbally flirting with, throughout the entire
poem. The true turning point comes, however, some nine years later (Dante being always keen to note the numerological coincidences of the timing), when she actually greets him. For all the bitterness of the true turning point comes, however, some nine years later (Dante being always keen to note the numerological coincidences of the timing), when she actually greets him. For all the bitterness of the closing image of a mouth "spitting a withered apple-seed," there is a hint of the garden still remaining, the fruit of the trees remaining on their
branches yet. The distance from the so-called truth that is autobiography to the so-called fiction that is poetry is an immense one once the reader regards the steps that it takes for the one, raw experience, to become the other, polished verse. Eliot is sensitive enough to the lingering freshness of the original implications of Dante's imagery and
language as a means to exemplify the growth of the individual spirit that he reinvigorates that initial spiritual impulse of Dante's in his own poetry in part II of "Ash-Wednesday." In La vita nuova, the speaker, whom the reader has every reason to believe is in fact Dante, tells of how he first saw and fell in love with Beatrice when both he and she were
but nine years old. In every case, however, including Eliot's, the critical and scholarly interest aroused is, as it ought to be, invested in the execution of the work, not the life that inspired it. Dante did. Any sensitive reader can see this process taking place throughout most of parts I and II of "Ash-Wednesday," where the speaker gives his life an
unflinchingly realistic evaluation and finds it wanting. Here there are no faces, only darkness, and beneath him suddenly yawns the pit of a pure, black despair (shades of St. John of the Cross's Dark Night of the Soul). However, it was with "Ash-Wednesday" that this sweet, new style of his had first come perfectly and completely into its own, because
he had finally clarified for himself a focus to his art that had until then eluded him. Thus, as melodramatic as it may seem, knowing Eliot's propensity for the subtlest of insinuation, these opening lines of "Ash-Wednesday" can be seen as the speaker's effort no longer to hide from or run from or excuse away those buried corpses of past sins and secret
betrayals that also haunt the speaker of The Waste Land in part I, "The Burial of the Dead." That "awful daring of a moment's surrender" from "What the Thunder Said" may also come to mind here. Yet, despite this untypical effort on Eliot's part not to cloud his general intentions, the poetry of "Ash-Wednesday" is often more troublesome for readers
than the far more difficult, convoluted, and obscure poetry of The Waste Land, say, because "Ash-Wednesday" seems to demand a reading based on belief, not poetry are both the working out of formal and thematic problems and an expression of the
spirit of belief. "Ash-Wednesday" thus becomes such an intensely compounded poetic, intellectual, and emotional experience that it would be invaluable for any reader to take final stock of the rich variety of options for meaning that the poem seems to be making available. It is a typical Eliot "turning," stealing that key term from his own present
poetic lexicon, to go quickly from the place that one is not to the place that one wants to be, the kind of paradox he played on as, after "Ash-Wednesday," he wrote more and more poetry in a decidedly religious vein, culminating in the great artistic achievement of his own Paradiso, "Little Gidding," in 1942. Eliot explains this more fully in his essay
 "Dante," published in 1929 during the period when he was completing his work on "Ash-Wednesday." In this essay, Eliot comments on how Dante's La vita nuova mixes what Eliot calls biography and allegory. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987. Dante may include an encyclopedic account of the figures and events of his
time, indeed, of much of human history, in his accounting of his own spiritual trial as it is told in the Commedia, but its greatness as a work of art lies in the intensity of the personal and intimate tone he strikes by making himself the focus of his own dramatic struggle, just as he had done in his La vita nuova. If thus far in Eliot's own considerably
abbreviated version of the same conversion process, Dante has been his Virgil, then Eliot's Lady has to be not Beatrice but the stylized lady of the courtly love tradition on whom Dante's adoration of Beatrice but the stylized lady of the courtly love tradition on whom Dante's adoration of Beatrice but the stylized lady of the courtly love tradition on whom Dante's adoration of Beatrice is itself based. So, then, although Eliot's, like any other poet's, biography can provide the reader with a cue, it hardly ever provides even so
much as the trace of a satisfactory clue. For genuine clues into the possible "meaning" of any work of literature, it would be wiser to turn to other cues, such as those that are provided by poetic and other conventions and traditions. Even that self-emptying can run too close a track to self-obsession, and as part I draws to a close, its energies at self-
expression virtually winding down to a murmur (but not the hollow men's whimper at least), he comes to see that he must renounce even the spirit of renunciation, for that will still require engaging the will, which is not openness to God's will but attention to his own. Chicago Press, 1974. As with any Eliot poem, there is the
almost immediate temptation to read it autobiographically. One is then left either like Sweeney, the embittered husk of his former self, or like the hollow men, about whose hope for fulfillment there is no question or doubt, since there will be none. Still speaking of Dante, Eliot concludes that for such a poet, the stuff of both actual or personal
experience and of intellectual and imaginative experience, which he identifies as thought and dream, become modified into a third kind, which is neither: "If you have that sense of intellectual and spiritual realities that Dante had," its "form of expression," as Eliot puts it, "cannot be classed either as 'truth' or 'fiction.' "It is with such an openness to
the range of possible experiences that "Ash-Wednesday" has thus far organized into its poetry that the reader can appreciate the speaker of the Eliot poem when he speaks of "restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme"—that is, a poetry of experience that is both intellectual and spiritual in the range of realities with which it deals. It is an old
solution to what may be a new problem: When a problem cannot be solved, shift the focus. when human beings cared somewhat about the salvation of the 'soul,' but not about each other as 'personalities.' " Dante, Eliot contends, was the product of just such an age, and this accounts for a marked difference in how he combined personal experience,
such as the encounters with Beatrice as he relates them in La vita nuova, with the very stuff of his poetry. In his typical fashion, Eliot provides his readers with literary cultural markers as parts of a clear road map toward his intended meaning, just as many other outstanding features of the eventually published complete work, too, virtually plead with
the reader to accept that finished poem as the true bill of goods that it pretends to be. Arnaut sends Dante on his way with a plea common enough among Catholic Christians, that they should pray for the souls in Purgatory, telling him in his own native Provençal: "Ara vos prec, per aquella valor que vos guida al som d'escalina, sovegna vos a temps de
ma dolor." [Now I pray you, by that valor which quides you to the topmost step, think at times of my own dolor.] Just as Dante's rhyme contrasts his own courage to change himself for the better while he still lives with Arnaut's grief and sorrow for a life ill spent, so too does Arnaut's arrested movement in the fire of his purgation—"Then he hid himself
in the fire that cleanses them"—contrast with Dante's forward movement as he now continues onward up the stairs cut into the purgatorial mountain toward the summit, where both the vista of paradise and his beloved Beatrice await him. Matters of Belief The poetry of "Ash-Wednesday," for all the constraints of its religious overtones, is as open to
interpretation as any other of Eliot's poetry. This process of abandoning the self to the corruptible flesh leaves the Virgin in meditation," the bones might do more than live; they might sing. They provide an appropriate
reference to the pursuits of worldly gain and glory that plaque the spiritual seeker "[i]n this brief transit," an image that puns on both the shortness of a human life and the demands of commerce and other material enterprises. Kenner, Hugh. He writes: I say that when she appeared from any side, out of hope for that wondrous greeting no one
remained my enemy, in fact a flame of charity seized me, which made me pardon anyone who may have offended me, and whoever then may have asked me about anything, my response would have been only, "Love," my features draped in humility. When the one and the other are creative artists, such as fellow poets, a recognition of that kind can
often lead to tragedy. Part II In keeping with this movement toward the feminine and maternal in the speaker's seeking for succor, solace, and surrender—or, in a single thought, peace—the next part of the poem openly addresses her: "Lady." The supposition, based on Eliot's original title for part II, "Salutation," when it was first published as a
separate poem in 1927, is that Eliot is here echoing that passage from Dante's La vita nuova (The New Life) in which he recounts the moment that Beatrice first greeted him. It stands to reason that now that Eliot's speaker has completed him own purgatorial ascent, he should find awaiting him there, as part IV opens, the lady's ultimate manifestation
in the Virgin herself. Attributed to St. Ignatius de Loyola, the 16th-century Spanish priest who founded the Jesuits, these sentiments from this early 14th-century prayer crown the conclusion of The Waste Land. He had been exploring this possibility at least from
the time of "Prufrock," always with an eye toward assessing its shortcomings while nonetheless recommending the cynicism of its benefits at least as a coping mechanism in the impersonal urban landscape that the modern world seemed to be bent on becoming. It is the Virgin Mary, after all, who, with a mother's love for a desperate child, intercedes
on behalf of the lost Dante as the Commedia opens, thus sending Beatrice to Dante's aid, although Beatrice herself first must appeal to Virgil, as embodied reason, to guide Dante during the earliest parts of his journey toward spiritual renewal and rebirth. It is as if Eliot has chosen to define the general problem of belief in the modern world—surely a
worthy theme—by simultaneously commenting on the problem, partly through his literary allusions, while illustrating the problem through his speaker's confusion and consternation with what appear to be his own personal spiritual concerns. Instead, it is poetry about what conditions are most conducive to the human capacity for prayer, and it finds
those conditions lacking in the contemporary scene that the speaker inhabits. Part III ends with the speaker, who till now has been struggling as if in private for the conversion of faith in the power of God to heal his soul: "but speak the word only." Part IV "Ash-
Wednesday," however, is not prayer; it is poetry, though it may be poetry about prayer. In the context of what sounds to be a lyric poem, however, with a single and single-minded speaker, the alternating aims of Eliot's project do not always lend themselves well to a well-defined clarity of purpose. However, there is more of a disciplining of the senses
than a denial of them in Eliot's approach, making the eroticism of Dante's approach to expressing the spiritual in poetry seem to be the more prevalent model. Speak but the word and my servant shall be healed." Jesus found this man's faith in him to be so remarkable that, in Luke's account, he called it to the attention of the multitude gathered
around him. The desert may be in the garden, but there must also be a garden in the desert. In summary, Dante concludes, "[C]hi avesse voluto conoscere Amore, fare lo potea mirando lo tremare de li occhi miei [Who would know Love, could behold it tremble in my eyes]." Despite the liberties that Eliot, for the sake of originality, takes with Dante's
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rendering of the moment when love for others seizes the human soul and re-creates out of its animal nature the divine image that it is capable of assuming, Dante's La vita nuova is clearly there when Eliot's speaker calls upon his own "Lady" to observe as part II of "Ash-Wednesday" opens. The speaker prays to "forget / These matters. The ballatetta is a love poem Cavalcanti wrote to lament that he can never return to the Tuscany where his beloved lives. It has become commonly accepted that faith alone is what is required to achieve salvation, for it is out of faith that all gifts flow. She is most certainly Mary, the most human of portals to the mystery of the Incarnation, but she is also the Lady,

the ideal of love and otherness that frees the spirit from its prison of self, and she to empty his heart of its longing for salvation. If from the time of Plato the Western in the modern world? Sleeping, he had a vision in which a figure, who later turns of individual's little, self-remembered acts of spitefulness and envy, betrayal and dece	n imagination had held poetry in the highest esteem for giving utterance to but to be his master, Love, brings the sleeping Beatrice in his arms to Dante	the otherwise unutterable aspirations of the human spirit in its yearning. For as Eliot himself would soon write in his first completed verse draw	ng for contemplation of and union with the divine, why should this ma, Murder in the Cathedral, the worst sin is to do the right thin	s same esteem and skill seem to be denied the imagination g for the wrong reason. However they be interpreted, each
Hemingwayesque separate peace (although Eliot beat Ernest Hemingway's A Fare That, too, should not prove to be the case, however. But Eliot never misses the mu fanfare or embellishment in the sequence title, "Ash-Wednesday;" the use of lines stone and bone, in "Ash-Wednesday" these bones—the self reduced by love to near poems to begin with as pieces in a larger whole, just as there is no reason to concl	ewell to Arms to that jump by at least seven years), or that, for all the rest of ach more salient point that meaning in poetry is most often layered, even who from devotional prayers and rituals of the Catholic Mass; and the poetry's larly nothing—may rest restored to life "[u]nder a tree in the cool of the day,	f humanity, both "Sweeney Agonistes" and "The Hollow Men" end with nen it is not intended that way. The Invisible Poet: T. In addition to the haunting but no less obscure overtones of, if not outright allusions to, p with the blessing of the sand," and that is better than nothing. As in th	the characters all waiting for what otherwise is the only hope of links to the troubadours, these signposts include the hardly observassages from Scripture and from a major religious poet, Dante. e case of "The Hollow Men," there is no reason to conclude that	such hollow men, death? Nor are past triumphs spared. ure Christian liturgical observance identified without Thus, rather than in "The Hollow Men"'s place of broken Eliot was not conceiving of the three separately published
his worldly attachments, finds his thoughts turning downward toward past mistake yet prove to be the case but is not an entire impossibility. By the same token, Dant itself, where the blessed have gathered about the throne of God centered within the troubadours. But, then, what is the truth? He frees his speaker to achieve the	es and frustrations. Till now, the speaker has been reaching upward toward te finds Beatrice waiting to guide him on the remainder of his journey when ne multifoliate rose. It is a theme that cannot be taken too lightly in the hand	the highest expression of the high dream, the human aspiration toward he reaches the topmost stair at the end of the Purgatorio, and it is thus ds of a poet like Dante, who, for all the unique reputation that he holds	d an understanding of the nature of the divine, of eternity. ," who is by virtue of her guidance, not reason's, that he will be able find as a man of letters now, in his own time would have been seen t	ich expresses at the very least that such an event may not ally to witness, as much as any mortal is capable, paradise o be in the tradition of the school of love poets known as
sentence). (Eliot himself commented, rather sagely, that belief in poetry ought be matter. In the 11th chapter, Dante gives the most adroit expression to the transfor difficulties, offers the attentive reader a plethora of signposts for the poet's intenti part-by-part commentary on the poem has been itself a running critical analysis of	rmation that her greeting exercised on his own animal nature, rendering his ions, making the poem surely something of a first for the self-made moderni the poet's apparent intent. It is a voice that served Eliot even better as he	n, in a word, human. London: Macmillan, 1989. Indeed, as testaments t ist Eliot, who hitherto had seemed to regard obscurity of intention as a went on, throughout the rest of the 1930s, to turn his attention more ar	to its own directness in its attempt at unabashed clarity, the com n obligation. CRITICAL COMMENTARY So much of "Ash-Wedne nd more directly to the theme that had occupied his attention the	pleted poem sequence, "Ash-Wednesday," despite its sday" is self-reflective as poetry that much of the preceding roughout most of his poetical and critical career to this
time:the crisis of order in the modern world. The English romantic poet William W finding he had lost his own moral and spiritual way, he was rescued by the ghost of acceptance, is combined with other considerations—the social, the historical, the comention his publishing outlets as editor of the Criterion and as poetry editor for Fadevil, despite its temptations, that Eliot's poem will proceed, but so, for that matter	of Virgil at the command of God—to lay bare a fairly true record of his own populations, the aesthetic, the public, the private. So, then, the "Because I do not aber & Faber, to publish works in progress easily, without having to think or	personal encounter with the shortcomings of his age. Indeed, if the poe of hope to turn. The duration of each phase need not be equal, but all t f them or introduce them as such, rather than as single, coherent piece	try has revealed anything to this point, it is how intricately the s three are always present and generally in that order. By now, he es, as was the case with The Waste Land. It is in this spirit of self	piritual, with its questions of belief, resignation, and had a sufficient reputation as a major poetic voice, not to abnegation and denial of the world, the flesh, and the
footnote to line 428 of The Waste Land). This is Eliot's way of representing and expression, it is in this manner—turning his own personal spiritual agon, or strugg Talent," that poets do. It is critical for him to resolve each part if he is to achieve the delusions, however: He can prepare himself, but he can make nothing happen. The	pressing the same reductive and yet restorative effect of divine love, which gle, into a richly poetic but nonetheless general commentary on the literaturate completion that the unitive phase requires, but no one of the three zones are cause for that disappointment may be laid at the door of the discomforts of the discomforts of the discomforts of the discomforts of the discomforts.	reduces the person to the least possible remnant of his own being, there and culture of any individual's personal spiritual struggle—that Eliots of interest is capable of being treated in coordination with the other. aused not so much by the religious content and context per se as by en	reby enabling him to find new life. If the poetry of "Ash-Wednesd succeeds in transforming biography into poetry, exactly as he a [not] because they had happened to him and because he, Dante accountering in the poem what appears to be the revelation of an	lay" is in fact founded on Eliot's own recent process of rgues, in the 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Alighieri, was an important person . The speaker suffers no intensely intimate and private spiritual experience. Still,
there are many readers to this day who, finding something companionable in the icclosing plea to Christ that introduces the final two lines: "Suffer me not to be sepa has been heading toward just that consideration, is an important and a valid one: I cheapen and yet cannot bewilder either. New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959. F	conoclastic and despairing cynic of the earliest Eliot, are prepared only to burated" (". The same exception cannot be made for "Ash- Wednesday," howe is it still possible to write a poetry of belief, of the effects of the action of fair for the religious impulse, nurtured or ignored, fostered or rejected, is surely	be let down when the poet takes what seems to be his sudden turn towarder, whose entire focus seems to require the reader to acquire a particulation an individual? These are all far more complicated patterns of discover a far more common, dare we say universal one than romantic love or one of the common.	ard a verse that is centered on longstanding traditions that are rescular religious bias in order to decipher the poetic moment. The occovery and resolution, it should be clear, than sexual desire can dreams of glory and conquest have ever been" Surely, juxtapos	eligious in nature. Then, from the Anima Christi, comes the question "Ash-Wednesday" poses in Part V, as if the poetry ever properly delineate, requiring a poetry that does not sing Guido and Shakespeare's sentiments the way that Eliot
does allows him very quickly to set a tone for "Ash-Wednesday" as a poem of self-a man's gifts and that man's scope." No wonder Eliot's speaker, whatever the implicant devotional nature, ought to be kept out of the bounds of serious creative literateliot felt free to make temptation obvious by casting it in sexual garb; thus he can they should be, with a consideration not of all of the details again but of what the respective properties of the sexual garb.	cations of the intricate web that the opening allusions have spun, does not heature altogether, both of these problems can be solved if one thinks first of the depict the seductiveness of behavior that is both self-serving and self-center.	ope to turn again. Whether the reader is a profound believer who resence the poetry. It is surely earthly love ennobled and purified, as much as is extend in the flawed sexual adventurism of Lil's friend and Albert, or the t	nts the presumptions of the religious poet or is someone who fee s imaginable, into a simulacrum of desire for union with the unat typist and the rental clerk, or the three game Thamesdaughters,	ls that religion, particularly of a highly developed doctrinal tainable, which is the divine. In that earlier work, however, or Sweeney and Mrs. Its final moments are taken up, as
first half is a cleverly altered translation by Eliot of the first line and traditional title every echo of their visions and expression expresses an overarching envy for the p as one's epoch requires and enables, nothing less, nothing more, the profit and the was not a believer in an Eternal Creator, Dante's use of the past tense makes Cava	le of a ballatetta, or short ballad, by the Italian troubadour, and Dante's best poets whom he also seeks to emulate. Part VI Eliot seems always to have loss." It is between those same two extremes of worldliness that "Ash- We	st friend, Guido Cavalcanti. Eliot, who until now had been the great poe e had a talent for doing nothing easily, at least as far as the comfort lev dnesday"'s speaker wavers. The more the poet manages the layering h	et of chaos and of disjunction and the fragmented, is trying to efficient of his readers might be concerned, but he always would argimself, the more those layers of meaning matter. When Dante te	ect a new goal for his poetry, balance. Thus, the speaker's ue that one does things as well as one is able and as much alls him that Guido is not along because he, like his father,
"sweet verses" that will be treasured "as long as modern usage endures." Guinizze mere biography gives order and coherence but not necessarily any factual basis. The music of a flute. If so, the poetry shows him to be capable of forging out of his moderns who stand tepidly always only "at the gate" of understanding, the gate in up the night," that "walks in [a spiritual] darkness / Both in the day time and in the	There is, however, a reward in persevering, for as the speaker arrives at the past technical triumphs, where he combined allusion with original statement to the imagination's ancient and still green garden, aware of the traditions,	first turning of the third stair, clearly a step up, the vista suddenly opent, an effectively new and distinct poetic voice. The modern world recognity but "[w]ho will not go away and cannot pray." The modern world is on	ens on blossoms and a pasture scene vested with a wealth of invi- gnizes but does not know her, not in the same imaginative ways e in which "there is not enough silence," the speaker had earlier	ting colors—blue and green, lilac and brown—and there is that that old world did, so, she will not pray for those reflected, one too, for all the pride it takes in its having "lit
be said for "The Hollow Men," whose poetry is contrived to express what ultimatel reducible in fact to two: "Because I do not hope to turn again. Hearing of his relig "larger than life" quality expected of products of the imagination—that the poet most succeeds by demonstrating that such poetry can no longer succeed. Mangania	ly can be regarded as nothing more than a spiritual paralysis in that poem's gious conversion to the established Church of En gland, in which he had bee makes the successful transformation of such experience into great art so that	collective speakers—but a spiritual paralysis is not a religious crisis. In first baptized and then confirmed in June 1927, these readers had the three three that had apparently inspired the art seldoms.	It can be referred to as a "veiled couplet" because the first four len come to regard him as a turncoat and a lost leader. It is, after seems to measure up to expectations and virtually never provide	ines, two of which are truncated, can easily be seen to be all, by the intensification of personal experience—that is more than the most fundamentally "useful" insight. The
especially if he has any hopes to move past the past and on to whatever vague promisery, too spiritually inept to see, literally, their way out of their hollow valley excertique while exposing nevertheless the speaker's apparently genuine spiritual structurally from the outset two poets for whom exile became both a reality and a poet	mise of redemption the future may hold. Rather this is the world of The Was cept as if from a great distance. Regarded as poetry, "Ash-Wednesday" not or ruggle as it undergoes its own step-by-step development. These echoes back etic theme, Guido Cavalcanti and Dante himself, the theme of humanity's he	ste Land again, the landscape where the best are "hollow men" who ha only expresses a considerable and welcome advance in Eliot's poetic vi- k to both Dante and Shakespeare resonate, enabling Eliot to open "Ash- avenly exile resonates as both a poetic theme and a spiritual reality. Fu	ve some knowledge of what they have lost but no will to find whe sion as it had been shaping itself from the time of "The Love Son-Wednesday" on a theme suitable to the liturgical solemnity of the irthermore, it seems to be the psychology of a self-denying love to the solution.	ere it might yet be, content to moan in their collective ag of J. The poem, it seems, enunciates a stinging cultural ne occasion: guilt. In a poem that has had for its focus that attracts Eliot to this particular aspect of Dante's life
and work at this particular juncture in "Ash-Wednesday." Dante's foremost contrib	oution to the literature of the spirit or inner person was not so much that he	extended the language of romantic love; a number of equally notable I	Provençal poets had already done that before him, most importan	nt among them Arnaut Daniel.

