

On the Poetic of the Double Point and Circle in Dante's *Paradiso* 30 and in Desmond Hogan's Short Story "The Last Time"

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Abstract: This essay discusses the interaction of the divine point of light and Beatrice as the unattainable point of revelation for Dante in *Paradiso* 30. The two points with their respective circles of understanding and expression form a powerful figure which calls for conceptualisation both in the context of Canto 30 but also the whole of the *Divina Commedia*. Despite the different epochs, ideologies and contexts, a striking similarity as to the poetic of the double point and circle may be found also in Hogan's text.

Keywords: figure; conceptualisation; revelation; the poetic of unattainability.

1. This essay discusses some aspects of the poetic of the double point and circle in Dante's *Paradiso* 30 (10–36)¹ and its intriguing parallel in Desmond Hogan's short story "The Last Time"²

I read and interpret the extract from Dante's text with reference to some other relevant places in the *Paradiso* and the *Vita Nuova*. I am of the opinion that the interaction between the two points, the divine point encircled by the angelic spheres by which Dante the pilgrim is overcome on his celestial journey,

Non altrimenti il triunfo che lude
sempre dintorno al punto che mi vinse,
parendo inchiuso da quel ch'elli 'nchiude[,]³
(10–12)

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¹ I have written another essay (Ploom 2019) on the same topic, but this essay extends the interpretative part of Dante's figure based on the double point and circle and compares it to a similar figure in Desmond Hogan's story.

² "The Last Time" was first published in 1980 (Hogan 1980). I use the text from the collection *The House of Mourning and Other Stories* (Hogan 2013: 7–13).

³ The text of the *Paradiso* is the standard critical Italian edition by Giorgio Petrocchi with some graphic modifications by Emilio Pasquini and Antonio Enzo Quaglio (2002).

So did the triumph that forever plays
 around *the Point that overcame me* (Point
 that seems enclosed by that which It encloses)⁴,

and the impossible point of describing Beatrice's beauty, which Dante as the lover and the poet can neither comprehend nor depict in a satisfactory way and which leaves him feeling more defeated than any other poet who has ever tackled a serious theme,

Da questo passo *vinto* mi concedo
 piú che già mai da *punto di suo tema*
 soprato fosse comico o tragedo:
 (22–24)

I declare myself defeated *at this point*
 more than any poet, whether comic or tragic,
 was ever thwarted by a topic in his theme⁵,

should be viewed as a key figure⁶ that requires due conceptualisation not only in the framework of Canto 30 but also in relation to the whole *Commedia*.

In considering Hogan's short story, I shall focus on the image of a bridge as the central meeting point of two young lovers, the centre of an ideal circle of love,

Yet I rarely met him, just saw him. [...] There at *the bridge, a central point*, beside which both of us paused, at different times, *peripherally*. [my emphases: Ü.P.] (Hogan, "The Last Time", 2013: 9),

which in interaction with another ideal circle, that of the marchers against the nuclear bomb in the 1960s in which the lovers unconsciously participate in the words of one of them, also constitutes a key figure to conceptualise

⁴ All the translations into English of the *Divina Commedia*, except for the one indicated in the next footnote, are by Allen Mandelbaum (1995). See also Columbia University's Digital Dante Project, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/>.

⁵ Robert and Jean Hollander's translation from 2007 (available on the website of the Princeton Dante Project, <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/>).

⁶ I treat 'figure' in this essay as a narrative figure which, although aesthetically perceivable on the micro level, also asks for conceptualisation and interpretation on the macro level. We may say that it is this that leads from text to *opus*.

for the interpretation. I argue that for both narrators, Dante and Maria, the first-person narrator in Hogan's story, the ideal centre point of love remains unreachable and not fully interpretable, even though they both make an effort to do just that.

2. It is curious that many translators and commentators do not seem to pay much attention to the poetic of the double point and circle in Dante's text. In Mandelbaum's translation for example, the second point is actually lost:

I yield: I am defeated at this passage
more than a comic or a tragic poet
has ever been by a *barrier in his theme*;

Mandelbaum certainly stresses Dante's difficulty in understanding and expressing Beatrice's beauty, but instead of "point" he uses "barrier". I do not think that there is just a linguistic coincidence and no more between the "punto" in "punto di [suo] tema" ("the point of [his] theme") and the "punto che mi vinse" ("the point that defeated me"), which would justify the substitution. Equally though, I am not convinced that Jean and Robert Hollander's "at this point", which I quoted earlier, really saves the situation, or that the scholars really consider Beatrice to be the second centre point surrounded by the circle of possible intenders and commentators. Therefore it is very important to analyse the poetic of the two points and circles for the sake of further interpretations and translations.⁷

Discussing the first point, the divine one, Peter Dronke (Dronke 2007: 383) justly points out Dante's well-known connections with the texts of Boethius, Alan of Lille and also refers to Dante's contemporary Meister Eckhart. Of these connections the one with Boethius seems to be especially relevant. Boethius (*Consolatio Philosophiae* IV, VI) discusses the relationship of divine providence as the centre and fate as the circle and compares it to some other similar relationships:

[...] as is reasoning to pure intelligence, as that which is generated to that which is, time to eternity, a circle to its centre, so is the shifting series of fate to the steadfastness and simplicity of providence.
(*The Consolation of Philosophy* IV, VI)

⁷ My own translation (not yet published) of these verses did not at first consider the interaction of the two points either, not until I had read Peter Dronke's most illuminating essay on this Canto (Dronke 2007).

As to providence and fate, I very much agree with Dronke's observation that for both Boethius and Dante this distinction is of the utmost importance, because the nearer anyone gets to the "punto" or the centre, the "more they share in the divine simplicity and freedom" (Dronke 2007: 383). This is how the *Commedia* ends, when Dante seems to give up even his free will, the biggest gift from God (*Par.* 5, 19–24, Beatrice's lesson), so he may be free in God, in His freedom (33, 143–145). But it is also important to consider the equivalent relation of human reasoning to pure or divine intelligence. In the *Commedia* Dante moves through different stages of reasoning and understanding from rational intellection when he is guided by Virgil in the Inferno and the Purgatory, and the revealed truths when he goes with the help of Beatrice from Mount Purgatory to the Empyrean in the Cantos up to and including 30, to the contemplated truths that he receives with the help of St Bernard and Holy Mary in Cantos 31–33 of the *Paradiso*, until his mind is finally struck by God's lightning and is penetrated by pure intelligence (*Par.* 33, 140–141).

Like the relationships cited by Boethius in the passage quoted above, human love also stands to God's love as the circle stands to its centre.⁸ Dante himself certainly expresses this idea in the *Vita Nuova*, where the relationship between Love and the lover is expressed by Love in the following way: *Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentie partes; tu autem non sic* (XII, 4).⁹

⁸ The relation of the centre and the circle is surely quite complex, even uncanny, as God, boundless (*non circumscripito*), does not allow Himself to be limited, but limits Himself all things created. Therefore God is the centre point logically, but it is not surrounded by anything physically. Even though He might appear to be surrounded by angelic circles, He surrounds, in fact, them Himself (see for example *Par.* 30, 12). Therefore God is paradoxically both the centre of all things and the encompassor of all things. The topic of *non circumscripito* appears also in *Purgatorio* 11, 1–3 and *Paradiso* 14, 28–30 and is theoretically postulated already in the *Convivio* (IV, IX). In the *Convivio* II, XIII Dante discusses, in connection of the heaven of Jupiter, the point and the circle as the two extremes of geometry and concludes that neither allows itself to be measured for different reasons, the first being indivisible and not measurable [at all] and the second not allowing itself to be measured exactly because of its arc.

⁹ "I am like the centre of a circle, from which all parts of the circumference are equally distant; but it is not so with you." All the English translations of the *Vita nuova* are by William Anderson (Dante 1964). The original text is from the critical edition of Domenico De Robertis (1960).

Dronke is also quite explicit about how the divine point of light is related to Beatrice as Dante's point of theme in *Paradiso* 30.¹⁰ I should only like to add that Beatrice should also be considered a point of revelation. It is through her that Dante moves closer to understanding Love in the *Vita Nuova* and God's light and love in the *Commedia*. In the *Vita Nuova* Love speaks in Latin, which is figuratively a different code to the verbal tongue, which Dante attempts to interpret and translate with the help of a series of cultural codes. He first describes Beatrice as the number 9, the perfection of the rotating skies and the miraculous number, the root of which is 3, the number of the miraculous Trinity (XXIX [XXX], 3–4), but then, at one point, it appears that Beatrice has moved to the very centre to occupy the position of Love itself. In the sonnet of chapter XXIV about Monna Vanna and Monna Bice for example, Love states, "Quell'è Primavera, / e quell'ha nome Amor, sì mi somiglia" (13–14).¹¹ Monna Vanna's position in relation to Monna Bice is the same as John the Baptist's position in relation to Christ, suggesting that Beatrice and Christ both have the beatifying function in Love.¹² There are other suggestions though that describe Beatrice as the central point of the young Dante's world. In chapter XL (XLI) for example, the pilgrims on their way to Rome to see the *Veronica*, the real face of Christ, pass through the centre of Florence, and for this occasion Dante composes a sonnet where he declares: "Deh peregrini [...] che non piangete quando voi passate / per lo suo mezzo la città dolente, / come quelle persone che neente / par che 'ntendesser la sua gravitate? [...] Ell'ha perduta la sua beatrice[;]" (1, 5–8, 12).¹³ It appears that with Beatrice's death the town has lost its beatifying centre, at least for Dante.

The similarity between Beatrice's role and that of Christ does not stop with the *Vita Nuova* but extends to the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, as has also been shown by Joan Ferrante (Ferrante 2007: 193). In quite a few places Dante refers to her using words which are usually applied to Christ, such as "*Benedictus*

¹⁰ "[I]f the *punto* at the center of the angelic rounds overcame Dante the poet, so does the now consummate beauty of his beloved, which is the ineffable *punto* of his theme. [...] Thus the word *punto* brings together subjective and objective reality, the intuition of the divine and the literary artifact". Cf. Dronke (2007: 384).

¹¹ "The first is called Spring; / The other's name is Love, she resembles me so." Monna (Gio) vanna as Primavera should rather be understood as the one who comes first.

¹² See De Robertis' gloss in the *Vita Nuova* (1960: 169).

¹³ "O pilgrims [...] you do not weep when you pick your way / Through the midst of the city of sorrow, Even like people who cannot follow / The cause of her grave dismay. [...] The city has lost her Beatrice." I am not thoroughly happy with Anderson's translation, for the Italian text states plainly that the city of Florence has lost the centre of its beatitude.

qui venis!” (*Purg.* 30, 19), or “*Modicum, et non videbitis me...*” (“A little while and you will not see me”; *Purg.* 33, 10). However the revelational qualities of Beatrice become especially evident in *Purgatorio* 31, 118–123, where the Gryphon (Christ) reveals his dual nature by reflecting it to Dante in Beatrice’s eyes.¹⁴

Beatrice as the “point of theme” and the divine point of light, that of God’s love and truth (*Par.* 30, 23 and 11), should therefore be read as related. For example, Beatrice functions as the revelation of God’s truth (*Par.* 28, 1–12) when Dante sees the divine light first in Beatrice’s eyes and only then turns round to look at its source in the divine point. However, it is also in this function that Beatrice’s beauty, in its scope and meaning, remains unattainable and not expressible to Dante.

Dal primo giorno ch’i vidi il suo viso
 in questa vita, infino a questa vista,
 non m’è il seguire al mio cantar preciso;
 ma or convien che mio seguir desista
 piú dietro a sua bellezza, poetando,
 come a l’ultimo suo ciascuno artista.
 (28–33)

From that first day when, in this life, I saw
 her face, until I had this vision, no
 thing ever cut the sequence of my song,
 but now I must desist from this pursuit,
 in verses, of her loveliness, just as
 each artist who has reached his limit must.

A similar thing happens when Dante is trying to understand the dual nature of Christ in the Second Person of the Holy Trinity in the final Canto. In Canto 30 Dante sees Beatrice’s eyes and her smile, but is unable to depict it, and in Canto 33 (127–139) he sees his own human face, indeed our own human face, in Christ’s dual face, which is one of the three divine circles, but he does not understand this relation fully or is at least not able to express his understanding. It appears that only God Himself understands the whole of Beatrice’s beauty (“*ma certo io credo / che solo il suo fattor tutta la goda*” – “I think that, surely,

¹⁴ “A thousand longings burning more than flames / compelled my eyes to watch the radiant eyes / that, motionless, were still fixed on the griffin. / Just like the sun within a mirror, so / the double-natured creature gleamed within, / now showing one, and now the other guise.”

/ only its Maker can enjoy it fully"; *Par.* 30, 20–21), which for the others will transfigure and reveal itself completely only on Doomsday when the Angel's trumpet expresses it in a much better way than Dante ever can.¹⁵

For Dante, or at least for Dante the poet and the exegete, Beatrice remains very much like those prefigurations, the "umbriferi prefazi" (*Par.* 30, 78), the luminous sparks and rubies that Dante the pilgrim sees instead of the angels and the blessed spirits (*Par.* 30, 64–66). Beatrice's beauty not only exceeds Dante's visionary and exegetic capacities but also seems to undergo transformations. This is expressed by "La bellezza ch'io vidi si trasmoda / non pur di là da noi" (30, 19–20), translated by Mandelbaum as "The loveliness I saw surpassed not only / our human measure", but which in my opinion also connotes transfiguration.¹⁶ This is backed up when Dante soon afterwards sees the real form of the two heavenly courts like painted icons in *Paradiso* 31–32.¹⁷ The final representations of Beatrice are also very much like those we see in medieval iconic paintings, and Dante's final address to Beatrice is like an oration in front of an icon (*Par.* 31, 79–90), when Dante actually says "Così orai" (91). Beatrice is also crowned with a halo as the saints and the angels are in iconography, and she reflects the divine light ("e vidi lei che si faceva corona / refllettendo da sé li eterni rai"¹⁸; *Par.* 31, 71–72).

In some extracts Dante describes his vision of Beatrice, the revelation of supreme love, in a very similar way to how he describes his own vision of Christ. At the beginning of their heavenly flight in Canto 1 for example, Dante lets his look sink as deep into Beatrice's eyes ("nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei"¹⁹; *Par.* 1, 67) as it does when he contemplates the dual nature in the image of Christ ("per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo"²⁰; *Par.* 33, 132). The pronoun "lei" ("her") in the second expression refers to "nostra effigie" ("our image") in verse 131, but Dante certainly also attributes the feminine side to

¹⁵ "Cotal qual io la lascio a maggior bando / che quel de la mia tuba, che deduce / l'ardüa sua matera terminando[.]" – "So she, in beauty (as I leave her to / a herald that is greater than my trumpet, / which nears the end of its hard theme) [...]" (*Par.* 30, 34–36).

¹⁶ Towards the end of the *Commedia* the divine point of light, which cannot change in itself, is also seen by Dante as changing, because his vision of it changes (*Par.* 33, 109–113).

¹⁷ See especially the description of the *iconostasis* in *Paradiso* 32, 4–87.

¹⁸ "[A]nd saw that round her now a crown took shape / as she reflected the eternal rays."

¹⁹ Mandelbaum has translated this line as "In watching her, within me I was changed", but I suggest "I made myself go so much inside her look".

²⁰ Mandelbaum's translation goes as follows: "so that my sight was set on it completely". I suggest "because my face was wholly absorbed into it".

Christ.²¹ The term “effige” is also used in reference to Beatrice’s iconic expression (“ma nulla mi facea, ché sua effige / non discendea a me per mezzo mista, *Par.* 31, 78”)²².

Thus it seems that Dante contemplates the two icons, Beatrice and Christ, in a similar way, and Beatrice as revelation is a milestone in Dante’s cognitive route. She both reflects the divine and points the way to it, so in *Paradiso* 31 Dante sees Beatrice turn her head in the paradisiac *iconostasis* to look at the divine source of light (*Par.* 31, 93), an example that he himself follows under the auspices of St Bernard and Holy Mary just a little later. Already inside pure divine intelligence, Dante the pilgrim understands for a moment the relation between the divine and the human in the circle of Christ (*Par.* 33, 140–141), but of course he is unable to express it (142). However, even now, Dante does not seem to give up trying. The final image painted by Dante the narrator of Dante the pilgrim is of the pilgrim being moved in his personal longing and determination (“disio e ’l velle”)²³ (*Par.* 33, 143) by the eternal Love, so that he is turning like a wheel, like the angelic circles, around the divine point.

There is a wonderful poem by Robert Graves which might give us a code for understanding the importance of Dante’s cognitive revolving around the centre point of divine light:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
but the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Graves’ Secret is surely comparable to Dante’s divine point, the eternal Light that resides in Itself and understands Itself (*Par.* 30, 124–126). Graves’ Secret alone, just like Dante’s Truth alone, knows Itself fully. In *Paradiso* 21 Dante has St Pier Damiano say that the divine providence is like an abyss which remains unfathomable even to the gaze of the seraphs and Holy Mary (*Par.* 21, 91–96). However, it is the gaze and supposing of both the dancers and Dante, as well as our own, that makes the Secret and the Truth reveal and perform Itself.²⁴ In Dante’s case this is achieved through Beatrice, but Beatrice, the guide to It and Dante’s “point

²¹ Joan Ferrante in her analysis of the kinship between Beatrice and Christ also refers to Dante’s use of bi-gendered representation and the tradition of attributing the feminine side to God (Ferrante 2003: *passim*).

²² “[B]ut distance was no hindrance, for her semblance / reached me – undimmed by any thing between.”

²³ [D]esire and will.

²⁴ See Jonathan Culler’s comment to this verse (Culler 1997: 101–102).

of theme”, remains unattainable for Dante the poet and the exegete, as revelation is never fully revealed and calls forth unendingly new interpretations.

3. I have no basis to suppose that Hogan draws on Dante or any other medieval text when making the centre and the circle his key figure in “The Last Time”. However, I intend to show that like Dante, Hogan also builds his narrative figure upon two points or centres, and their circles, one of which is love and the other is understanding of that love.

The plot of the story is that Maria, an orphan girl who is the daughter of a prostitute in Ballinasloe, Ireland, is brought up by the nuns in the local convent, and meets Jamesy, an intelligent boy from a wealthy family of the same town. They are attracted to each other from the very first but their relationship is hindered by their different statuses and the social conventions of their time, and so it remains undeveloped in the modern understanding, as Maria is caught in the arms of Jamesy in the local cinema and sent away to work in the neighbouring town, while Jamesy goes to Dublin to study dentistry at his father's bidding. This means they meet furtively just one last time at Ballinasloe Station in 1953, where Jamesy seems to ignore the sight of Maria, at least from her viewpoint, as she tells the story in the first person narrative.

Hogan's short story begins with “The last time that I saw him [...]” and ends with “I touch upon truth”, when Maria is writing of what happened, so the story has a circular structure despite the continuous movement between the present and the past.²⁵ When writing, Maria makes a kind of circle round the centre point where the truth resides. The truth means understanding the nature and significance of love, the centre point of their relation, from which they were both equally distant, like Dante was from understanding Love in his relation with the young Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*. Indeed Maria and Jamesy also meet only occasionally, first on the village green, where he instinctively shakes his fall of reed-coloured hair in a way she will never forget, then near a bridge or in the park by the river, where Maria pushes the pram of a baby she is walking as part of her job and Jamesy comes with the books that he, the bright boy, lends her to read. Their relationship is at first “blindly educational” (Hogan 2013: 8), as Maria puts it, but later, each time, they also touch “a new

²⁵ Dante also moves between the two presents, the present of his writing as the poet of what happened to himself as the character, another present, but in the past. See for example *Paradiso* 1, 4–6: Nel ciel che piú de la sua luce prende / fu'io, e vidi cose che ridire / né sa né può chi di là sù discende; (I was within the heaven that receives / more of His light; and I saw things that he / who from that height descends, forgets or can / not speak;). Of course Dante's movements between the present and the past are not as sharp as those that Hogan gives to his narrator Maria.

part of one another. An ankle, a finger, an ear lobe, something as ridiculous as that” (Ibid.: 9), later on they embrace lightly and finally hug each other at the cinema show, from where she is dragged away and sent off to another town.

Maria’s narration is of course *post factum*, like that of Dante or any other narrator, written in London years later²⁶ as she tries to figure out why Jamesy had pretended not to recognise her at the station. She uses a lot of figures, comparing him for example to a furtive motif of Glenn Miller, and her own attempt at understanding his raw wildness to the floating movement of a ballerina (“His hair, his face, his madness I’d hardly touched, merely fondled like a floating ballerina”; p.11), etc.

Yet there is one particular figure, the bridge by the river near the convent, which becomes a symbolical centre point of their circle of love, a centre point which they actually never reach, seeming to remain on its circumference:

Yet I rarely met him, just saw him. Our relationship was blindly educational, little else. There at *the bridge, a central point*, beside which both of us paused, *at different times, peripherally* [my emphases: Ü.P.]. (Hogan 2013: 9)

First, the bridge is the central point ideally, from which both Jamesy and Maria stand apart. It seems as if the bridge, which may be unison and love, stands out of time, but the lovers move in time. And they are also peripheral to that centre point.

Second, it is curious that just as Dante likens Beatrice to Christ in the *Vita Nuova* and has Beatrice become the centre of his theme in *Paradiso* 30, Hogan’s Maria also has Jamesy occupy the central position of the bridge, though perhaps less obviously:

There he was that summer, standing on the bridge by the prom, sitting on a park bench or pawing a jaded copy of Turgenev’s *Father and Sons*. (Ibid.: 8)

Of course the circle as such is never mentioned explicitly, but if it remained at that, the bridge as a central point would be just one among several other images that Hogan has Maria use in her attempt at understanding her relationship with the boy. But there is also another centre point and circle which actually urges Maria, now married and the mother of three children in London, to take up writing in order to understand what had happened at Ballinasloe station far back in Ireland and to resurrect Jamesy, who she had already buried in her

²⁶ “I couldn’t put words or emotions to it but now from a desk in London, staring into a Battersea dawn, I see it was a womanly feeling. I wanted Love.” (Hogan 2013: 11).

mind there and then, at their last meeting at the station (“Jamesy Murphy, you’re dead”, I said – my head reeled. “Jamesy Murphy, you’re dead.”; p. 11). It is now the beginning of the Sixties and young people are protesting against the threat of the nuclear bomb. Of course, this is an altogether different circle with its dreadful nuclear centre of anti-love and the young people on the circumference in an age when they said “make love, not war”. Hogan refers to the two circles, one of love and the other of anti-love, through Maria:

The world was exploding with young people – protests against nuclear bombs were daily reported – but in me the *nuclear area* [my emphasis: Ü.P] of the town²⁷ where I’d worked returned to me. Jamesy and I had been the marchers, Jamesy and I had been the protest! (Ibid.: 12)

It is here and now that Maria begins to love Jamesy again, in another circle, though she had buried him in her head.²⁸ She now thinks of him and herself as the real marchers who had “warded off total calamity, total loss” (p. 12). Jamesy reappears like a Christ, just as Beatrice is like Christ in the *Vita Nuova*. He is, in a way, resurrected²⁹ in Maria’s mind:

He was like a ravaged corpse in my head and the area between us opened; [...] I began loving him again. (Ibid.: 12)

Hogan’s Maria uses different images connected with space, both physical and mental, just as Dante does in his *Commedia*. However, the image of the two centres or nucleuses, and the respective circles, is a decisive one and becomes the topical figure, just as the divine point of light and Beatrice as the point of

²⁷ Curiously enough there was a power station (now destroyed) in another Athlone, near Cape Town, South-Africa.

²⁸ Both convent film shows and especially those films she may have seen in public cinemas, including some westerns (“Duel in the Sun” is mentioned – Hogan 2013: 8), explain why Maria says to herself, “Jamesy Murphy, you’re dead”, when she symbolically kills him. Therefore the first part of the story may be read in the key of a western. Maria imagines Jamesy to be the crook from “Duel in the Sun” and herself as the heroine from the same film.

²⁹ Maria, even though she has a sympathy towards the sisters and her fellow orphans, definitely protests against her upbringing in the convent where she was resident when she was discovered in her affair with Jamesy. However, her own imagery is basically Catholic. For example she speaks of the dresses she had “resurrected from nowhere with patterns of sea lions or some such thing on them” (Hogan 2013: 11). And she also says that she and Jamesy were “active within a certain sacrifice” (Ibid.: 12). On the other hand, “the ravaged corpse” may also be related to the imagery of a nuclear disaster.

revelation with their respective circles of love and understanding do for Dante. We can imagine the mental circle of the anti-nuclear marchers, their centre point being not the explosive nucleus of anti-love, which in a way is comparable to Dante's Lucifer in *Inferno* 33 in the centre of the Earth, but the nucleus of love and solidarity. The marchers' circle is comparable to such circles as a circle of friends, a family circle, or a circle of young scientists, which all have love and truth as their centres. We may therefore presume that in Maria's imagination the young people themselves take hold of the ideal centre of the circle, the explosive position of love ("the world was exploding with young people").

However, there is also the centre and the circle of understanding and interpreting love. It does not matter so much whether Jamesy ignored Maria at their last meeting or whether Maria herself was too uncertain to go and address him³⁰; what matters is the circle of love and loss that Maria tries to understand, to decipher. "I never reached him," she says but adds:

The gulf between me and Jamesy narrows daily [...] I say something I never said before, something I've never written before.

I touch upon truth [my emphasis: Ü.P.]

(Ibid.: 13)

Dante really never reaches so far as to describe Beatrice worthily. He never understands completely the truth revealed to him through Beatrice, at least not in the way he does through the direct intervention of God Himself (see my discussion in section 2). Hogan's Maria never reaches her beloved either. But what does the last sentence of the story "I touch upon truth" really mean? Is it that Maria is gradually going to understand the truth? Or perhaps that she is only gradually moving nearer to it, which means that she will never understand what really happened or what Jamesy really means to her as an educator, a Christ, one who can be her saviour from a meaningless and loveless life.

I never reached him; I just entertained him like as a child in an orphanage in the West of Ireland I had held a picture of Claudette Colbert under my pillow to remind me of glamour. (Ibid.: 13)

³⁰ "There was a world of difference between us, a partition as deep as war and peace. Then one morning I saw him. I had a scarf on and a slight breeze was blowing and it was the aftermath of a sullen summer and he was returning to Dublin. He didn't look behind. He stared – almost at the tracks – like a fisherman at the sea. I wanted to say something but my clothes were too drab; not the nice dresses of two years before, dresses I'd resurrected from nowhere with patterns of sea lions or some such thing on them." (Ibid.: 11).

Thus Jamesy may be seen as an icon for Maria, very much like Beatrice for Dante, a sacred mental image.³¹

4. Certainly, the epochs, ideologies and contexts of Dante and Hogan are far removed from one another. Maria and Jamesy actually protest with their innocent love against the social and religious conventions and military threats of their time.³² However, I insist on the comparability of Dante's and Hogan's poetic of the point and the circle,³³ even if some of their accents are of course different where they concern the relationship between real space and ideal space. Dante very often depicts ideal space and even non-space³⁴ in terms of real space and quasi space.³⁵ Hogan's Maria, who certainly acts in a specific, albeit fictional, space, conceives and interprets her love by applying some imagery of ideal space.³⁶ It is true that the idealness and abstractness of Maria's mental spaces is not as explicitly expressed³⁷ as is that in several of the passages quoted from Dante, yet it is still evident. Whether Hogan ever consciously thought of Dante while writing this short story is really difficult to say. I have simply made an attempt to point out and analyse some striking similarities in their poetic imagery.³⁸

³¹ We see, however, that Maria's explanation of Jamesy's function is dually overcoded: he is both a Christ and a cinema icon.

³² Of course Dante is a great protestor against many social and religious conventions as well, but this cannot be discussed in this paper.

³³ I do not claim that Hogan's figure could not be analysed in some other framework like centre-periphery models, but that was not the purpose of this paper.

³⁴ See Juri Lotman's treatment of space and non-space (Lotman 1992: 386–406).

³⁵ I have analysed the interaction of the real and the quasi-real in my translation of *Paradiso* 24–26 and 30 (Ploom 2016: 56–76).

³⁶ There are for example the concrete spaces of Ballinasloe, Athlone and London with their *realia*, which are mostly described in a very fragmentary way, although Hogan's Maria is a great master of minute observations, yet there is also the space of love between Maria and Jamesy that she attempts to figure out. Maria's attempt at conceiving this space may be analysed with Henri Lefebvre's ideas of how social (bodily) practices of space are entwined with the conceptualisation of space. See, for example, the famous "perceived-conceived-lived triad" (Lefebvre 1984: 40).

³⁷ Indeed Maria very often mentions space as something very subjective and bodily: "the feeling between us was of summer and space" (Hogan 2013: 7); "there was a world of difference between us" (11); "the area between us opened" (12) "tried to decipher an area of loss" (13).

³⁸ I wish to thank Michelangelo Zaccarello for his careful reading of this essay and his useful comments.

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