**The Function of Imagery as Background and Undertone in Divine Comedy**

S.Karthick, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli

T.S.Eliot, a key figure among the moderns had turned to Dante in order to define or consolidate his literary practice can seem paradoxical because one usually associates the modern mind with a literature based exclusively on the experience of modern life without regard for the religious or metaphysical perspective afforded by Dante’s journey to the other world. In his principal writings on “Dante”, Eliot underlines his master’s ability to treat spirituality and philosophy in terms of vision. He says, “Dante, more than any other poet, has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy, not as a theory or as his own comment or reflection, but in terms of something perceived” (195). Thus, Eliot offers here another touchstone of the profundity of Dante’s visual imagination.

Caroline F.E. Spurgeon, an eminent Shakespearean critic defines the term ‘imagery’ as “the word picture used by a poet or a prose writer to illustrate, illuminate and embellish his or her thought… the image thus gives quality, creates atmosphere and conveys emotion in a way no precise description, however clear and accurate can possibly do” (9).Thus, Shakespeare’s plays were read as clusters or patterns of ‘thematic imagery’ according to the predominance of particular kind of ‘ imagery’ without reference to the action or to the dramatic meaning of characters’ speeches (Baldick 107).

She does not just stop with the definition accounting only for the thought-part, that is to say, the rational and logical content of imagery only, but goes further to explicate the spiritual ingredient of imagery as:

It (images) stirs us because; it touches or awakens something in us, which we must call spiritual, at the very roots of our being. For as the poet well knows, as does also the seer and prophet, it is only by means of these hidden analogies that the greatest truths, otherwise in expressible can be given a form or shape capable of being grasped by the human mind… sensuous perception and spiritual intuition are both necessary to the great poetry and also to the fact that his or her constant accumulation of vivid sense-perceptions supplies the most potent means by which he articulates his spiritual intuitions (Spurgeon 7-8).

Nevertheless for contemporary cognitive psychologists, imagery is not simply an interesting kind of phenomenal experience. It also provides a form of mental representation in which the information about the appearance of physical objects, events and scenes can be depicted and manipulated (Richardson 3).

Therefore, the following gleaned study of ‘floating’ or ‘recurring’ imagery in Dante’s *Divine* *Comedy*, confines itself to its functioning as background and reinforcement of the spiritual theme of the poem, discounting the psychological nature of the poet. Besides, the discerning study is limited to canticles *Inferno* and *Paradise* alone, as both have frequent iterative imagery.

The areas of Hell beginning at the top are the Dark wood where three beasts, Lion, She-wolf, and the Leopard, are encountered by the pilgrim Dante. The atmosphere is noisy and dramatic in the black realm of despair, darkness, degradation, disorder and fire and ice, where the sinners’ punishment is eternal. There is a series of lower animals and vile bird imagery that pervades or replete throughout the text from the very first canto of *Inferno*. The array of creatures include right from the ‘Evil’ worm, mosquitoes, snails, frogs, lizards, mouse to pigs, hounds, boars, bat, hawks, eagle, dragon etc. There are as many as fifteen instances where dogs and serpents alone are mentioned in the canticle along with other wild animals and birds of prey, quite often to reinforce the theme that humanity has degraded itself to the status of beasts and further it has decayed to the hideousness of monstrosity depicted in the images such as Minos with a long tail that has the stings of a scorpion , Charon whose eyes were like burning coal, Cerberus with its beasty meal, the Minotaur, Centaurs with bow and arrows and Harpies , Geryon and Medusa. Dante’s artistry in the *Inferno* reflects the classical, mythological and Biblical traditions which he uses as the canvas for his magnum opus.

One of the distinctive features of the *Divine* *Comedy* is the frequent use of extended similes, some occupying four or more tercets. Dante’s narrative is generally rapid and concise compared with that of later epics in high style like that of Milton and his extended similes, like their classical models, are elements in the narrative that slow it down. They also tend to have a strongly visual and realistic character, representing the unfamiliar events and figures of the afterlife in terms familiar to the readers. To give the overall effect of epic dignity with emotive dimension, which add to the complexity of feeling evoked by a particular episode. For example, when Virgil breaks off a branch from the barren tree in which the soul of the suicide Pier della Vigna is incorporated , the stump is said to leak blood and words, in the same way a green twig put on a fire hisses at one end and spurts vapour at the other, as in canto 13 of *Inferno*:

As from a sapling log that catches fire/along one of its ends, while at the other/it drips and hisses with escaping vapour/ so from that broken stump issued together/both words and blood; at which I let the branch/fall, and I stood like one who is afraid.(ll 40-46).

It is a remarkable pictorial image but also one that expresses the horror of the barren vegetable state to which the soul has been reduced or has reduced itself.

Images like these are quickly grasped and are particularly frequent in *Inferno*.

In later parts of the book pictorial images can be much more complex and quite often demand considerable effort and knowledge on the part of the reader. Even *Inferno* can deploy names or episodes from the Bible and ancient poetry and history in its similes, in a periphrastic and allusive way. When Dante and Virgil look down to see Ulysses and other false counsellors enveloped in tongues of flame below them, Dante draws an evocative and slightly mysterious comparison with fireflies watched by a peasant from a hillside during harvest. The flames are then immediately compared in a second simile to the flame that “Even as he who was avenged by bears/saw, as it left, Elijah's chariot…/by watching one lone flame in its ascent/just like a little cloud that climbs on high” (ll 34-39) in *Inferno* canto 26. One has to know here biblical prophets well enough to identify the first figure as Elisha, and even then one may wonder about the exact significance of the image, beyond increasing the suspense, giving certain grandeur to the writing, and possibly suggesting the Dante’s own ascent to Paradise. Along with this kind of similes, periphrasis, personification, repetition, apostrophes, and rhetorical questions are among the many poetic figures that Dante derived from ancient literature and to some extent from the medieval Latin tradition, and used systematically to raise his language to a level comparable in its own way to that of the classical high style suitable for an epic.

The device most extensively by Dante, the most flexible and distinctive, is metaphor. Unlike the extended similes, ornate extended metaphors are rare. They tend to be concrete and brief sometimes consisting in one word only. Many of them take the form of verbs, and have a characteristic tendency to express abstract, casual or circumstantial connections in terms of direct physical action as in *Inferno* canto 29 “different laments arrowed [through] me” (ll 43)or as for instance in canto 5 famously when Francesca says literally “several times that reading pushed our eyes together/ and paled our faces” (ll 130-1). These kinds of metaphors can be given a striking prominence by their position at the end of the line in rhyme, with effects which it is impossible to reproduce in translation. The following is a particularly strong example; it describes the purification in Purgatory canto 18 of the slothful, who make up for their former lazy lives by chasing at top speed around the mountain: “such [a throng] scythed its way around that circle, /as I could see when it came, /of those whom right will and just love ride” (ll 94-96). The words ‘scythed and ‘ride’ give characteristically vigorous and physical expression to the passionate desire that drives the souls. In such metaphors there is a disproportion, by the standards of normal parlance, between the metaphorical vehicle and its tenor or meaning. The effect is to heighten as well as elevate Dante’s realism, emphasising not just the visual aspect of things, but giving force to both inner and outer experience.

As various complexities that arise in the book *Purgatory,* due to metaphors placed at end rhyme, it is dealt tangentially with a lighter vein in this paper.

The visual representation of theme of bliss in paradise is the most striking one. The souls in paradise are not recognisable until Dante reaches ‘heavenly Rose’. Concrete realism gives way to imagery of light, movement, and music, through which the souls express the bliss they all share. As Dante and Beatrice move up through the heavenly spheres, they are surrounded by light as they pause in the heavenly body to which each sphere belongs. But the brightness of the souls that they see, like that of Beatrice’s smile, is greater than that of the planets and stars, and increase as the soul’s bliss increases from one sphere to the next one. Their bliss derive from their contemplation of the divine light in the Empyrean, described by Beatrice as the means by which God makes himself visible to human souls and the angels, and in their turn they emanate light in proportion to the clarity and depth of their vision of God and the love and joy that this give rise in canto 30 of *Paradiso* as “Above, on high, there is a light that makes/ apparent the Creator to the creature/ whose only peace lies in his seeing Him… vast light, then what must be the measure of/ this Rose where it has reached its highest leaves! (ll 100-117). The complex brilliance of these representations of lights and their effects on Dante tend to make us forget that it is all ultimately metaphorical. As Beatrice points out the light of Paradise, it is “intellectual light, full of love” (ll 40), something one can grasp only with their mind.

The souls appear to Dante in different formations as the journey through the spheres progresses. The small group in the Moon is replaced by a larger gathering in Mercury, where they gather not in a disorderly fashion but like a school of fish gathering in an orderly way when some food is dropped in the pond or lake and in Venus by souls moving in circles at varying speeds according to the degree of their bliss. In sphere of the sun they dance in circles around Dante and Beatrice, while in Mars they form a cross, and in Jupiter they assume the shape of an Eagle, speaking through its beak with a single voice. In Saturn they appear as lights moving up and down a golden staircase stretching up to the higher reaches of heaven. Souls express their bliss by singing in heavenly harmony, and by spinning or dancing. Above all they laugh and smile as the overpoweringly beautiful expression of their intense spiritual bliss. At the beginning of canto 27, it becomes universal, when the apostles and saints singing together seemed to Dante: “the sweetness of the singing held me rapt/ What I saw seemed to me to be a smile/the universe had smiled; my rapture had/ entered by way of hearing and of sight” (ll 4-7). Therefore, the entire paradise is delineated through the recurring imagery drawn from different symmetrical patterns of gathering of the heavenly host of the blessed people with their humane laughter, various light effects, harmonious music and songs contrasted to pitch darkness, horrible sounds and accents of anger in the *Inferno*.

Indeed the language of *Paradiso* is more metaphorical, and makes more conspicuous use of other figurative turns of expressions in the sense that concrete images often mixing with abstractions in a more subtle way as in the case of the saint who introduces himself as “I am the life of Bonaventure” (ll 127) designating himself as his life rather than his soul in canto 12 of *Paradiso*.

The blessed are jewels, splendours, radiances, fires or flames or torches, raptures, loves, flowers or lilies or roses. In groups they are garlands, crowns, lyres, dances and apostles and saints are the ‘beautiful garden that flowers under the rays of Christ’ (ll71-2).The most important extended metaphors is that of the rose, deployed to represent the concourse of the blessed contemplating God. For example in canto 30, where under Beatrice’s guidance Dante enters ‘in the yellow of the sempiternal rose/ that descends and spreads and is redolent/ with the perfume of praise in the sun of perpetual spring time’ (ll 124-26). There is an innovative Latinism in the words like ‘sempiternal’ and ‘redolent’ and an excess of sound effects by the alliterative words in the third line of the tercet like ‘perfume’, ‘praise’, ‘perpetual’ to complement it along with metaphorical representation of ‘springtime’ that seems to delight in itself also matches the strange sublimity of the beautiful vision it describes.

Some images, especially the similes, make severe demands on the intellect and imagination, as when, twenty four lines from the start of canto 13. The reader is expected to picture a non-existent combination of constellations in order to visualise the concentric dance of two circles of souls in the Sun. The music of the circle of souls around Dante in canto 10 that depicts the Heaven of Sun is like a chiming clock telling the faithful that it is time for dawn prayers: “Then, like a clock that calls us at the hour/when the bride of God gets up to sing…/ chiming its ting-ting with notes so sweet/that the willing spirit swells with love…/except where joy becomes eternal” (ll 139-148).Beatrice waiting for the appearance of Christ in the sphere of the Stars , is like a bird waiting for the sun in the opening ten lines of canto 23.In canto 27 she pales, hearing St.Peter’s diatribe against the contemporary Papacy, like a virtuous woman who hears about the failings of others, not her own. There is an intense lyricism in such images. In canto 25 Beatrice watches like a silent bride, as St. John joins St.Peter and St.James like a ‘a happy maiden rises and comes forward’ (l 103) and joins the dance in order to honour the bride , not herself . The triumph of Christ in canto 23 is compared to the moon appearing surrounded by stars, i.e. “the eternal nymphs who paint Heaven in all its recesses” (ll 26-27). Thus, just as the state of damned souls in Hell is an image of the animal world and monstrosity, so is the blissful harmony of the souls dwelling in Heavenly light.

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