Dante and Williams: Pilgrims in Purgatory

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Abstract
Analyzes All Hallows' Eve in terms of the symbolism and structure of Dante's Il Purgatorio. Asserts the importance of the purgatorial aspect, which not all critics recognize.

Additional Keywords
Dante. Purgatory—Influence on Charles Williams; Williams, Charles. All Hallows’ Eve—Relation to Purgatory; Sarah Beach
Any novel that begins with two dead women walking arm in arm through the streets of London and ends with a veritable autumnal Walpurgisnacht is bound to have difficulties in interpretation; just such a novel with just such a difficulty is All Hallows' Eve by Charles Williams. Begun in 1943, the novel has the London blitz as a background. But the battle here is not between England and Germany; it is the battle of love and hate, of freedom and of slavery, of principalities and of powers. Ultimately it is the battle of life and death on an eternal scale.

But identifying the conflicts does not solve the problem of interpretation. Several critics have alluded to the puratorial aspects of the novel without extending the insight to cover the entire work. Thus, for example, Thomas Howard writes of Richard, Lester's living husband, "entering his own purgatory, so to speak; but it is not purgatory experienced as pain and labor and horror. Far from it." [1] Howard also sees that end of the novel is bathed in Dante's imagery. "Williams," he writes, "is borrowing unabashedly from Dante's blinding imagery of Paradiso." (Howard, p.180)

And, while not writing criticism, Humphrey Carpenter, the biographer of the Inklings, of whom Williams was one, wrote: "The novel was not precisely about heaven, but if it was not Paradiso, All Hallows' Eve (as he named it) proved to be Williams' triumphant Purgatorio." [2] The invitation is there; examine All Hallows' Eve in the light of Dante's work, especially the Purgatorio. Thus the intent of this paper is to compare Williams' last novel and Dante's section of his Divine Comedy to see if some light can be shed on a perplexing novel and to show that the medieval allegory and the modern novel can be yoked together without doing violence to either. Such a juxtaposition can almost be predicted of Williams since he was one of the foremost Dante scholars of his day. In fact, his study of Dante, The Figure of Beatrice, is still considered one of the most interesting interpretations of The Divine Comedy in English. So for Williams to have incorporated Dante's images, figures, and themes into his own works not only understandable, it is inevitable.

Further, Williams desired that his novels be read in the light of his other books, especially in the light of his theology. He wrote in Descent of the Dove, the History of the Holy Spirit in the Church:

I may perhaps be permitted to add that the themes of this book are also discussed, from different points of view, in other books of mind — in Descent into Hell. He came down from Heaven, and Taliessin through Logres. The first is fiction; the second is not; and the third is poetry — whether that is or is not fiction." [3]

In this history, Williams gives a rather singular interpretation, not only of the role of the Holy Spirit in time, but also of the simultaneous existence of all creation (an important theme in All Hallows' Eve) as well as the theology of substitution, as he called it, which means that one not only can but must carry another's burdens. Indeed, Williams said that no one can carry his own burdens, only another's. This point too becomes important in the novel.

Both Dante and Williams shared a common, highly orthodox belief in the tenets of Christianity. The Trinity, the Incarnation, grace, heaven, hell, purgatory — all are beliefs they considered basic and elemental. Paradise is for those who have died and have reached their reward of blessedness; they enjoy full participation in the sight of the "White Rose," which is Dante's image of Godhead. Both the meaning and the color are important in All Hallows' Eve because it is
through the presence of the rose light and scent that we know of grace operating on the characters. Hell, of course, is for sinners who have died unrepentant. For Dante (as for orthodox Christianity itself) hell is a choice deliberately made and a place of eternal punishment. Purgatory, however, needs greater explanation.

There are those who, having died, must be placed somewhere other than heaven or hell; they have not been good enough to enter heaven immediately, nor have they been evil enough to deserve hell. They still have some stain of sin which must be removed before they can enter heaven, although heaven is their ultimate destination. Therefore they enter a realm of temporal punishment for as long as it takes for them to be purged of their desire to hold on to their sin. Dante, of course, writes with broad strokes and allows each character in his Commedia only one main sin which is being punished. Dramatically, this keeps a very clear connection between the crime and its punishment.

Dante adds another area, a very strange one, which he calls Ante-Purgatory. This is realm of the excommunicated who have repented at the last moment of their lives, of the preoccupied, of the unshriven but sorrowful, and of the indolent. These souls must come to Peter's Gate through confession, contrition, and satisfaction before they can enter purgatory proper and ascend to heaven. It is not hell, although it has similarities to hell. The souls in hell are without hope: "Abandon all hope, you who enter here." Although Ante-Purgatory is not hopeless, it is not active purgation either. It is allegorically in this strange area that the action of All Hallows' Eve takes place.

Since the contention of this paper is that the Purgatorio acts as a paradigm for All Hallows' Eve, three particularly telling scenes from the allegory and from the novel have been selected to illustrate the relationship. The first concerns the waters that Dante and Lester must encounter in their journeys. The second is the moment when Dante and Lester must make an act of repentance before they can leave Ante-Purgatory. And the third is the climactic moment when, for Dante, the rose light showers on him in blinding brilliance, and when, for Lester, the rose light and smell permeate the scene and evil is conquered.

After the grizzly encounters with the souls of the damned in the Inferno, Dante arrives at the shore of Ante-Purgatory:

For better waters now the little bark of my indwelling powers raises her sails and leaves behind the sea so cruel and dark. Now shall I sing that second kingdom given the soul of man wherein to purge his guilt and so grow worthy to ascend to Heaven. [4]

The souls he meets here must remain in this area for three times the length of their years on earth in order to prepare themselves for the actual work of expiation and repentance. They wander, as do the lost souls, but there is an end to their wanderings.

In the Williams novel, Lester finds herself alone and bewildered as she stands on Westminster Bridge:

She was alone with this night in the City — a night of peace and lights and stars, and of bridges and streets she knew. But all in a silence she did not know, so that if she yielded to the silence she would not know those other things, and the whole place would be different and dreadful. [5]

Thus both Dante and Lester find themselves in an alien land: for Dante it is Ante-Purgatory; for Lester it is the City.

When Dante arrives at the Gate of Purgatory, he must make the threefold act of repentance; confession, contrition, and satisfaction. These are symbolized by three colored steps which he must ascend:

We came to the first step: white marble gleaming so polished and so smooth that in its mirror I saw my true reflection past all seeming. The second was stained darker than blue-black and of a rough-gained and a fire-flaked stone, its length and breadth crisscrossed by many a crack.

The third and topmost was of porphyry, or so it seemed, but of a red as flaming as blood that spurts out of an artery. (IX: 94-102)

"The courteous keeper of the gate," an angel who holds the keys of Peter, draws a "P" (peccata = sins) with his sword on Dante's forehead and tells him: "Enter. But first be warned; do not look back or you will find yourself once more outside" (IX: 132-3).

After Dante has entered purgatory proper, he passes through the cornices of those expiating their seven deadly sins (pride, envy, anger, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, and lust). He reaches the end of purgatory and finds the Earthly Paradise which is similar to the Garden of Eden. Here an emissary from Bedricle, Matilda, meets him:

The water you see here is from no source that needs replenishment from cloudy vapors, like streams that rise and fall: with constant force. It leaves a fountain that receives again, from God's Will, every drop that it pours forth to the two streams it sends across this plain.

On this side, it removes as it flows down all memory of sin; on that, it strengthens the memory of every good deed done.

It is called Lethe here: Eunoe there. And one must drink first this and then the other to feel its powers. (XXVIII: 121-31)

As we shall see, the same repentance that Dante drinks will also be reflected in All Hallows' Eve.

Before considering that however, let us first finish with the light that permeates the final canto of the Purgatorio:

Time and again at daybreak I have seen the eastern sky glow with a wash of rose while all the rest hung limpid and serene. And the Sun's face rise tempered from its rest so veiled by vapors that the naked eye could look at it for minutes undistressed. Exactly so, within a cloud of flowers that rose like fountains from the angels' hands and fell about the chariot in showers,
A lady came in view: and olive crown
wreathed his immaculate veil, her cloak was
green,
the colors of live flame played on her gown.

(WXXX: 22-23)

Wreathed in light, Beatrice has arrived. She allows him to drink of the waters of Lethe for forgetfulness, and of Enoe for remembrance. And only then is Dante permitted to leave purgatory:

I came back from those holiest waters new,
remade, reborn, like a sun-wakened tree
that spreads new foliage to the Spring dew
in sweetest freshness, healed of Winter's
scars;
perfect, pure, and ready for the Stars.

(XXXIII: 142-6)

These symbols and acts — the waters, the three-colored stairs of repentance, the light — all find their expression in All Hallows' Eve, to which we shall turn after we have considered another matrix, this time a theological one, which Williams uses in his novels:

The whole of this [the correspondence among things] relationship between man and God, and between man and man, is describable by three of William's favorite terms; coinherence, substitution, and exchange.

The three terms all refer to single aspects of the same things, and this thing may be called the universal principle of existence. The principle may be stated negatively by saying that nothing, not even God exists alone without reference to anything else. The pattern of all existence is to be found in the Trinity: this is the supreme example of co-inherence and exchange. And the universe, as in the neo-Platonic tradition, mirrors or adumbrates the existence of God. All things co-inhere in each other and in God because, literally, that is the way existence is... whether sacred or profane. And substitution, the model of which is the Redemption-Atonement, is a further application of this same principle. As all things co-inhere and practice exchange with each other, so all things substitute for each other. More accurately, in the case of man, who is a unity, all men substitute for each other and thereby serve themselves... but the nature of substitution and exchange, principles of existence as they are, does not permit them to be practiced only at the whim or will of the persons involved... Frequently Williams uses the image of the city as a symbol of the continual exchange that constitutes existence; the city exists only as a vast "exchange between citizens." [6]

In the light of the Dantean symbols plus the concepts of co-inherence, substitution, and exchange, All Hallows' Eve becomes not only a fascinating novel but also an understandable one. Lester and Evelyn, Lester's friend, on their way to meet each other, die when a plane crashes into London. The first chapter is called "The New Life," an obvious Dantine allusion, and follows the progress of the two dead women as they realize their situation in the City. Evelyn is particularly terrified and keeps repeating, "Why are we like this? I haven't done anything. I haven't; I tell you I haven't. I haven't done anything" (AH, 18). And, of course, that is literally true; she has done nothing worthy of either heaven or hell. Therefore she is among the indolent who must wait and wander until they can make the first movements towards repentance.

Lester, on the other hand, instinctively recognizes her need for some action, some gesture towards love, however feeble. She reaches out when she sees an apparition of her husband Richard. Howard says of that gesture:

Because she had had some real companionship with Richard, and some commitment to him, he, apparently, constitutes the only connection she had with the living world of other selves. He was her spouse, and if marriage is anything at all, it is at least the locale where we learn what knowing another self entails — and thereby what knowing all the other selves entails.... Lester had missed almost all her cues because she was generally a selfish and irritable spouse; but once again, whatever rag of authenticity clung to whatever fleeting attitude she may ever have exhibited, will be made full use of now by the Mercy [William's term for God's action] that is giving her chance to move along in the direction of the joy that she and all souls want, ultimately. You tolerated Richard? You even had some passion in your attachment to him? Good. That will do for a start. We can build on that. (Howard, pp. 154-55)

And Lester does build on her love of Richard throughout the novel. She exemplifies several themes in the theology that Williams derived from Dante, what he calls the Way of Affirmation and the Way of Negation:

Both methods, the Affirmative Way and the Negative Way, were to co-exist; one might also say, to co-inhere, since each was to be the key of the other: in intellect as in emotion, in morals as in doctrine. "Your life and your death are with your neighbor."... The one Way was to affirm all things orderly until the universe throbed with vitality; the other to reject all things until there was nothing anywhere but He. (Reilly, p. 158)

Lester affirms her love for Richard at the same time she must reject him as something less than divine love:

Yet even as she spoke [to Betty] she irreverently thought of Richard's eyes at the corner in Holborn — and before that — before she was dead; and she remembered how Richard had come to meet her once and again, and how her heart had swelled for the glory and vigor of his coming (AH, 135).

Also, in death, Lester must repent of her selfishness and of her inadequate responses to situations in life, in other words, like Dante standing at the three steps at the Gate of Purgatory, she must confess her sin, be sorry for it, and ask forgiveness before she can make further progress in the City. Once, she and Evelyn had taunted Betty, the saint of the novel; Evelyn had actually been vicious while Lester had done nothing to stop the taunting. But sin it was and she had to be forgiven:
At first, Betty thinks the point very trivial and cannot understand what Lester wants. But forgetfulness is not the same as forgiveness; one must remember in order to forgive:

As soon as she knew that Lester wanted it, she too wanted it; so simple is love-in-paradise. She stood and thought.... She said, "Oh well, how could you know?"

(AHE. 132)

Betty does remember and she forgives Lester by remembering and dismissing the incident. From this time on, Lester is capable of substituting for Betty in Betty's hour of desperate need. "In some way [Lester] had now been left in charge of Betty. She must keep in charge. She must wait" (AHE, 137). The time comes and Lester is equal to the task.

Evelyn, the other dead person in Ante-Purgatory/the City, is also given the opportunity to make the three acts of repentance for her pettiness and cruelty. She comes to Betty's house, which is symbolic of the Gate of Purgatory. She ascends the steps, painfully, and tries to open the door; her intent is to taunt Betty once more:

She went right up to the door... and stood by it listening. Betty was inside; for all she knew he [Simon] also might be inside. She even put her hand on the door. It sank through; she began to pull it back and found it caught as if in a tangle of thorns. She felt a long sharp scratch before she got it loose. Tears came to her eyes. She was lonely and hurt... The hand itself was dim, because she had been crying, and dirty, because she had been leaning against the sill; and bleeding — at least, if she looked long enough it was bleeding (AHE. 174).

The three colored steps at the Gate of Purgatory are here: the white (her hand), the black (the hand is dirty), and the red (her hand is bleeding), but here Evelyn recoils from the acts of contrition (the white), confession (the black), and satisfaction (the red); she descends the stairs, ready for nothing yet except her own foolish wanderings.

At the end of the novel, when Lester leaves for the higher realms of purgatory, Evelyn remains. She wavers, almost opens herself to generosity and love, and then refuses:

They saw the immortal fixity of her constricted face, gleeful in her supposed triumph, lunatic in her escape, as it had had once a subdued lunatic glee in its cruel indulgences; and then she broke through the window again and was gone into that other City, there to wait and wander and mutter till she found what companions she could (AHE, 269).

Evelyn is seeking some companionship or community — hell is terrifying isolation — even if it is still for the wrong reason. "Perhaps," Williams seems to imply, "even that will be enough later; just not now."

To continue the comparison of symbols in the two works, we see that water is an important symbol in both the medieval allegory and the novel. The two works begin with the crossing of water, Dante for "better waters in a little bark" and Lester for the City beyond the Thames as she stands on Westminister Bridge. And each reacts to the waters at the end of the purgatorial journeys. Dante drinks of the River Ennue, which allows him to see his past as it is in itself; Lester, once more standing over the Thames, sees the river for what it is:

The Thames was dirty and messy. Twigs, bits of paper and wood, cords, old boxes drifted on it. Yet to the new-eyed Lester it was not a depressing sight. The sweetness of the water was, at that particular point, what it should be and therefore pleasant enough... Corruption (so to call it) was tolerable, even glorious. These things also were facts. They could not be forgotten or lost in fantasy; all that had been, was; all that was, was. A sodden mass of cardboard and paper drifted by, but the soddeness was a joy, for this was what happened, and all that happened, in this great material world, was good (AHE. 222).

Finally, the water and the light of Canto XXX of the Purgatorio flood the final scene of the novel. Thomas Howard in the statement previously cited says, "Williams is borrowing unabashedly from Dante's blinding imagery of Paradise." (Howard, p.180) Howard is simply wrong, for Williams with theological definiteness and allusive precision is still referring to the Purgatorio. Beatrice comes to Dante amid "an eastern sky aglow 'with the wash of rose' ("la parte oriental tutta rosa") and "within a cloud of flowers" ("dentro una nuvola di fiori"). In Williams, this becomes the "rain of roses," rain being implicit in the "cloud of flowers." Also, Williams combines several symbols of the Trinity with the rose light: the waters of baptism, the smell of blood and of burning. All coalesce in the scene in which Simon is vanquished:

[Simon] went on against the [the rain], but the growing roseal light confused him still more,... He knew he needed time — time and shelter from the rain and from the rose-light and the rose-smell; which was not only a rose-smell but a smell of blood and of burning, of all those great crimson things,... The hate seemed to swell in the nightmare bubble within the rose which was forming round them, cloud in cloud, overlying like petals.... The smell of the rose was changing to the smell of his last act, to the smell of blood. He looked down; he saw below him the depth of the rose (AHE. 265-6).

Because Simon is so obviously evil, it is difficult to avoid the temptation of placing the novel's action in hell rather than in purgatory. And Glen Cavaliiero does not avoid it: "[The City] is a world suggestive both of the vestibule to Hell and of Limbo in the Inferno of Dante; and like them it is a place where choice is made known."[7] He continues that thought: "then the working of the City compels their true natures to assert themselves, so that Lester's path eventually takes her, through her inherent virtues and willingness to give herself in exchange, 'upwards'
to Purgatory, while Evelyn self-absorbed and futile, is incapable of anything but Hell." (Cavallerio, p. 93) Cavallerio simply bypasses the meaning of purgatory.

Thomas Howard comes closer to the purgatorial aspect than does Cavallerio, but he practically apologizes for his insight: "The reader does not need to accept any special religious doctrine of purgatory, or even of life after death, to feel the force of what happens. The 'purgatorial' aspect of things may, if one wishes, be seen simply as a way of casting a special light on human behavior, which is what all novels try to do one way or another in any case." (Howard, p. 152)

In his study of Williams, Lawrence Morris interprets the novel in terms of the "state of consciousness of a person who has just died." He continues:

The antithesis of the state of rigidity and stagnation [the damnation of Simon] is the process of spiritual transformation of consciousness. Williams offers his most detailed and comprehensive description of this process of transformation as it unfolds in the mind, heart and "body" of Lester Purvinal. (Morris, p. 185)

Indeed, Lester is spiritually transformed, but it is her response to the grace of repentance rather than of the development of knowledge. Not only is it the Thames she accepts for what it is, she also "saw temptation precisely as it is when it has ceased to tempt — repugnant, implausible, mean" (AHE, 94). Further, Simon, for all the capacity he has for evil, is not damned. He still lives, now an imbecile, but he continues to recognize the potential of the City. He quotes Psalm 139:

The City, so, was visible to him. "If I go down into hell, thou are there"; but if I go down to thee —? If even yet he could attend to those points, he would escape hell; he would never have been in hell. If he could not, he had his changing and un-changing faces to study. He stared at them, imbecile; imbecile, they stared back — farther, deeper and deeper, through the rose and the burning blood (AHE, 266).

There are other, ancillary parallels between the two works which could be developed. The mystic moment in The Purgatorio comes when Beatrice smiles at Dante ("shows her mouth to him"); after the exchange and substitution between Lester and Betty, the novel fairly sparkles with smiles and laughter. Also, after Dante had passed through the Gate of Purgatory, he heard the hymn, "Te Deum," the first line of which is: "Te Deum laudamus. Te Dominum confitemur" ("We praise You, O God, we give You thanks, O Lord"). Lester, in leaving Richard for the last time: "She said, 'Dearest, I did love you. Forgive me. And thank you — Oh Richard, thank you! Goodbye, my blessing" (AHE, 269). And the last scene of the novel is a constant pean of thanks and praise as Betty cures those who had been under Simon's spell.

If it were only All Hallow's Eve that suffered from insufficient readings, we would have no great concern. However, it is also Williams as a novelist who suffers. William Dowie, for example, has no hesitation in his evaluation of Williams: "As a religious novelist of the twentieth century, Charles Williams is an oddity, a fascination, and a failure." (Dowie, p. 58)

To fault Williams for using the tools of theology in a religious novel is rather like grousing at Dante for writing about all those dead people. T. S. Eliot had answered Dowie's objection in advance: "but it is also true in a measure to say that Williams invented his own form — or to say that no form, if he obeyed its conceptual laws, could have been satisfactory for what he wanted to say, what it is, essentially, that he had to say came near defying definition" (AHE, xiii).

Charles Williams was the master of the theological thriller. His world is both familiar and exotic; his plots are both simple and convoluted; his characters are both real and dreamlike. No one denies the excitement he generates in his novels. T. S. Eliot said it best: "Some of his books... were frankly pot-binders; but he always boiled an honest pot" (AHE, xii). Seen in the light of Dante's excursion through purgatory, All Hallow's Eve is, I believe, one of the most honest pots of all.

NOTES

BIBLIOGRAPHY