

DANTEAN REVERBERATIONS:  
FOUR READERS OF DANTE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.  
A STUDY ON THE DANTES OF  
PRIMO LEVI, EDOARDO SANGUINETI,  
SAMUEL BECKETT AND SEAMUS HEANEY

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the present research is to investigate the presence of Dante in four authors of the twentieth century and to discuss in what ways these authors contribute to our perception of Dante.

This study begins with the analysis of Primo Levi's reaction to Dante, and the first two chapters deal respectively with Levi's troubled relationship with the monumentality of Dante in Levi's personal culture and with the modern writer's attempts at rejecting that very monumentality. In the third and fourth chapters, the focus is on the inclusion of Dante within Edoardo Sanguineti's poetry, and on the issue of ideologically oriented exploitation of Dante both in Sanguineti's novels and plays and in his critical analyses of the *Comedy*.

The following chapters are about the presence of Dante in Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney. In Beckett, a network of Dantean inclusions shows how Dante's presence can be fertile, controversial, and yet apparently discarded. The last chapter discusses Seamus Heaney's Dantisms and especially the question of translation as both a technical and a cultural issue.

The result is the perception of a vital Dantean presence, which generates approaches and revalidations in spite of its apparent distance and of its cultural diversity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Dante's presence, not only in scholarly criticism but also in the world of fiction and even in that of daily communication, offers constant evidence of shared background knowledge. Dantean notions such as limbo, journey in the underworld, poet guides, have become part of the cultural landscape, and have reached the realms of pop culture, and certainly not only in Italy. As Zygmunt Baranski put it, 'The going on a journey, certain acts of barbarity, particular landscapes, characters, encounters, etc., words such as *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, even *limbo*, all tend to evoke irresistibly the presence of Dante whatever an author's more specific intentions might be'<sup>1</sup>. Dante reception is part of the history of culture and of literature, while Dante studies are more and more involved in looking for and into Dante's texts, beyond seven centuries of readings, obviously and necessarily conditioned, historically biased, and culturally oriented.

In order to explore the question of the presence of Dante in the creative literature of the twentieth-century, I have chosen to limit the research to a series of authors in whose works the Dantean presence is unquestionable, but not necessarily dominating, and whose production can be seen as a meaningful example of twentieth-century literary context: Primo Levi, Edoardo Sanguineti, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney are all – for different reasons – deeply and controversially central in the cultural literary debate of the twentieth-century. In all these authors, who have themselves become canonical presences not only in their respective literatures, the function of memory, the purpose of culture, and the role of language are central. In these authors

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Baranski, 'The Power of Influence: Aspects of Dante's Presence in Twentieth-Century Italian Culture', *Strumenti Critici*, n.s. a. I, n. 3, September 1986, 343-376 (p. 343).

Dante is often a hidden reference and never an obvious or uncritical occurrence. The choice of authors and of texts depended, also, on a preliminary consideration of the aspect that I considered most likely to produce a fruitful analysis: that is, the controversial nature of the authors' relationship to Dante: it seems to me that wherever the Dantean presence is hidden, misplaced, or even overtly denied, the modern author is in fact making a more interesting statement about his belonging to that very tradition.

On the other hand, the text and the plot of the *Commedia*, and, perhaps surprisingly, even that of Dante's less known works, have journeyed into the imagination of modern men and women and contributed to shaping their artistic production. In this direction, works such as Pasolini's *Divina Mimesis*<sup>2</sup>, a text that should have become a modern version of Dante's *Inferno* and that, through its very failure, shows the vitality of Dante's 'plot', the persistence of what Gianfranco Contini called the 'libretto' (or of what we could call the narrative texture of the *Commedia* and its memorability): 'Il "libretto", dunque, non tiene più? Conveniamo che tiene troppo, come un filo che si smaltisce ma non si assimila'.<sup>3</sup>

Influence is one of the essences of writing; what appears new in modern texts is a definite focus on ideas such as citation, allusion, evocation and their deliberate inclusion as a conscious, ideological, and often provocative, move<sup>4</sup>. The texts we read are in any case, and necessarily, 'encrusted' and much of their fascination depends on the perception of their implied multiplicity.

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<sup>2</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La Divina Mimesis*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Gianfranco Contini, 'Un'interpretazione di Dante', in *Un'idea di Dante* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), pp. 69-111 (p. 69).

<sup>4</sup> My points of reference have been, in relation specifically to the question of 'influence', the studies of Harold Bloom and Gérard Genette. In particular:

Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)  
Gérard Genette *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982).

Peter Kuon's study on the creative output of Dante as a source of inspiration in modern world literature<sup>5</sup> and Luigi Scorrano's collection and analysis of the Dantean lexical impact on twentieth-century Italian literature<sup>6</sup>, show two approaches to the question of Dante's actual presence in today's culture: the strong creative and narrative potential of the medieval poet, on one side, and the objective, lexical evidence of his influence on modern Italian writers on the other. Both Kuon's and Scorrano's approaches show that the perception of Dante's presence tends to derive either from the general assumption of his cultural availability or from specific instances of textual re-use.

In my research I collected and compared texts in which a Dantean presence is detectable - either as a direct quotation or as a reference to a recognisable Dantean situation - and then I looked at both the linguistic and the literary horizon of this intertextual dimension. I tried to focus first on the verbal level, and then develop a network that might define the cultural relations between the modern authors and Dante's works. Among the possible paths, I considered recognition, detachment and concealment. Recognition implies an explicit reference to the Dantean pre-text, its relevance, and the modern author's acceptance of this relevance. This seems to be the case of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound among the writers of English or of Mario Luzi and Eugenio Montale among the Italians. In these authors the creative manipulation of the Dantean heritage often produces a totally unexpected, almost unrecognisable Dante, if one considers the image of Dante in modern scholarship. Yet, in their case, the reference is outspoken and consciously focussed. What I decided to examine is the opposite direction, that is the path of

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Kuon, *Lo mio maestro e'l mio autore. Die produktive Rezeption der 'Divina Commedia' in der Erzählliteratur der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Luigi Scorrano, *Presenza verbale di Dante nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1994)

detachment and concealment. I assumed that in the authors I chose to consider, Dante operates in subtle and controversial ways, and determines an interesting network of possible interpretations, creating in the meantime a further dimension of meaning in the modern texts.

Researches into the sources, such as Luigi Scorrano's work on the actual presence of 'stilemi danteschi' in the works of twentieth-century Italian writers, show the two main ways in which Dantisms have pervaded Italian literary production in the last century: that of D'Annunzio on the one hand, with explicit, loud, and theatrical appropriations; and that of Pascoli on the other, in which there is a constant attempt to present not only the Dantean source but also its tormented afterlife, a sort of half-achieved cancellation. The example chosen by Scorrano is *Gloria*, from Pascoli's *Myricae*:

Al santo monte non verrai, Belacqua? –

Io non verrò: l'andare su che porta?

Lungi è la Gloria, e piedi e mani vuole;

e là non s'apre che al pregar la porta,

e qui star dietro al sasso a me non duole,

ed ascoltare le cicale al sole,

e le rane che gracidano, Acqua acqua!<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Scorrano, p. 56.

Dante's text deals with the question of zeal and sloth: Belacqua appears in a canto where the human desire for action and knowledge is given a limit and a discipline, and where waiting is a punishment but also the necessary condition for future salvation. Pascoli uses the *Commedia* - in fact more a reminiscence or a mosaic-like recollection of Dantean situations and texts, where the theme is the image of Belacqua from *Purg.* IV 127-129 ('[...] O frate, andar in sù che porta?/ ché non mi lascerebbe ire a' martiri/ l'angel di Dio che siede in su la porta') and, surprisingly, from *Par.* IV 43-45 ('Per questo la Scrittura condescende/ a vostra facultate, *e piedi e mano!*/ attribuisce a Dio e altro intende' – emphases mine) – but produces a situation that is deeply and substantially different and yet is meant to have an obvious Dantean flavour: Pascoli's Belacqua, unlike Dante's, can prefer to 'star dietro al sasso' and enjoy 'ascoltare le cicale al sole'. In Pascoli's text, Dante is a part of the reader's expected knowledge, and Belacqua follows a recognizable path of sloth and immobility, but the whole situation is essentially alien to the basic principle of Dante's *Purgatorio*, where movement and ascent are the ultimate aim of the purging souls. The Purgatory of Dante echoes in the background of Pascoli's acknowledgment to immobility and self indulgence, but the voice one hears is no longer Dante's.

Looking at modern poets through a Dantean perspective is a rewarding task, as very often what is reflected is an aspect of the modern writer that might have escaped the reader's attention. One more example might be that of Campana: a poet normally perceived as spontaneous, and a poetry felt as disorganized, might acquire a different status when one considers, for example, the following quotation from the beginning of *Canti orfici* through a Dantean perspective:

ricordo una vecchia città, rossa di mura e turrita, arsa su la pianura sterminata nell'Agosto torrido, con il lontano refrigerio di colline verdi e molli sullo sfondo. Archi enormemente vuoti di ponti sul fiume impaludato in magre stagnazioni plumbee: [...] e a un tratto dal mezzo dell'acqua morta e zingare e un canto, da la palude afona una nenia monotona e irritante...<sup>8</sup>

Here ‘la città, rossa di mura e turrita’ is a reminder of Dante’s Dis, which is recognizable through the references to the ‘torri’, the colour red, the surrounding bog, and yet none of the references is a definite quotation from the text of the *Commedia*: the first infernal bridges appear in the *Commedia* in later cantos (*Inf.* XVIII, XXI, XXIV, and XXVI), and the ‘palude’ (*Inf.* IX, XI) – although surrounding indeed the city of Dis, is however never ‘afona’ in Dante’s text, nor is the Dantean ‘acqua’ ever ‘morta’ (while ‘gora’ is). Memories of even more distant Dantean *loci* act in the text, like the ‘canal freddi e molli’, which echo Mastro Adamo’s reminiscence of his homeland in *Inf.* XXX, 64-66. Actually, the whole texture of Campana’s homage to Dante is based on the availability and the memorability of Dante’s text, and –like Pascoli’s use of Dante – contributes to the persistence of a Dantean perspective, and adds one more layer to the canon.

In this respect, Primo Levi’s controversial approach to Dante reveals crucial points of our relationship with culture, civilization, and literature. Dante, thanks to Primo Levi (who enacts the possibility of remembering Ulysses in Auschwitz), acquires a different and even stronger moral potential. On the other hand, Levi’s perception of Dante is a complex knot of admiration and dissatisfaction, an open and unresolved question about the necessity and the limits of memory and of literature.

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<sup>8</sup> Scorrano, p. 86. See also Dino Campana, *Canti orfici* (Marradi: Ravagli, 1914).

Surprisingly enough, Edoardo Sanguineti, whose approach to Dante is both that of a scholar and of a poet-writer, is no less controversial: Sanguineti's Dante is often an indirect, implied presence, perceived and proclaimed as a quotable question, rather than a quotable example, and always made to look and to act as an agent of discomfort. Levi and Sanguineti, moving from totally different cultural premises, are both deeply and controversially aware of the inclusion of Dante within the cultural establishment.

While the appropriation of Dante's texts by state and church is extremely evident within Italy, especially in the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries, the phenomenon is not only Italian: misreading is an essential part of the history of readership. Non-Italian readers of Dante very often feel the duty and the burden of dispelling the mist around Dante's text, a mist caused by hundreds of years of 'institutional appropriation', as Teodolinda Barolini says in her latest collection of essays, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*. The American critic defines the damage in extremely clear terms: 'The Dante whom I know [...] has been submerged both by nationalism, which has used him as an emblem of the coherence and unity of a state that was for centuries fragmented and incoherent, and by the Catholic Church, which has used him as a conduit for its official dogma.'<sup>9</sup>

In many cases, the canon has developed into including Dante himself as a fictionalised character to whom the modern reader attributes a series of features that might be more deeply rooted in the present than in the past. The *Commedia* was born several times and has lived many existences. A curiously consistent pattern of troubled admiration, a coexistence of recognition

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<sup>9</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 6.

and distancing seems to be at the core of Dante's presence in the Anglo-Saxon tradition on both sides of the Atlantic. According to David Wallace, for instance, it is evident that in the 'Monk's Tale' Chaucer's intent is not to imitate Dante, but, rather, to mention a new literary fashion and to suggest a moral, that is: to 'biwaille in manere of tragedie / The harm of hem that stood in heigh degree, /And fillen'. The whole situation is made up both of attraction and repulsion toward the Dantean source: the same narrator, who tells the readers they ought to acquaint themselves with the original text, is also determined to show that the tale is not popular with the pilgrims.<sup>10</sup> The way the text can become a relevant and distorted source is pointed out by David Wallace when he shows how the Miltonian lines

Thou art my Father, thou my Author, thou  
My being gav'st me  
(*Paradise Lost* 2, 864-65)

derive, obviously, from Dante's

Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,  
Tu se' solo colui....  
(*Inferno* I, 85-86)

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<sup>10</sup> David Wallace, 'Dante in English', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; repr. 1998), pp. 237-58 (p. 238). New edition (2007), pp. 287-8.

Yet, the revealing element is that while in the *Commedia* Dante is acclaiming Virgil, in Milton's text Sin is acclaiming Death. We are most certainly experiencing what Wallace calls 'a witty and critical commentary on Dante's poetic project'<sup>11</sup>. Apparently free from the burden of received scholarship, but certainly not from the controlling agenda of state and church, the Anglo Saxon Dantean tradition shows since its beginning instances of a strong cultural orientation.

When one looks for a 'creative manipulation' of the Dantean text, what should be found is not simply a recognisable reference, but – and more importantly – a rooted semantic contiguity with (or a departure from) the Dantean text. Dealing with non-Italian authors means adding, among others, the question of translation and that of the conversion of the text into a medium whose sounds and echoes are deeply different. The question: 'Is the Dantean reference the result of a direct, first-hand knowledge, or is it a demonstration of Dante's general availability in the author's culture?' becomes perhaps easier to answer (a translation tends to have a date and a name attached to it), but leads to the perception of many more cultural passages. Beckett and Heaney are – I think – extremely interesting examples of how the question could be answered.

One major question concerning the cultural impact of Dante's theological universe on his readers is faced by Wallace: he maintains that Dante's Catholicism makes him a more attainable and homogeneous source to Irish than to English or American culture and that 'the claiming of Dante as poetic mentor and ancestor has obvious advantages for Irish poets writing in English. Irish Catholicism brings them (for better or worse) closer to the urban, national, and universalising culture of Dante than any American or English poet can imagine'<sup>12</sup>. It seems that perceiving Dante as a champion of institutionalised Catholicism is, in fact, part of a historically

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<sup>11</sup> Wallace, p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, p. 253.

conditioned tradition, and does not recognise essential features of Dante's very own (and quite non-canonical) approach to theological and religious issues.<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, the more apparently distant the rendition of the medieval poet, the more philologically correct it actually becomes, both on stage and on the page, as Sanguineti and Beckett demonstrate.

Peter Kuon has produced an analysis of what we could call 'the Dantean creative potential' within the twentieth-century fictional world: I would like to point out at least two remarks, among his many extremely interesting observations which appear to be strongly supportable by what I could find in the course of my research. The first is that the two structural and shaping principles - contamination (an influence of the ancient text on the organism of the modern one) and anagram (a quotation-oriented reference to the original text within the modern one) - are constantly at work within the reception of the *Commedia*. The reference to Dante and the 'anagrammatical' reappearance of lines from his works are somehow part of the background cultural noise, and perhaps the supporting backbone for the collective memory of the ancient text; at the same time, what one perceives in the modern texts is a strong availability to contamination, to the adaptation and the creative re-elaboration of the source. This openness of the modern text to the inclusion of the reference is an even more revealing, although sometimes hardly perceivable, characteristic.<sup>14</sup> The other remark Kuon makes, and which I found widely recognisable in the texts I used in my research, is that for many writers the *Commedia* offers a ready-made accessible source of narrative potential, and therefore a recognisable tool, available

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<sup>13</sup> See Edoardo Crisafulli, *The Vision of Dante. Cary's Translation of The Divine Comedy* (Market Harborough: Troubador, 2003), p. 8: 'In fact, one could maintain that there are structures or messages in the *Comedy*, in particular Dante's fierce anticlericalism, which were a stumbling block to the orthodox Roman Catholics in the nineteenth century (and possibly even after).'

<sup>14</sup> Kuon, p. 29.

to the modern writers whenever they feel that the recourse to the *Commedia* provides them with a map of ‘narratability’ in extreme territories.<sup>15</sup>

Levi, Sanguineti, Beckett and Heaney have been chosen as paradigmatic cases of modern Dantism: for all of them Dante is more a question than an answer, the interrogation is toward the present rather than the past, and the inclusion of the distant poet is a matter of linguistic and/or cultural identification. For Italian authors Dante is an implicit, often unavoidable reference. Not only because the *Commedia* is required reading in any Italian secondary school, but also, and especially, because Dante’s lines have entered the language even at the cost of constant decontextualization. In a sense, while the medieval poet might be included within a foreign author’s canon even without taking into consideration his belonging to Italian culture (or even in spite of it), for the Italians – and especially for Primo Levi and Edoardo Sanguineti – Dante is known, analysed, often parodied and eventually de-contextualised, because of his unavoidability. Levi and Sanguineti look at their own Dantean roots and discover themselves. What makes their Dantism so peculiar is the fact that, in both, for different reasons leading to different effects, the reference to Dante, more than for many other Italian writers, sounds like an internal cultural echo, not even a choice, which leads to a complex process of rejection or at least of distancing.

For the non-Italian authors included in this research, Dante is a chosen heritage. Making a Catholic, medieval, Italian poet a source and a background for literature written in English by Irishmen in the twentieth-century includes a series of decisions that pre-define their own cultural horizon. The added meaning implied in the Dantean inclusion creates a universal scope that might be less present in the works of the Italian writers. On the other hand, both for the Italian

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<sup>15</sup> Kuon, p. 35.

and the Irish writers included in this research, the Dantean note sounds as one of self-identification. Echoes and reverberations are stronger at their sources, but might become more fascinating and creative at the extreme point of propagation: when the trace is still so close to the point of departure, it might be difficult to detect the different hues. The Dantisms of Primo Levi and Edoardo Sanguineti could easily be taken for granted, and the reader might be induced to consider their Dantean references without the interrogations that include them. The Dantean choice in Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney contain an open statement on their own idiosyncratic Irish identity and its cultural implications. Beckett's Dantean references involve a severe parody of human life, Heaney's Dante is a more traditional guiding figure, chosen, however, in times that would have easily made any such figure (and especially an apparently canonical one) less than acceptable.

What links these four Dantean reverberations in a curiously unifying way (to a deeper extent than other more famous, and well studied, combinations such as Contini/Montale/Eliot/Pound, for example), is a particular semantic approach to Dante, which I tried to summarise as 'troubled, troubling, and paradoxical'. This approach includes but does not privilege the comparative analyses of prose vs. narrative: what is constantly sought is the unequivocal, linguistic, citational Dantean appearance, and its utilisation in a semantic context that totally or partially disconnects it from the monumentality of the source. In doing so, the first move had to do with the actual detection of Dantean inclusions, especially in the form of hidden, disguised, or even parodied Dantisms.

Once the scheme and the approach of 'Dantean denials' started to take shape, it became evident, that the concrete support of linguistic, even more than semantic, evidence, had to become the backbone of the research. The evidence was to be found in actual citations: the more

hidden, the more disguised, the better; and at the same time, because of their potentially unconscious nature, these linguistic indications would become as valuable and as revealing as any accumulation of Dantisms at a narrative or situational level. This decision has limited the choice of texts, so that – for example - much of Beckett's theatre has not been included in this research, although, as it has been pointed out, Beckett's Dantisms occur in his theatre and in his poetry as well as in his prose. Often, in fact, as Daniela Caselli points out in her *Beckett's Dantes*, 'Dante is inscribed in Beckett's text as what we can hear/read only if we have heard/seen it before'.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, this is also the reason why more 'negative evidence' is available in texts written in Italian rather than in English, and – therefore – why more space has been dedicated to the two Italian writers than to the two Irish ones.

The focus on refusal leads to an increased perception of how Dante can be read – and is, in fact, increasingly read – not as a champion or a paragon of religious accountability, but rather as a creator of a fictional universe which includes a specific religious dimension. This aspect feeds the deeply troubling and unresolved attitude that is at the core of Primo Levi's Dante. The perception of the 'fictive nature' of Dante's universe is what supports Sanguineti's researches and his use of Dantean references in his creative output. In this sense, the two Italian writers escape the ever-impending temptation of making Dante the guarantor of religious or political establishment: a danger particularly felt by those who had experienced the 'cult of Dante' produced in particular, but not only, during Fascism.

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<sup>16</sup> Daniela Caselli, 'Staging the *Inferno* in *How it is*', in: *Beckett's Dantes. Intertextuality in the fiction and criticism* (Manchester - New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 157.

For the two Irish writers studied in this research, the Dantean perspective could have meant a somehow sociologically or politically oriented approach on whether their Dante might be included within a specifically Catholic (vs.: Anglican) cultural context. Yet, although both Beckett's and Heaney's approaches somehow presuppose a 'Catholic question' in connection with the use of Dante, they do not focus on it. Although Beckett is profoundly aware of Dante's theological, historical and linguistic preoccupations, his employment of Dante is forged on a 'trituration' of Dante (as Caselli calls it), which uses and denies the ancient voice, and – most of all – bends it to the needs of the text being written. Heaney's Dantisms, on the other hand, seem to imply an overcoming of the tragical present in the light of an added complexity: Dante is not chosen as 'the' guiding figure, but as a possible, revered and yet not ultimate voice. Dante is not, for Heaney, the point of departure, nor that of arrival: the medieval Catholic poet is a beloved 'Station island' and Heaney's Dantism imply the refusal of fanaticisms and oversimplification.

Moving from Primo Levi's Dantism means starting from a decisive moment for the history of Europe and of European culture. The questions about the possibility of poetry after the Shoah are all embedded within Levi's decisions not only on writing about it, but on making his decision an essentially poetical, creative, and ethical one. Not only is the writing necessary, but it will include the question and the complex answer on its necessity. This will not lead to a simplified 'yes' to the witness's tragic vocation of narrating his story, but it will include the cultural history of the narrator, what has made him that unique human being whose voice and whose memories the reader is experiencing. It is the uniqueness of Levi's Dantisms (the complex nature of their appearance and of their inclusion, as well as the unresolved status of their very appearance: a constant appeal to their emerging from Levi's memory) that – I think – should explain why it is with Levi that I started my research on what had started as an enquiry into

‘disguised Dantisms’, that is: Dantisms either dissimulated, hidden, or presented with that double distancing implied by parody.

All these aspects are also perceivable in Edoardo Sanguineti’s approach to Dante. In him, however, the rather surprising factor is that the Dantean reverberation takes the hue of parody and of cultural criticism not only in his works of fiction and of poetry but also, and in rather clear and detectable forms, in his essays and his studies on various aspects of Dante’s works. For both Levi and Sanguineti there is an obvious and careful decision to keep at bay the risk of dealing with Dante as with a revered monument and paying him the rhetorical homage that tends to be a rather obvious effect of a long history of considering Dante the embodiment of religious and even nationalistic observance. Beckett makes it possible to perceive how useless an approach of this nature can possibly be, as his Dante is totally and programmatically alien to any sort of potential appropriation by state or church.

The guiding thread, in my research, is the one that leads to the discovery of different paradigms of refusal: the refusal of Dante the monument in Primo Levi and Edoardo Sanguineti; the refusal of consolations – especially in a traditionally “Dantean” sense - in Samuel Beckett; and the refusal of surrounding patterns of cultural behaviours – involving, for instance, the employment of Dante as a form of religious identification - in Seamus Heaney For Heaney the tragic and apparently irresolvable contradictions of the Irish situation leads to a Dantean presence that makes the choice of a leading figure a series of approximations on the need to avoid fanaticism and preconceptions.

The Dantean effect is, from what I have experienced in my research, not only a creative impulse reaching across centuries and cultures, working in surprising ways within different

authors, building bridges but also shaping breathtaking chasms: Primo Levi and Samuel Beckett do not leave us with an untroubled vision of Dante; Edoardo Sanguineti shows and recovers what we might have lost, by narrating what is normally left to the scholars; Seamus Heaney matches the sense of distance with that of belonging and shows once more the troubling relationship between culture and conflicts.

As foreseen, one of the most rewarding aspects of the research is going back to the *Commedia* and the other Dantean works, and re-reading them with an increased perception of the readers' responsibility in keeping them alive. Which might even occasionally mean using, abusing and misusing them: as one does with living things.

## 1. DANTE IN LEVI

In spite of an ever-growing perception of Primo Levi's 'literary' importance, reading, considering and discussing his books still tends to be first an ethical issue and only then a cultural-literary-linguistic option. 'Some readers may feel a sense of unease at treating Primo Levi's work (and particularly his writings about the camps) as literary objects, rather than texts crucial for their ethical, political and historical value', remark Anna Laura Lepschy and Giulio Lepschy.<sup>17</sup> It has often been noticed how the narrative of *Se questo è un uomo* is astonishingly alien to self indulgence, and achieves its most striking effects through pauses, silences, and an ever present ethic of responsibility.

Levi himself never allows the readers any distancing, self-protecting device, whether cultural or literary. The poem at the beginning of *Se questo è un uomo* clearly and famously appeals to the reader's nature, position and moral responsibility:

Meditate che questo è stato:

Vi comando queste parole.

Scolpitele nel vostro cuore

Stando in casa andando per via,

Coricandovi alzandovi;

Ripetetele ai vostri figli.

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<sup>17</sup> Anna Laura Lepschy and Giulio Lepschy, 'Primo Levi's Languages', in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. by Robert S. C. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 121-136 (p. 121).

O vi si sfaccia la casa,  
 La malattia vi impedisca,  
 I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, literature, its canons, and its masterpieces are constantly within reach. The title later added to the poem ('Shema') and its content are strongly reminiscent of Deuteronomy, for the imperative to remember, to 'bind the words upon the body'<sup>19</sup>, but in its conclusion the biblical source mingles with the Dantean one. In the first part of this chapter I would like to point out how the *Commedia* is in the implied cultural context from the very beginning of Levi's most famous text, even if its actual presence is not yet as openly required and proclaimed as in other moments of *Se questo è un uomo*.

If we consider the final line 'I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi', two Dantean references suggest themselves as a possibility: 'I vostri nati' reminds one of *Inf.* X 110 – 111:

dissi: «Or direte dunque a quel caduto  
 che 'l suo nato è co' vivi ancor congiunto;

While 'torcano il viso da voi' can easily take one back to *Inf.* VI 91:

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<sup>18</sup> *Primo Levi – Opere* (two vols.), ed. by Marco Belpoliti (Torino: Einaudi, 1997). All references to Levi's work cited from this edition will henceforth be given in the form *Opere* followed by volume and page number(s). Where quotations from the same source are given in succession, the reference will be included in the text rather than as a footnote.

<sup>19</sup> See Nancy Harowitz 'Primo Levi's Jewish Identity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. Gordon, pp. 17-31 (p. 28).

Li diritti occhi torse allora in biechi;  
 guardommi un poco e poi chinò la testa:  
 cadde con essa a par de li altri ciechi.

One would of course suspect, as constantly happens in the case of researches tending to decide relations of influence, that the quotation is in fact accidental and not necessarily intended or devised by the author as an opening towards the world of another writer. Yet, in the case of the opening poem of *Se questo è un uomo*, the theme of ‘looking’, which, as Robert Gordon maintains<sup>20</sup>, is central and paradigmatic in Levi’s writings, the face (‘il viso’) is not present in the biblical model, but, instead, becomes quite available if one considers the lines from the *Commedia*.

Citing Dante in the Italian literature of the twentieth-century was probably a form of ‘ecolalia’, and it is often extremely difficult to decide whether the ‘dantismo’ is in fact a necessary structural reference, or an accidental tool available to any Italian who has necessarily heard Dante’s lines at least at school. Yet, in the case of Levi the Dantean relationship empowers the text with added relevance. As Lynn Gunzberg says:

Are the citations from Dante, direct and indirect, to be taken as learned asides or do they really contribute an added dimension to our understanding of Levi’s situation? The ambiguity and

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<sup>20</sup> Robert S. C. Gordon, *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 54: ‘In the movement from ordinary human lives to the terrifying consequences of the Holocaust within the single image of the face, ethics and testimony meet and merge’.

comprehensiveness of Dante's language (...), suggest that by citing and alluding to Dante, Levi did increase the communicability of his horrific experience.<sup>21</sup>

In the opening poem, the relevance is detectable especially after one has focussed one's attention on the Dantean context. The lines from *Inf. X* are addressed to Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti who, overtaken by the mistaken belief that his son is dead, has fallen into his sepulchre and disappeared from Dante's view. 'l suo nato' famously refers to Cavalcante's son Guido, and is one of the most arresting examples of the strength of family love and of the power of its ties in world literature. For the second citation (or suggestion of a quotation), the context is *Inf. VI* and marks the end of the encounter with the Florentine Ciacco, a glutton punished through the shame ('sì fatta pena, / che, s'altra è maggio, nulla è sì spiacente'. *Inf. VI* 47-48) and dirt of an eternal rain ('eterna, maladetta, fredda e greve'; *Inf. VI* 8). It can be added that, two lines before the last, Levi's epigraph reads 'Vi si sfaccia la casa', and the same verb 'sfarsi' is the core of the very line that describes Ciacco's appeal to Dante, 'Tu fosti, prima ch'io disfatto, fatto', in *Inf. VI* 42.

What seems to empower the text of Levi's poem, once the Dantean reference is made explicit, is the 'contrappasso' quality of the relationship: the malediction 'i vostri nati torcano il viso da voi' acquires so much more poetic energy if it is juxtaposed first to a text (*Inf. X*) whose complex poetic texture is based on the context of 'belonging' (to the party, the city, the family) and to a situation (*Inf. VI*) where the physical deterioration of everything human leads to spiritual blindness and total loss. The progressive demolition of humanity in the camp succeeds through

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<sup>21</sup> Lynn Gunzberg, '“Nuotando altrimenti che nel Serchio” – Dante as Vademecum for Primo Levi’ in *Reason and Light. Essays on Primo Levi*, ed. by Susan Tarrow (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp.83-98 (p. 91).

the destruction of any social sense of belonging and through the physical humiliation of the victims.

The title *Se questo è un uomo* derives from the fifth line of the poem ('Considerate se questo è un uomo'), but the title originally devised by Primo Levi might have been *I sommersi e i salvati*, according to Marco Belpoliti<sup>22</sup>. In that case, the Dantean reference would have been plain and evident: 'de la prima canzon, ch'è d'i sommersi' (*Inf.* XX 3) is Dante's very own definition of his *Inferno*. If it is true that Levi chose (or agreed) to change it, it is also true that these very words return both as the title of one of the chapters of *Se questo è un uomo* and as the title of his final work, the essay on the concentration camps and on the Shoah. Besides, as Peter Kuon notices in his analysis of the Ulysses chapter in *Se questo è un uomo*, the fifth line of the poem is reminiscent, in its syntax and metre, of Ulysses' 'Considerate la vostra semenza' in *Inf.* XXVI 118, and the chapter 'Il canto di Ulisse' is one of the focal points of the whole book.<sup>23</sup>

There is in fact a form of deep consistency and yet the sense of a controversial relationship in Levi's employment of Dante; and the question is not only one of formal re-use of a well-rooted cultural tradition in the form of scattered citations: Levi's Dante, far from being a shared and unquestioned literary resource, embodies all the characteristics of the unresolved conflict between civilisation and Auschwitz. Levi's Dante, under the appearance of a canonical, traditional and unquestionable cultural reference, has acquired, together with the 'salvation' powers which are thought to be naturally inherent to culture, also all the characteristics of a father-figure and as such is constantly challenged and questioned and never forgotten. In *La*

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<sup>22</sup> Marco Belpoliti, 'Se questo è un uomo – Note ai testi', in: Primo Levi, *Opere I*, p. 1380: 'A proposito del titolo, prima della scelta definitiva, operata da Antonicelli, forse su suggerimento di Renzo Zorzi, Levi era orientato per *I sommersi e i salvati* [...]'.

<sup>23</sup> Kuon, p. 117.

*ricerca delle radici*, an annotated anthology of texts chosen by Levi because of their relevance to his activity as a writer and as a reader, Dante is not included. On answering a question about this surprising absence, Levi says that Dante's importance and presence does not need to be stated:

Ho deliberatamente escluso autori che sono (o dovrebbero essere) patrimonio di ogni lettore, come Dante, Leopardi, Manzoni, Flaubert, ecc.: se li avessi messi, sarebbe stato come se, in un documento di identità, sul rigo “segni particolari” si scrivesse “due occhi”.<sup>24</sup>

Yet one wonders at the conscious choice of including even very little-known texts, such as Sir William Bragg's *L'architettura delle cose*, translated by Carlo Rossi, and published by Mondadori in 1934, and excluding Dante, while Dante in fact is obliquely mentioned in Levi's introduction to the anthology:

Tuttavia, e fermo restando che una scelta come questa non può essere esaustiva, né dare al lettore (che le desideri) le chiavi dell'autore, compilando il volume mi sono accorto che l'impresa non era tanto a buon mercato. [...] A metà cammino mi sono sentito nudo, e in possesso delle opposte impressioni dell'esibizionista, che nudo ci sta bene, e del paziente sul lettino in attesa che il chirurgo gli apra la pancia; anzi, in atto di aprirmela io stesso, *come Maometto nella nona bolgia e nell'illustrazione del Doré*, in cui del resto il compiacimento masochistico del dannato è vistoso. (emphases mine)<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, in an interview dated September 17, 1979, and speaking of the relevance of language, Levi makes two references to Dante and the *Commedia*.

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<sup>24</sup> Risa Sodi, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1990)

<sup>25</sup> Primo Levi, *La ricerca delle radici: Prefazione*, in: *Opere*, II, p. 1362.

[...] mi pare che sarebbe una buona cosa che lo scrittore non vivesse non dico in una torre d'avorio, ma in una tubazione *che parte da Dante e arriva all'infinito*. Ed egli si muove in questa tubazione senza mai vedere il mondo intorno a sé. (emphases mine)

And then, rather ironically:

Proprio per scrivere *La chiave a stella* ho letto un bellissimo libro sui ponti che mi è sembrato fondamentale *quasi* quanto la *Divina Commedia*. (emphasis mine)

It seems quite evident that the writer consciously (and ironically) tries to escape the formal confrontation with the canonical image of Italy's greatest poet and intends to mark his distance from the whole literary system. However, in an interview with Risa Sodi, an episode from the *Commedia* in which Dante famously refuses to keep his promise to a damned soul (Fratre Alberigo, mistakenly remembered as Bocca degli Abati) is being used not as a learned reference but almost as an expressive tool, a shortcut towards the understanding of the non-understandable<sup>26</sup>. In that case, the quote from *Inferno* XXXIII, 149-150 ('E io non lì l'apersi/ e cortesia fu lui esser villano') becomes a double declaration: of distance and belonging: Dante is the code whereby the horror can be perceived, and is at the same time a subtly and unexpectedly subverted canon, that makes it possible to perceive the general subversion of morality that made Auschwitz possible.

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<sup>26</sup> Risa Sodi, 'An Interview with Primo Levi', *Partisan Review*, 54, 3 (1987), 305-366 (p. 363). Also, translated into Italian, in *Primo Levi, conversazioni e interviste 1963-1987*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti (Torino: Einaudi, 1997) pp. 234-35.

Levi's words, beyond the surface of an apparent intellectual detachment, display the extreme nature of an offence that cannot follow the rules of consequence and logic. Dante's lines contain this very subversion: 'e *cortesia* fu lui esser *villano*' (*Inf.* XXXIII 150). Levi decides to overlook the fictional context and the 'theological' (or, in fact, 'fictional') order that support the single episodes of Dante's journey, and foregrounds, instead, the affective (and destructive) aspect of what one could call personal and material responsibility of human beings toward human beings:

The feeling that Dante, a fervent Catholic, felt toward the damned, who have no further claim to their rights, and who must be forced to suffer, was perhaps the Nazis' position with regard to the Jews: they felt they must be forced to endure the maximum possible suffering.<sup>27</sup>

Levi makes it clear that literature, even in its most canonical and unquestioned instances (such as a well known passage from no less a text than Dante's *Commedia*), can be bent to the needs of expression even in spite of its original intention and nature. Such utilisation of literature is obviously alien to anything scholarly or detached: it suggests that literature can indeed be asked to witness and respond to human questions and doubts in an extremely direct and unprotected way. Levi's overt citations from the *Commedia* are often both a conscious and an unconscious creative misreading of the text. In the case of the interview with Risa Sodi, Levi ignores part of the episode's context. It is almost as if the supporting system and the single episode that springs from it could not be made to coexist: and it seems possible to argue that at the centre of Levi's preoccupations there is this very discontinuity, this sort of mismatching

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<sup>27</sup> Sodi, 'Interview', p. 363.

between the framework (Dante's, the periodic table, the order of the universe, the meaning and logic of the world...) and experienced reality.

Levi himself mentions the importance and the meaning of a structure, which not only can shape the known, but can also suggest a rational order for the unknown. When Levi explains why he considers Bragg's text as part of his roots, he says:

A questo suo libro devo riconoscenza. L'ho letto per caso, a sedici anni; mi sono *invaghito delle cose chiare e semplici che diceva*. Leggevo tra le righe una grande speranza: i modelli in scala umana, i concetti di forma e misura, arrivano molto lontano, verso il mondo minuscolo degli atomi e verso il mondo sterminato degli astri; forse infinitamente lontano? *Se sì, viviamo in un cosmo immaginabile, alla portata della nostra fantasia, e l'angoscia del buio cede il posto all'alacrità della ricerca.*<sup>28</sup> (emphases mine)

What is particularly revealing is what he explicitly says about his own sense of achievement and wonder towards the periodic table: when as a student he encountered the study of chemistry, the world acquired a new shape. It became structure, yet one did not need to dispel and discard differences and intrinsic qualities of less known elements. The pleasure and the challenge sprang from the very experience of the actual world:

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<sup>28</sup> Primo Levi, *La ricerca delle radici*, in: *Opere*, II, p. 1388.

[...] per me la chimica rappresentava una nuvola infinita di potenze future, che avvolgeva il mio avvenire in nere volute lacerate da bagliori di fuoco, simile a quella che occultava il monte Sinai. Come Mosè, da quella nuvola attendevo la mia legge, l'ordine in me, attorno a me e nel mondo.<sup>29</sup>

However, what we learn about the shaping, revealing, challenging and consoling function of the ‘table’ comes especially from a book, *Il sistema periodico*, published in 1975 and that covers the whole of Levi’s life, from childhood – or even from the roots of Levi’s Jewish-Italian cultural identity - to the present, and was written when the narrator had already passed through the stages he mentions and, in particular, after Auschwitz, the experience and the very passage that most dramatically and absolutely questions (and probably dissolves) the presence of order, sense and rational purpose.

There is another element that makes the ‘accidental’ citation from *Inf.* XXXIII 149-150 particularly impressive and that is the fact that Levi remembers the lines ‘[...] ed io non li’apersi/ E cortesia fu lui esser villano’, but curiously ‘mistakes’ the name of the protagonist of the episode, not Bocca degli Abati, but Alberigo Manfredi, who, in line 118, introduces himself by saying: ‘Rispuose adunque: I’ son frate Alberigo’. Bocca degli Abati / Alberigo is not the focus (and therefore can be mistaken), because the actual focus is Dante himself. Dante, in Levi’s elaboration of the episode, stands for the inexplicable attitude of a nation that silently acquiesced to a horrific departure from rationality and ethics. It seems that proceeding along this line one would be confronted with the question that gradually became central in Levi’s work and that is the key issue in his last work, *I sommersi e i salvati*, that is: what can logical thinking detect, understand and communicate about Auschwitz?

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<sup>29</sup> Primo Levi, “Idrogeno”, in *Il sistema periodico*, in *Opere*, I, p. 758.

There is no question about the fact that Levi's inspiration, attitude and thoughts are constantly (and somehow naturally) bent to rationality: yet, at the heart of this ethical desire for rationality, the originating core is one of darkness and of despair. As a man of science and a strong believer in the power of reason, Levi fights with calm and determined passion against the loss of guidelines, of principles, and therefore of ethics. But the darkness is never overcome. One of the ambiguous tools to deal with the horror is literature, and literature curiously coincides with Dante:

Ora che ci penso, capisco che questo libro è colmo di letteratura, letteratura che ho assorbito attraverso la pelle anche quando la rifiutavo e la disdegnavo (giacché sono sempre stato un cattivo studente di letteratura italiana). Preferivo la chimica. Mi annoiavano le lezioni di teoria poetica, la struttura del romanzo e roba del genere. Quando fu il momento e dovetti scrivere questo libro, e allora avevo davvero un bisogno patologico di scriverlo, trovai dentro di me una sorta di 'programma'. E si trattava di quella stessa letteratura che avevo studiato più o meno con riluttanza, di quel Dante che ero stato costretto a leggere alla scuola superiore, dei classici italiani e così via.<sup>30</sup>

The Ulysses chapter in *Se questo è un uomo* is the most unconcealed reference to the importance and meaning of Dante for Levi. Interestingly enough, the chapter undergoes several changes and additions, if one compares the original text (a typed copy dated February 14, 1946), the De Silva edition of 1947, and the Einaudi final edition of 1958.<sup>31</sup> This seems to reinforce the idea that remembering is in fact a complex literary choice: in spite of the urgency of bearing

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<sup>30</sup> Germaine Greer, 'Colloquio con Primo Levi', in *Primo Levi, conversazioni e interviste* ed. Belpoliti, p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> A comparative analysis of the three available versions of the text is presented by Marco Belpoliti in 'Se questo è un uomo. Note ai Testi' in *Opere I, 1375-1413*.

witness, another fundamental attitude at work is that of restoring and preserving a cultural background.

The title of the chapter is ‘Il canto di Ulisse’ and it comes immediately after the one entitled ‘Esame di chimica’, which is centred on the ‘exam’ Levi passes in order to be admitted to work at the Buna laboratory. It is very difficult to determine in which order and according to which logic the references to the *Commedia* presented themselves in Levi’s memory, but one is tempted to see a structural coherence in the disposition of references. In ‘Esame di chimica’, one of the characters is Alex, the prisoner who accompanies Levi and who is given the power to torment and control the Jewish prisoners. This is the description of Primo’s immediate tormentor:

Eccoci di nuovo per le scale. Alex vola gli scalini: ha le scarpe di cuoio perchè non è ebreo, è leggero sui piedi come i diavoli di Malebolge. Si volge dal basso a guardarmi torvo, mentre io discendo impacciato e rumoroso nei miei zoccoli spaiati ed enormi, aggrappandomi alla ringhiera come un vecchio.  
(Opere I, p. 103)

Besides the subtle and implicit statement on what Auschwitz means even in terms of logical perceptions (‘Alex [...] ha le scarpe di cuoio *perchè* non è ebreo’ - emphasis mine), the memory of the *Commedia* filters into the narration when the passage from the narrative set in the ‘passato remoto/imperfetto’ to the ‘presente storico’ (a ‘presente atemporale’, in fact) has already taken the reader into the irredeemable presence of the horror. The device is almost a constant in *Se questo è un uomo*: the narrative tends to develop or even to start in a present tense that is at the

same time nightmarish and designed to state the intangibility of what has been.<sup>32</sup> The nature of the offence creates a background texture, which is necessarily dreadful and deprived of causality, but Levi's stubborn opposition, both moral and aesthetic, to the acceptance of obscurity – even as a literary device – reveals itself through a text that is obstinately clear, in spite of the darkness it depicts<sup>33</sup> and present, in spite of its being a narration of past events. The sudden, unexpectedly learned comparison startlingly materialises Malebolge on earth and develops into one of the impressive denunciations of the narrative voice: a cry of biblical intensity through purposefully limited means:

Per rientrare alla Bude, bisogna attraversare uno spiazzo ingombro di travi e di tralicci metallici accatastati. Il cavo d'acciaio di un argano taglia la strada, Alex lo afferra per scavalcarlo, Donnerwetter, ecco si guarda la mano nera di grasso viscido. Frattanto io l'ho raggiunto: senza odio e senza scherno, Alex strofina la mano sulla mia spalla, il palmo e il dorso, per nettarla, e sarebbe assai stupito, l'innocente bruto Alex, se qualcuno gli dicesse che alla stregua di questo suo atto io oggi giudico, lui e Pannwitz e gli innumerevoli che furono come lui, grandi e piccoli, in Auschwitz e ovunque. (*Opere I*, pp. 104-105)

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<sup>32</sup> On the theme of dreams and nightmares as unavoidable forms of communication in Levi's works, Cesare Segre notes: 'Si affrontano insomma due incubi: quello di essere nel Lager, quello di esserne fuori ma di non poter raccontare; o in altre parole: quello di aver perso la libertà, e quello di aver recuperato una libertà che esclude il racconto della non libertà.' Cesare Segre, 'Gli scritti di invenzione di Primo Levi', *Primo Levi, il presente del passato. Giornate internazionali di studi*, ed. Cavaglion, 2 edizione (Roma: Franco Angeli, 1993)

<sup>33</sup> The issue of Levi's determination on choosing to be 'clear' is frequently introduced and discussed. His most significant statement on the question is the article 'Dello scrivere oscuro', in *L'altrui mestiere*, in *Opere*, II, 676.

By the end of the chapter ‘Esame di chimica’ and before the following ‘Il canto di Ulisse’, Primo has already gone through the utterly painful process of memory, which, however, restates the forgotten dignity of his previous life:

L’esame sta andando bene. A mano a mano che me ne rendo conto, mi pare di crescere di statura. Ora mi chiede su quale argomento ho fatto la tesi di laurea. Devo fare uno sforzo violento per suscitare queste sequenze di ricordi così profondamente lontane: è come se cercassi di ricordare gli avvenimenti di una incarnazione anteriore. (pp. 102-103)

The most explicit reference to Dante in the whole of Levi’s production is a tribute to the ambivalent powers of memory. ‘Il canto di Ulisse’ begins and ends with a focalisation on language: the prisoners can speak with Jean, who has become ‘Pikolo’, that is the prisoner in charge of a series of tasks in the camp:

Era perciò toccata a lui la carica di Pikolo, vale a dire di fattorino-scritturale, addetto alla pulizia della baracca, alle consegne degli attrezzi, alla lavatura delle gamelle, alla contabilità delle ore di lavoro del Kommando.’ (p.105)

What is more, he knows both German and French, this has made it possible for him to conquer a ‘privileged’ position in the concentration camp and, together with his cunning, astute way of making himself necessary to the ‘brute’ Alex, make him an almost-Ulysses figure:

Jean parlava correntemente francese e tedesco: appena si riconobbero le sue scarpe sul gradino della scaletta, tutti smisero di raschiare:

- Also, Pikolo, was gibt es Neues?

- Qu'est-ce qu'il y a comme soupe aujourd'hui?

... di che umore era il Kapo? E la faccenda delle venticinque frustate a Stern? Che tempo faceva fuori? Aveva letto il giornale? Che odore c'era alla cucina civile? Che ora era? (p. 108)

The figure of Alex, in all his stolid brutal stupidity, foregrounds and strengthens Jean's human and intellectual characteristics:

Alex aveva mantenuto tutte le sue promesse. Si era mostrato un bestione violento e infido, corazzato di solida e compatta ignoranza e stupidità, eccezion fatta per il suo fiuto e la sua tecnica di aguzzino esperto e consumato. Non perdeva occasione di proclamarsi fiero del suo sangue puro e del suo triangolo verde, e ostentava un altero disprezzo per i suoi chimici cenciosi e affamati: - Ihr Doktoren! Ihr Intelligenten! – sghignazzava ogni giorno vedendoli accalcarsi colle gamelle tese alla distribuzione del rancio. (p. 106)

It is knowledge, intelligence and cunning that qualify Jean. The adjectives subsequently used to define him are: *eccezionale, scaltro, robusto, mite, amichevole, abile, perseverante*. Primo and Pikolo walk together in a universe of dangers and desperation and their movement is marked by encounters (quite a Dantean narrative structure itself):

Passò una SS in bicicletta. È Rudi, il Blockführer. Alt sull'attenti, togliersi il berretto. – Sale brute, celui-là: Ein ganz gemeiner Hund - . Per lui è indifferente parlare francese o tedesco? È indifferente,

può pensare in entrambe le lingue. E' stato in Liguria un mese, gli piace l'Italia, vorrebbe imparare l'italiano. Io sarei contento di insegnargli l'italiano: non possiamo farlo? Possiamo. Anche subito, una cosa vale l'altra, l'importante è di non perdere tempo, di non sprecare quest'ora. (pp. 107-108)

What develops is a progressive mutual knowledge. The switch from past tense to the already noticed device of ‘atemporal present’ takes place when the relationship between Primo and Pikolo has acquired a definite shape and – not incidentally – starts from the moment of fear and brutality (‘È Rudi, il Blockführer’) and moves into the ever present issue of language. The use of the present tense clearly marks the newly introduced need of velocity. It is this very time that must be made the most of, this time has become valuable, because it has to do with human self esteem. Just as Pikolo has at least momentarily defeated Alex, by bending brutality to accepting the supremacy of intelligence, now Primo and Pikolo, in their physical and yet also symbolical walk across the camp, challenge the surrounding brutality and momentarily suspend it through the newly rediscovered powers of memory, knowledge and fraternity. Dante’s text presents a complex network of references to language (marked in emphases in the following quotations): when Dante expresses his desire to hear the voices of the souls in the flame,

«S’ei posson dentro da quelle faville  
*parlar*», diss’io «maestro, assai ten priego  
 e ripriego, che ’l priego vaglia mille,

*Inf. XXVI 64-66*

When Virgil suggests that it would be advisable that he himself – and not Dante – should address the speaking flame,

Lascia *parlare* a me, ch'i' ho concetto  
 ciò che tu vuoi; ch'ei sarebbero schivi,  
 perchè e' fuor greci, forse del tuo *detto*.

*Inf. XXVI 73-75*

when the flame actually starts to speak,

Lo maggior corno de la fiamma antica  
 cominciò a crollarsi *mormorando*,  
 pur come quella cui vento affatica;  
 indi la cima qua e là menando,  
 come fosse la lingua che *parlasser*,  
 gittò voce di fuori, *e disse*

*Inf. XXVI 85-90*

when Ulysses himself describes the powerful effect his words had on the ‘compagnia picciola’:

Li miei compagni fec'io sì aguti,  
 con questa *orazion* picciola, al cammino,  
 che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti.

*Inf. XXVI 121-123*

The decision to teach Italian through Dante and through the Dante of *Inf.* XXVI is presented as inexplicable:

...Il canto di Ulisse. Chissà come e perchè mi è venuto in mente: ma non abbiamo tempo di scegliere, quest'ora già non è più un'ora. Se Jean è intelligente capirà. Capirà: oggi mi sento da tanto. (p. 108)

Yet it seems that the text has already anticipated and answered the question on how and why Primo chooses to remember Dante, the *Commedia*, and the ‘Canto di Ulisse’, among all the possible episodes. A few lines before, this is how Pikolo’s ‘Ulyssean’ attitude is described:

Pikolo era *esperto*, aveva scelto *accortamente* la via in modo che avremmo fatto un lungo giro, camminando almeno un’ora, senza destare sospetti. (p. 107 - emphases mine)

And it has been noticed how the very essence of Pikolo’s characterisation is based on his intelligence vs. Alex’s brutality. Primo chooses to act as a school teacher would:

...Chi è Dante. Che cosa è la Commedia. Quale sensazione *curiosa di novità* si prova, se si cerca di spiegare in breve che cosa è la Divina Commedia. Com’è distribuito l’*Inferno*, cosa è il contrappasso. Virgilio è la Ragione, Beatrice è la Teologia. (p. 108 - emphases mine)

Culture becomes ‘curiously new’, because it makes it possible to state and demonstrate that collective and individual memory can in fact act as opposing means to violence and brutality. Cesare Cases notices that Levi’s Ulysses is the almost romantic hero of knowledge vs. brutality, a reading commonly and typically practised in Levi’s schooldays.<sup>34</sup> In this context, what we tend to see as the anachronism of Levi’s interpretation (subsequent, late twentieth-century readings of the episode tend to focus on the controversial nature of Ulysses’ greatness, rather than romantically accepting it<sup>35</sup>), is certainly consistent with a suggested, implied identification that gradually involves both Pikolo and Primo. It is Pikolo who proves himself an active, productive listener, while Primo’s slow and careful beginning anticipates Ulysses’ speech:

Jean è attentissimo, ed io comincio, lento e accurato:

Lo maggior corno della fiamma antica

Cominciò a crollarsi mormorando,

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<sup>34</sup> Cesare Cases deals with the complex issue of Levi’s approach to Ulysses: ‘Una sola volta Dante viene espressamente citato in *Se questo è un uomo* ed è nel capitolo *Il canto di Ulisse*, che Primo tenta di spiegare a Pikolo: dunque il Dante che, almeno secondo la tradizione romantica – oggi contestata ma non morta, e certo ancora ufficiale ai tempi in cui Levi frequentava il liceo -, esce dai limiti del Medioevo e annuncia il Rinascimento con il suo programma di ‘seguir virtute e conoscenza’ che suona in mezzo all’orrore di Auschwitz ‘come uno squillo di tromba, come la voce di Dio’. Ulisse contesta l’*Inferno* in nome della volontà di conoscere.’ Cesare Cases, ‘Introduzione. L’ordine delle cose e l’ordine delle parole’. In *Opere I*, p. XIX.

<sup>35</sup> Among the endless realm of the researches on Dante’s Ulysses: Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy, Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992) in Chapter Three, before giving her own interpretation of Dante’s Ulysses, Barolini shows and explains the various approaches to the complex issue and gives extensive biographical indications. See also Mario Fubini, ‘Ulisso’, in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, vol. V, pp. 803-809 (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1994), John Freccero, ‘Dante’s Ulysses’ in *The Poetics of Conversion*, (Cambridge, Ma – London: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 136-151, and Piero Boitani, *L’ombra di Ulisse* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992), as well as Edoardo Sanguineti’s studies and findings, mentioned in Chapter 2.2 of the present work.

Pur come quella cui vento affatica.  
 Indi, la cima in qua e in là menando  
 Come fosse la lingua che parlasse  
 Mise fuori la voce, e disse: Quando...

Qui mi fermo e cerco di tradurre. Disastroso: povero Dante e povero francese! Tuttavia l'esperienza pare prometta bene: Jean ammira la bizzarra similitudine della lingua, e mi suggerisce il termine appropriato per rendere ‘antica’ (p. 108)

It is Pikolo who ‘admires’ the simile in which the ‘lingua’ painfully expresses its voice. Pikolo, the Ulyssean user of languages, is characterised through his appreciation of this most impressive visual representation of language.

It is then remarkable that the following sentences are a series of repeated admissions on the failure of memory. What is remembered and what is irremediably forgotten trace a map of resistance of Primo’s identity, dignity and value against the Lager:

Di questo sì, di questo sono sicuro, sono in grado di spiegare a Pikolo, di distinguere perché «misi me» non è «je me mis», è molto più forte e più audace, è un vincolo infranto, è scagliare se stessi al di là di una barriera, noi conosciamo questo impulso. (p. 109).

It seems especially worthy of note that these considerations on the verb ‘mettersi’ not only will subsequently be supported by another ‘philological’ notation, but correspond with

another ‘buco della memoria’, one that the text does not make explicit and that Levi could have easily corrected at the time of the composition of the book, but evidently chose not to (the whole quote seems to spring from memory rather than from a later supervision of the text): the final line from Primo’s interrupted quotation from *Inf.* XXVI reads ‘*Mise* fuori la voce, e disse: Quando...’, but the actual text reads ‘*Gittò* voce di fuori e disse: Quando...’.

It is evident that in this case, as in the previously mentioned occasion of Bocca degli Abati, a creative manipulation of memory has privileged ‘mettersi’ and all its connotations over ‘gettare’. Purpose, aim, decision defeating casualness and impotence? Dante’s verb expresses an extreme concentration of power and intensity, but the prevalent force at work in Levi’s reworking of the text has focussed itself on ‘mettersi’. The free traveller knows a different horizon from that of the camp:

L’alto mare aperto: Pikolo ha viaggiato per mare e sa cosa vuol dire, è quando l’orizzonte si chiude su se stesso; *libero diritto e semplice*, e non c’è ormai che odore di mare: dolci cose ferocemente lontane. (p.108 - emphases mine)

The description of the horizon: *libero diritto e semplice* reminds the reader of an apparently distant line, in which Virgil, recognising Dante’s newly acquired experience and dignity, tells him he can now proceed alone in the last part of his journey: ‘libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio’. (*Purg.* XXVII 140).

The short encounter with one who has not surrendered to the brutalising and annihilating effects of the camp is functionally coherent with an achieved rediscovery of self-dignity:

Siamo arrivati al Kraftwerk, dove lavora il Kommando dei poscavi. Ci deve essere l'ingegner Levi. Eccolo, si vede solo la testa fuori della trincea. Mi fa un cenno colla mano, è un uomo in gamba, non l'ho mai visto giù di morale, *non parla mai di mangiare*. (p.109 - emphases mine)

The theme of food is a constant, terrible and obsessive presence in the whole narration. In this chapter it acquires an even increased value, as it is the background texture of the story, it constitutes its beginning and end, and provides the materialisation of what happens when human beings are deprived of their essential human qualities. Of the two questions in direct speech that are asked by the prisoners at the beginning of the chapter, one is about the food:

Also, Pikolo, was gibt es Neues?

Qu'est-ce qu'il y a comme soupe aujourd'hui? (p.105)

Alex's contempt is shown in the moment when food is being distributed:

-Ihr Doktoren! Ihr Intelligenten!- sghignazzava ogni giorno vedendoli accalcarsi colle gamelle tese alla distribuzione del rancio. (p. 106)

It is because of food that Pikolo chooses Primo as a companion:

Aujourd’hui c’est Primo qui viendra avec moi chercher la soupe. (p. 107)

The words in Italian that Pikolo hears and repeats have to do with food:

Pikolo sta attento, coglie qualche parola del nostro dialogo e la ripete ridendo: - Zup-pa, cam-po, ac-qua. (p.108)

The chapter famously ends with the Babel tower of languages that no longer aim at understanding, or remembering, but only at mere surviving:

Siamo ormai nella fila per la zuppa, in mezzo alla folla sordida e sbrindellata dei porta-zuppa degli altri Kommandos. I nuovi giunti ci si accalcano alle spalle. –Kraut und Rüben?- Kraut und Rüben-. Si annunzia ufficialmente che oggi la zuppa è di cavoli e rape: - Choux et navets. – Kaposzta és répak.

But the ‘ingegner Levi’, who ‘non parla mai di mangiare’, whose figure appears when Primo is strenuously fighting with his own memory in order to ‘save’ an almost forgotten line, the ‘ingegner Levi’ is almost a reappearance of a figure that had spoken to Primo at the beginning of the book, Steinlauf:

Ho scordato ormai, e me ne duole, le sue parole *diritte e chiare*, le parole del già sergente Steinlauf dell’esercito austro-ungarico, croce di ferro della guerra ‘14-18. [...] Ma questo ne era il senso, non dimenticato allora né poi: che appunto perchè il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie, noi

bestie non dobbiamo diventare; che anche in questo luogo si può sopravvivere, e perciò si deve voler sopravvivere, per raccontare, per portare testimonianza; e che per vivere è importante sforzarsi di *salvare* almeno lo scheletro, l'impalcatura, la forma della civiltà. (p. 35 - emphases mine)

The attempt to keep one's dignity is coherent with the attempt to remember. The verb used is, in both cases, 'salvare':

«Mare aperto». «Mare aperto». So che rima con «diserto»: «...quella compagnia Picciola, dalla qual non fui diserto», ma non rammento più se viene prima o dopo. E anche il viaggio, il temerario viaggio al di là delle colonne d'Ercole, che tristezza, sono costretto a raccontarlo in prosa: un sacrilegio. Non ho *salvato che un verso*, ma vale la pena di fermarcisi:

...Acciò che l'uom più oltre non si metta.

«Si metta»: dovevo venire in Lager per accorgermi che è la stessa espressione di prima, «e misi me». Ma non ne faccio parte a Jean, non sono sicuro che sia una osservazione importante. (p. 109 - emphases mine)

The process of memory is now developing beyond any expectations: the language that separates, isolates and marks the condition of the prisoners (almost all the references to the food are expressed in a foreign language) has become through Primo's efforts and Pikolo's understanding, a language that really translates, communicates, remembers and finally produces a revitalisation of memory itself:

Quante altre cose ci sarebbero da dire, e il sole è già alto, mezzogiorno è vicino. Ho fretta, una fretta furibonda .

Ecco, attento Pikolo, apri gli orecchi e la mente, ho bisogno che tu capisca:

Considerate la vostra semenza:

Fatti non fosti a viver come bruti,

Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza. [sic]

Come se anch'io lo sentissi per la prima volta: come uno squillo di tromba, come la voce di Dio.

*Per un momento, ho dimenticato chi sono e dove sono. (p. 109 - emphases mine)*

In this upside down universe, forgetting is in fact remembering, so that recovered and saved knowledge allows human beings to re-establish their ‘virtute et conoscenza’, their knowledge and their worth. Not only has the Dantean text acquired a definite, almost philological value, it has also produced a domino-effect whereby the words really ‘mean’, and therefore, most importantly, ‘connect’ and ‘communicate’:

... Quando mi apparve una montagna bruna

Per la distanza, e parvemi alta tanto

Che mai veduta non ne avevo alcuna.

Sì, sì, «alta tanto», non «molto alta», proposizione consecutiva. E le montagne, quando si vedono di lontano... le montagne... oh Pikolo, di’ qualcosa, parla, non lasciarmi pensare alle mie montagne, che comparivano nel bruno della sera quando tornavo in treno da Milano a Torino! (p. 109)

The extreme value of what has been recovered is expressed by a further “upside down” effect of the situation: that very food which so far had constituted the only cause and reason and, most tragically, the only purpose for any action is, momentarily at least, reduced (or perhaps re-valued) to its function of instrument:

Darei la zuppa di oggi per saper saldare «non ne avevo alcuna» col finale. Mi sforzo di ricostruire per mezzo delle rime, chiudo gli occhi, mi mordo le dita: ma non serve, il resto è silenzio. (p.110)<sup>36</sup>

The Ulysses chapter ends with the last line of *Inf.* XXVI: ‘Infin che ‘l mar fu sopra noi richiuso’. Language has again become Babel, isolation, and torment. The *zuppa* is once more the only aim, and the adventure of these men is towards a final drowning. The readers, in spite of the tragic conclusion of the chapter, are made to feel that what is in fact ‘saved’ is the journey of the two men and Primo’s attempt at remembering. In a sense, what Primo does is coupled by what the readers are meant to try and achieve: for him humanity, dignity and salvation are in the possibility to remember Ulysses in spite of the camp; for us salvation resides in the duty to remember what has been.

Levi’s utilisation of Dante’s text in ‘Il canto di Ulisse’ is both a close reading of what memory has saved, and a qualification of the man who chooses to remember. In this sense it

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<sup>36</sup> The situation reminds one of Stazio’s words on his enthusiastic declaration of love for the poetry of Virgil:

E per esser vivuto di là quando  
visse Virgilio, assentirei un sole  
più che non deggio al mio uscir di bando.

*Purg.* XXI 100-102.

seems possible to conclude that Levi's Dante is effectively 'made alive': whatever Levi remembers, forgets, changes or adapts is consistent with the plan of *Se questo è un uomo*.

In his attempt at remembering the text of the *Commedia*, Primo, the prisoner, the victim, is an active producer of new connections, some of which are made explicit, while others are left in a 'gray zone' of potential meaning. Before arriving at the final lines of the canto and at the final point of that day's journey, the *zuppa*, one more line is remembered and discarded:

Mi danzano per il capo altri versi: «... la terra lagrimosa diede vento...» no, è un'altra cosa. (p. 110)

That very line is part of the conclusion of *Inf. II* (vv. 133-136):

La terra lagrimosa diede vento,  
che balenò una luce vermicchia  
la qual mi vinse ciascun sentimento;  
e caddi come l'uom cui sonno piglia.

The line that narrates (or perhaps: hides within a dream) Dante's entrance into Hell comes back into Primo's memory exactly when Primo, through Dante's Ulysses, has almost succeeded in escaping from the actual hell of the camp.

Later on, in his subsequent works, Levi did not abandon his concern with language and with the question of whether human beings will be able to define their relationship with the world in a positive way. If compared with *Se questo è un uomo*, the references to Dante are less deeply

linked with the internal narrative structure of the different texts, but a direct Dantean presence is quite often detectable especially in *Il sistema periodico* and in some *Racconti*. As I will argue in the next chapter, one of the rare cases in which Dante is explicitly and extensively introduced into the core of the narrative is the short story ‘Nel parco’, almost an anticipation of the operation performed in *La ricerca delle radici*, that is a sort of planned, ironical understatement of Dante’s influence. In all of Levi’s Dantisms, what can be found is a constant presence of meaningful citations, which trace a map of Levi’s own Dante, and yet this is a system that he never stops questioning.

## 2. DISTANCING DANTE

The *Commedia* is a structural frame for *Se questo è un uomo*: the entrance, the first encounters, the very conception of the Lager as an *Inferno* from which no physical or cultural escape is possible. The cultural, literary, and linguistic tools connected with the knowledge of the Dantean underworld almost naturally lend themselves in the description of the unspeakable. In other words, in *Se questo è un uomo* the references to the *Divine Commedia* tend to operate as a supportive system, a framework, and a linguistic background<sup>37</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that this very approach to the study of Levi's works has already been not only noticed, but also developed and applied to the analysis of specific episodes.

What I would like to discuss now is the fact that the Dantean reference background, already challenged in *Se questo è un uomo*, is totally subverted in the rest of Levi's works and that this subversion is achieved in terms of reduction, focalisation, conscious misplacement and ironical reinterpretation.

As I argued in the previous chapter, one of the central episodes of *Se questo è un uomo*, dedicated to Dante and centred on the figure of Ulysses, is based on the power, characteristics, and limits of memory. Memory is the material of the writer-witness at the moment of

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<sup>37</sup> Marco Belpoliti states and focusses the issue in his 'dictionary of Levi's references' under 'Dante Alighieri': 'Se questo è un uomo si presenta per molti aspetti come un'opera fortemente permeata dall'influenza di Dante; lo è sul piano lessicale per i numerosi riporti dalla *Divina commedia*, ma anche sul piano strutturale, dal momento che il viaggio "verso il fondo" di Primo Levi, nell'"anus mundi", appare come una ripresa della prima cantica dantesca. Inoltre, molte delle figure degli aguzzini, in particolare nei primi capitoli, sembrano modellate, almeno sul piano letterario, sugli stereotipi danteschi.' Marco Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*. (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1998) (p. 60).

composition, and is also the faculty that should be made alive in the mind of the reader. Memory is therefore shown as a newly conquered tool, defined in its re-humanisation results, and yet made to apparently fail again in the face of the brutality of the concentration camp.

Jean Améry, whose reflections on Auschwitz are a constant presence in Levi's later essays, books and articles<sup>38</sup>, in his 1966 book *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, writes about an incident which one cannot but compare with the Ulysses chapter in *Se questo è un uomo*. The vision of a flag on a building under construction in the camp makes the writer mechanically remember a line from Hölderlin. He recites the line aloud in the hope that a feeling might arise, but nothing happens: in the Lager, poetry – in Améry's conclusion – does not transcend reality any longer. Perhaps, he adds, if there had been a companion to whom he could have communicated the memory, the feeling and the spirituality of this shared background, the emotional and spiritual spring would have acted again. The problem, he concludes, was that there was no such companion in Auschwitz.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See in particular the observations made by Primo Levi in chapter VI ('L'intellettuale ad Auschwitz') of *I sommersi e i salvati*, in Opere, I, cit. p. 1100.

<sup>39</sup> 'Davanti a un edificio in costruzione notai una bandiera, esposta per chissà quale motivo. 'Die Mauern stehn sprachlos und kalt, im Winde klirren die Fahnen' [Al freddo muti se ne stanno i muri, nel vento stridono le banderuole], mormorai seguendo meccanicamente un'associazione. Ripetei i versi ad alta voce, rimasi in ascolto del suono delle parole, cercai di tener dietro al ritmo, confidando che emergesse il riferimento emozionale e spirituale che da anni per me si ricollegava a questa lirica di Hölderlin. Non accadde nulla. La poesia non trascendeva più la realtà. Era lì ed era ormai solo asserzione concreta: questo e quest'altro, e il Kapo grida *links* e la zuppa era liquida e nel vento stridono le banderuole. Forse il sentimento hölderliniano racchiuso nell'humus psichico si sarebbe manifestato se vi fosse stato un compagno in uno stato d'animo simile al mio, al quale avrei potuto citare la strofa. Il problema più grave era che questo buon compagno non esisteva, non esisteva nella fila del Kommando, non esisteva in tutto il campo.' Jean Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungversuche eines Überwältigen*, (Szesensy Verlag, 1966; Italian edition, translated from the German by Enrico Cerri, *Intellettuale a Auschwitz* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1987), ( p.8).

Levi structures, distributes, and designs *Se questo è un uomo* with the rationalistic principle that Hell can be narrated, that the memory of the fact must not be lost, and that the instruments through which the witness pursues his task are those of a shared cultural heritage. All this implies the presence of an external listener-reader: Levi's narration, unlike Améry's, is not only the solitary record and the extremely painful reflection elaborated by the victim, but also the attempt to produce a narration of the non-narratable and to speak about the unspeakable in order to fight against the danger of forgetting. The challenge of reconstruction involves at a first level the question already expressed: is it possible that the very cultural tradition (that gives the witness the means to narrate and communicate his journey through hell) be in fact part of the world that contains and leads to Auschwitz?

Belpoliti defines the numerous citations from the *Divine Commedia* as 'presenze sottocutanee', sign and evidence of Levi's belonging to the social and cultural milieu of the Italian middle class of his time.<sup>40</sup> The references have been indicated and isolated in various studies<sup>41</sup> and trace a shared cultural map, but also – and this is in my opinion their most disquieting aspect – a form of approach that is not so consistent with the tranquillising effect that the employment of a literary 'monument' is expected to produce. What Mengaldo<sup>42</sup> notices, talking about the classicisms of Levi's vocabulary, is the presence of Dante as a privileged source

<sup>40</sup> Belpoliti, *Primo Levi*, p. 61.

<sup>41</sup> Besides Belpoliti, *Primo Levi* (pp. 60-65) and the observations by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo in his introduction to the third volume of his edition of Levi's works, as well as in his study of the linguistic aspects of Levi's production, the issue is often presented as a self evident reference rather than a problematic presence. See Pier Vincenzao Mengaldo, 'Introduzione', *Primo Levi – Opere*, 3 vols (Torino: Einaudi, 1986). Vol. 3, p. XVI and Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Ciò che dobbiamo a Primo Levi' and 'Lingua e scrittura in Levi' in *La tradizione del Novecento. Terza serie*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> Mengaldo, 'Introduzione', p. XXIX.

of expressions: ‘Come non sorprende, poi, alcune parole di nobile caratura rimandano direttamente al classico per eccellenza di Levi, Dante [...] una faccetta della sua *altezza d'ingegno* [...]; che fosse [il Moro di Verona] *cinto* da una disperata demenza senile (e più sotto viene citato con Calibano, Capaneo)’. In the accompanying note, Mengaldo specifies: ‘In generale, Dante, come è noto, è l’autore che Levi più spesso cita e di cui senz’altro incorpora espressioni e vocaboli nel suo discorso’.

Yet, Dante is part of a world that the Lager has cancelled. Citing Dante tends to acquire the taste of a stubborn, almost ironical statement about the author’s identity. As if the very fact of remembering what one comes from, and is made of, could challenge the whole situation: the paradox is not solved: if the Lager exists in spite of Dante, culture, tradition, humanity, it is the Lager that has overcome all the rest, and denial becomes a structuring thread (‘...dove andiamo *non sappiamo*’, ‘*non ritorneremo*’, ‘*nessuno* deve uscire ...’) that involves a programmatic first person plural.

Gunzberg’s analysis of Levi’s use of *Inferno* XXI 48-49 (‘Qui non ha loco il Santo Volto! / Qui si nuota altrimenti che nel Serchio’) in the description of the arrival in Auschwitz, moves from the assumption that ‘what makes these lines so apt, such a perfect description of Levi’s own situation is that here place is defined by what is *not*, by the absence of comfortable familiarity, of what makes merely bearable existence livable. Any reminder of home – the so-called Santo Volto or black-faced crucifix kept in the Duomo and printed in the coins of Lucca, and the Serchio river in which so many Lucchesi swam on a hot day – was at this point so distant and inaccessible as to make it seem impossible that it ever existed.’<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Gunzberg, p. 85.

Memory in the Lager (as well as work, the utterly dehumanised *Arbeit*) becomes unbearable pain and rational contradiction. In the chapter dedicated to the limbo situation of the infirmary (*Ka-Be*), Levi defines the suspension of physical suffering as an increase of awareness: ‘Il Ka-Be è il Lager a meno del disagio fisico. Perciò, chi ancora ha seme di coscienza, vi riprende coscienza;’<sup>44</sup> And of course awareness means access to memory:

Sappiamo donde veniamo: i ricordi del mondo di fuori popolano i nostri sonni e le nostre veglie, ci accorgiamo con stupore che nulla abbiamo dimenticato, ogni memoria evocata ci sorge davanti dolorosamente nitida. Ma dove andiamo non sappiamo. Potremo forse sopravvivere alle malattie e sfuggire alle scelte, forse anche resistere al lavoro e alla fame che ci consumano: e dopo? Qui lontani momentaneamente dalle bestemmie e dai colpi, possiamo rientrare in noi stessi e meditare, e allora diventa chiaro che non ritorneremo.<sup>45</sup>

Levi consciously elaborates a system of defence in which rationality has a primal role. The structure of *Se questo è un uomo*, its division into thematic units that favour a didactic intent, and often escape the mere chronological order, suggest the consideration that rationality is still a resource, a chosen framework made to contain, analyse, and present the facts to an external reader/listener, in spite of the incommunicable nature of facts themselves.

In subsequent works, such as *La tregua* and *Se non ora quando?*, chronological order becomes the connective guiding line and the narration accomplishes the task and the imperative of an order. In other works, *Il sistema periodico* and *La chiave a stella*, the narrator chooses an

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<sup>44</sup> *Se questo è un uomo*, in Opere, I, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem.

external form to justify and connect the story: respectively the table of the elements and the relationship between the character of Faussonne and the narrator. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to find a common thread for the short stories of the various collections (*Storie naturali*, *Vizio di forma*, *Lilit*). It is as if order and systematisation were an ideological choice no longer available, while the dominating force remains that of irrationality, disorder, chaos: the short stories often seem to play with an idea and suggest a possible development, but tend to stop before the extreme consequences are actually reached. Science fiction in this case takes full advantage of its status of ‘fiction’ to prevent and protect from the complete vision of the nightmare.

Levi himself mentions and reveals his troubled attitude to his activity as a narrator, when he comments on the choice of the pseudonym ‘Damiano Malabaila’ for *Storie naturali*, his first work not explicitly connected with the Auschwitz experience:

Malabaila significa ‘cattiva balia’; ora, mi pare che da molti dei miei racconti spiri un vago odore di latte girato a male, di nutrimento che non è più tale, insomma di sofisticazione, di contaminazione e di malefizio. Veleno in luogo dell’alimento: e a questo proposito vorrei ricordare che, per tutti noi superstizi, il Lager, nel suo aspetto più offensivo e imprevisto, era apparso proprio questo, un mondo alla rovescia, dove ‘fair is foul and foul is fair’, i professori lavorano di pala, gli assassini sono capisquadra, e nell’ospedale si uccide.<sup>46</sup>

The Lager has created a short circuit whereby whatever existed before, and whatever may exist after, is both poisoned and unavoidable. While in the Lager, the narrator has experienced the

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Storie Naturali: Note ai testi’, in *Opere*, I, p.1436.

need, the extreme pain, and the failure of memory; after the Lager, his very identity becomes that of the witness, whose purpose is the preservation of memory<sup>47</sup>.

Yet, the preservation of memory is itself a disquieting task. The author refers to lines he expects to be familiar to his implied readers and therefore defines his audience as a non-alien interlocutor, belonging to, and probably standing for, the very world that was Levi's own before Auschwitz. Gunzberg notices a fact that is easily comparable to what has been observed about the use of the verb *mettere* in the Ulysses' episode and the way Levi confuses Bocca degli Abati with Frate Alberigo:

Levi's misquotation allows us further insight into his use of Dante. He renders the lines as '...Qui non ha luogo il Santo Volto,/qui si nuota altrimenti che nel Serchio!' His modernisation of the older form *loco* may have been calculated to make the passage appear to be the spontaneous, apparently imprecise, recollection it may indeed have been in the camp as Levi pondered the incident with the icicle and the forbidding guard.<sup>48</sup>

One more episode from *Se questo è un uomo* foregrounds an in-built and implicit familiarity with Dante. It is the final paragraph of the first chapter, 'Il viaggio':

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<sup>47</sup> This very point is most clearly expressed by Gordon, in his essay on Levi: 'The dilemma Levi implicitly sets himself is to move from a pathological testimony, where memory is solipsistic and crushing, towards an ethical memory, in which a conscious, voluntary awareness and acknowledgment of the past (memory and history) can communicate a sort of collective sense of value for writer and reader. This is memory's ethical turn.' (Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, p. 65.

<sup>48</sup> Gunzberg, p. 92.

Senza sapere come, mi trovai caricato su di un autocarro con una trentina di altri [...] ci siamo presto accorti che non siamo senza scorta: è una strana scorta. E' un soldato Tedesco [...] Accende una pila tascabile, e invece di gridare ‘Guai a voi, anime prave’ ci domanda cortesemente ad uno ad uno, in tedesco e in lingua franca, se abbiamo danaro od orologi da cedergli: tanto dopo non ci servono più. Non è un comando, non è regolamento questo: si vede bene che è una piccola iniziativa privata del nostro caronte.<sup>49</sup>

The passage from the unforgettable Charon of *Inf.* III to the vivid description of the German soldier presents some of the characteristics that are most worth noticing in Levi's employment of Dante. Not unlike the case of Ulysses discussed in the first chapter of my research and the episode analysed by Lynn Gunzberg, a fundamental semantic contiguity is to be perceived between the third canto of the *Commedia*, which marks the actual crossing of the border of the Underworld, and the narrator's entrance into the Hell of the Lager. But it is almost as if the reader were made to perceive a continuity that is in fact unachievable: in Levi's narration Hell has already shown itself in the violence, the madness, the absurdity of the situation. The first six lines of *Inf.* III state the theme of divine justice, power and love as structuring pattern:

Per me si va ne la città dolente,  
per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,  
per me si va tra la perduta gente.

Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;

fecemi la divina potestate,

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<sup>49</sup> *Opere*, I, p. 15.

la somma sapienza è 'l primo amore.

The words to be read on arriving at Auschwitz were the hellish lie ‘Arbeit macht frei’. As Primo Levi says:

Nei riguardi dei condannati a morte, la tradizione prescrive un austero ceremoniale, atto a mettere in evidenza come ogni passione e collera siano ormai spente, e come l’atto di giustizia non rappresenti che un triste dovere verso la società, tale da potere accompagnarsi a pietà verso la vittima da parte dello stesso giustiziere. Si evita perciò al condannato ogni cura estranea, gli si concede la solitudine, e ove lo desideri, ogni conforto spirituale, si procura insomma che egli non senta intorno a sé l’odio o l’arbitrio, ma la necessità e la giustizia, e, insieme con la punizione, il perdono.

Ma a noi questo non fu concesso, perché eravamo troppi, e il tempo era poco, e poi, finalmente, di che cosa avremmo dovuto pentirci, e di che cosa venir perdonati? (p. 9)

The reference to the *Commedia* acts as a distancing factor: in Levi’s cultural experience, the *Commedia* is the highest, most unanimously accepted canon about sin, pain, and punishment, and it is necessarily reduced to an obviously insufficient background of knowledge. In a sense, what remains are the lexical units: the basic elements that constitute the material stuff of which language, communication, or culture are made, while the syntactical level is lost: as the prisoner is told, ‘hier ist kein Warum’. The ‘presenze sottocutanee’, as Levi’s citations of Dante have been called, present themselves as defeated challenges where the previously shared cultural ground disappears into a new incomprehensible universe.

In this universe Charon loses his capitalisation and acquires a function ('si vede bene che è una piccola iniziativa privata del nostro caronte') that has nothing to do with a recognisable order. It is a reduction of elements that started with the visualisation of the German soldier: 'Accende una pila tascabile, e invece di gridare 'Guai a voi, anime prave'.... The 'invece' stresses the paradoxical contiguity with a pattern that the mind strives to recognise, while the actual situation defeats even the most horrible expectations in being itself more hellish than any previous representation of hell. No 'fioco lume' (*Inf.* III 75), but 'una pila tascabile', no commands, but 'ci domanda cortesemente', no 'Caronte', but 'caronte'.

The whole episode and the very words 'comando' and 'regolamento' ('non è un comando, non è regolamento questo: si vede bene che è una piccola iniziativa privata del nostro caronte') seem to suggest that Levi had written the chapter as a carefully planned adaptation of *Inf.* III. The unexplained 'strano sollievo' that derives from the ironical awareness that this 'caronte' shares the known vices of the earthly world, and is not, after all, an incomprehensible demon, is the final mistake of the prisoners: the following chapter 'Sul fondo' is dedicated to the organised progressive deprivation of everything the prisoners still own, their identity included.

Dante acts as a linguistic and semantic resource, whose value, however, is made to acquire a different shape, as it perceptibly becomes a matter related to the blindness of literature. It is almost a constant that the episodes that most overtly employ the citation of lines from the *Commedia*, far from being a form of glorification of the source or presenting themselves as learned asides, constitute a subtle challenge, almost a denial, of the lines themselves. The case of Charon is not dissimilar to that of the citation from *Inf.* XXI, where the 'Hier ist kein Warum' of the guard is explained through the situation of the 'barattieri':

spinto dalla sete, ho adocchiato, fuori di una finestra, un bel ghiacciolo a portata di mano. Ho aperto la finestra, ho staccato il ghiacciolo, ma subito si è fatto avanti uno grande e grosso che si aggirava là fuori, e me lo ha strappato brutalmente. – Warum? – gli ho chiesto nel mio povero tedesco. – Hier ist kein Warum, - (qui non c’è perché), mi ha risposto, ricacciandomi dentro con uno spintone.

La spiegazione è ripugnante ma semplice: in questo luogo è proibito tutto, non già per riposte ragioni, ma perché a tale scopo il campo è stato creato. Se vorremo viverci, bisognerà capirlo presto e bene:

...Qui non ha luogo il Santo Volto,  
qui si nuota altrimenti che nel Serchio!

Ora dopo ora, questa prima lunghissima giornata *di antInferno* volge al termine. (p. 23, emphases mine).

The point of view from which the lines are presented induce the readers to perceive the logic of the tormentors: the statement ‘La spiegazione è ripugnante ma semplice’ frames the programmatic subversion on which the Lager is based. The words, which enable the narrator to communicate the subversion, are borrowed from Dante, and Dante becomes the means through which the reader perceives the moral unacceptability of the whole situation.

The unquestionable, evident, and absolute innocence of the victims is presented through citations taken from a context where there are no victims, but sinners: in Dante’s Hell what is unquestionable, evident, and absolute, is the guilt of the sinners. By framing Dante’s Hell in the Lager, Levi produces an increased perception of displacement and the realisation that the primal

subversion might be in the literary text, whose words, whose lexical units, reproduce (even anticipate, and eternalise) the present situation, but whose overall discourse and logic are in fact irreconcilable with what is being experienced.

There is an unfathomable mystery that Primo perceives at the end of the Ulysses chapter:

Trattengo Pikolo, è assolutamente necessario e urgente che ascolti, che comprenda questo ‘come altrui piacque’, prima che sia troppo tardi, domani lui o io possiamo essere morti, o non vederci mai più, devo dirgli, spiegargli del Medioevo, del così umano e necessario e pure inaspettato anacronismo, e *altro ancora, qualcosa di gigantesco che io stesso ho visto ora soltanto, nell’intuizione di un attimo, forse del perché del nostro destino, del nostro essere oggi qui.* (pp. 110-11 - emphases mine)

The ‘intuizione’ remains in the background, but it seems that its subversive value could in fact provide the reader with a consistent reference in the case of Dante quotations, especially where the citation itself is not a mere linguistic-cultural tool but instead presents itself as a semantic indication. Moving from the contexts of *Se questo è un uomo* to Levi’s other works, one finds numerous instances of a subversive, controversial nature that seems to characterise Levi’s relationship with Dante.

One quite clear and extremely interesting example is ‘Capaneo’, the first short story of the collection *Lilit*. The collection comprises short stories published between 1975 and 1981, with the exception of ‘Un discepolo’ (1961) and ‘Capaneo’, which had previously appeared in the magazine *Il Ponte* in 1959. The text is basically the same in the two versions, but, beside a more

‘impersonal tone’<sup>50</sup>, one of the most interesting changes is that in the revised version, the reference to Capaneo becomes more explicit. Still, the reference relies on the reader’s knowledge of the episode from the *Commedia*, which Levi does not recount or summarise, but merely indicates as an orientation for the reader. The story is set in Auschwitz during an air attack. The characters are the narrator, and two of the prisoners: the Italian Valerio and the Polish Rappoport. Valerio is weak, bent by the violence of the Lager and submissive to people and events. Rappoport is his opposite and, interestingly enough, he is introduced into the story through his own movements and words, rather than through the narrator’s authoritative description:

Fuori, dopo l’urlo tragico delle sirene, regnava un silenzio pieno di minaccia, ma ad un tratto si udì un calpestio sopra le nostre teste, e subito vedemmo disegnarsi in cima alla scala il contorno nero e vasto di Rappoport con un secchio in mano. Si accorse di noi, esclamò: - Italiani! – e lasciò il secchio, che rotolò con fragore giù per gli scalini.<sup>51</sup>

Here Gordon’s notation on the deeply Dantean nature of many of the encounters in Levi’s works<sup>52</sup> seems particularly appropriate. There is an obvious proximity between ‘un silenzio pieno di minaccia’ and ‘un fracasso d’un suon, pien di spavento’ (*Inf.* IX 65), while the expression ‘ad un tratto’ does somehow reproduce the very Dantean ‘ed ecco’ that so often arrests the reader’s perception in front of the many sudden visual changes in the course of the *Commedia*. What the narrator records and marks is the structural (and – again – very Dantean) opposition between

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. ‘Note ai testi’, in *Opere*, II, 1531- 36.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Capaneo’, in *Lilit*, *Opere*, II, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Gordon, *Ordinary Virtues*, pp. 225-30.

Rappoport's 'magnanimità' and Valerio's 'pusillanimità', but the occasion for the central, explicit reference to Dante, comes as a reflection of the narrator after Rappoport's reaction to the bombing:

Rappoport si sganasciava dalle risa. – Te la sei fatta sotto, eh, Pisano? O non ancora? Aspetta, aspetta, il bello ha ancora da venire.

- Hai dei buoni nervi, - dissì io, mentre nella memoria liceale mi affiorava, sbiadita come da una incarnazione anteriore, l'immagine spavalda di Capaneo, che dal fondo dell'*Inferno* sfida Giove e ne irride le folgori. (p. 10)

The choice of the title is now made explicit: the lines the narrator dimly remembers are from *Inf.* XIV 28-30, the canto is dedicated to those who denied or cursed the deity, punished with an eternal rain of fire:

Sovra tutto 'l sabbion, d'un cader lento,  
piovean di foco dilatate falde,  
come di neve in alpe senza vento.

In Dante's text the sense of wonder is achieved by the silence and the surprise suggested by the comparison of fire with snow, and the implied peacefulness of a windless mountain landscape, where the dominating characteristics are solemnity, immensity, and silence. While all the nameless sinners try to diminish the torment of the fire, Dante notices a figure ('quel grande') that does not seem to be affected by the common punishment:

Sanza riposo mai era la tresca  
 de le misere mani, or quindi or quinci  
 escotendo da sé l'arsura fresca.  
  
 I' cominciai: 'Maestro, tu che vinci  
 tutte le cose, fuor che ' demoni duri  
 ch'a l'intrar de la porta contra uscinci,  
 chi è quel grande che non par che curi  
 lo 'ncendio e giace dispettoso e torto,  
 sì che la pioggia non par che 'l maturi?

*Inf. XIV 40-48*

When Rappoport makes his statement about the way he sees the world, the narrator does not feel sympathetic, as he is still in a condition that does not allow him to be different from Valerio:

La vitalità di Rappoport, che in altra condizione avrei ammirata, (ed infatti oggi la ammiro) mi appariva importuna, insolente: se la nostra pelle valeva due soldi, la sua, benché polacco e sazio, non valeva molto di più, ed era irritante che lui non lo volesse riconoscere. Quanto a quella faccenda della teoria e della contabilità, non avevo voglia di starla a sentire. Avevo altro da fare: dormire, *se i padroni del cielo* me lo permettevano; se no, succhiarmi la mia paura in pace, come ogni benpensante. (pp.10-11, emphases mine)

In spite of his listeners' present defeat, Rappoport speaks bold and clear:

Perciò, nel caso deprecabile che uno di voi mi sopravviva, potrete raccontare che Leon Rappoport ha avuto quanto gli spettava, non ha lasciato debiti né crediti, non ha pianto e non ha chiesto pietà. *Se all'altro mondo incontrerò Hitler, gli sputerò in faccia con pieno diritto... -* Cadde una bomba poco lontano, e seguì un rombo come di frana: doveva essere crollato uno dei magazzini. Rappoport dovette alzare la voce quasi in un urlo: *-...perché non mi ha aiutato!* (emphases mine, p.11)

In Dante's text (*Inf.* XIV 52-60), Capaneo's cry and curse against God is a complex mythological reference to the Theban War, and to Jupiter's smiths: even if Jupiter exhausted the very makers of the lightning bolt which was used to kill Capaneo, even if Jupiter asked Vulcan himself for help, he would never ultimately defeat and break him, says Capaneo. Levi's remembrance of Capaneo's utter rebellion is contained within the very first words the sinner says as soon as he realised Dante is asking Virgil about him: 'gridò: 'Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto' (*Inf.* XIV 51). Again, as in the case of Ulysses, while the 'magnanimità' of the figures is in the foreground, the discourse developed by the events hardly hides a more unquiet conclusion whereby the sinners' attitude to God is echoed by the victims with unexpected side effects. Here Capaneo's cry against God is reflected by Rappoport's cry against Hitler.

The utilisation of Dante's text in its single episodes, which makes it possible to foreground, isolate, and probably misinterpret, the most famous fragments of the *Commedia*, is common practice in the discourse of the 'educated' Italian. What Levi does about his 'Rappoport – Capaneo' is, however, more disquieting and unexpected. While the 'pusillanime' Valerio disappears from the conclusion of the story, Rappoport dies, but survives in the words of the

narrator-witness who fulfils the task of ‘raccontare che Leon Rappoport ha avuto quanto gli spettava’ so that the narrator concludes the short story saying:

Ho ragione di ritenere che Rappoport non sia sopravvissuto; perciò stimo doveroso eseguire del mio meglio l’incarico che mi è stato affidato. (p. 12)

Not only is Levi’s Capaneo freed from his identification as sinner, and focussed instead as the spokesman of non-defeatable individual freedom and self-accountability, but he survives as a ‘magnanimo’ in the very words of the witness. The Dantean model had stated, through Virgil’s rebuke, a further condemnation of the rebellious sinner:

‘O Capaneo, in ciò che non s’ammorra  
la tua superbia, se’ tu più punito;  
nullo martiro, fuor che la tua rabbia,  
sarebbe al tuo furor dolor compito.’

*Inf. XIV 63-66*

Levi’s controversial attitude to the Dantean reference is once more visible. What the narrator has described as an almost accidental connection (‘... dalla memoria liceale mi affiorava, sbiadita come da una incarnazione anteriore, l’immagine spavalda di Capaneo, che dal fondo dell’*Inferno* sfida Giove e ne irride le folgori’) is in fact much more than a dim reminiscence, since it is anticipated in the title itself. What is especially interesting is this very reserve, a sort of implicit address to the reader to complete and fulfil the task for which the writer has prepared the

clues but for which he has obscured the conclusions. The reader is given a title and the unexplained reference to an episode. The clues are clear to any Italian sharing Levi's milieu, but their disquieting effect (the symmetry in the relationships Rappoport/Capaneo and Hitler/God) can only become evident if one goes back to the *Commedia*. Therefore, the linguistic and cultural tools acquire a more ambiguous nature, as their effect is consciously (un)determined by the writer, who could have made them more (or less) explicit and given the reader more (or less) choice in establishing to what extent Capaneo's God is to be identified with Rappoport's Hitler.

The Dantean source is pervasive in Levi, moving from an ironical utilisation of the reference to a more complex and sometimes troubled relationship. A particularly interesting situation is to be found in his poems. Dante's lines tend to filter and recreate themselves in Italian poetry, almost presenting an obvious 'ready made', to be used in case of need: from the first line of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* to Sanguineti's experimental poetry. Dante's text generally fulfils the needs of an anticipated echo, and states at the same time belonging and distancing. What is particularly interesting in Levi's use of Dante, is a constant tendency to 'translate' and question the model: the literary text is not merely a descriptive tool, as it becomes the pretext for a more compelling question on the role of culture.

A similarly complex situation develops in the case of the poem 'Il superstite' included in the collection *Ad ora incerta*<sup>53</sup>: again – as in the case of Capaneo - the reference to Dante is made clear by the author (here by a note indicating the line being quoted), but the interpretation of the poem changes dramatically according to the level at which the citation is perceived.

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<sup>53</sup> Levi's poems were written and published in different periods: in 1970 an untitled collection of twenty-three poems, then, in 1975, *Osteria di Brema*, comprising the previous poems and five more. In 1978 Levi starts publishing his poems in the newspaper *La Stampa* and in 1984 these works are collected in *Ad ora incerta*, whose title is inspired by a line from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: 'since then, at an uncertain hour'.

IL SUPERSTITE<sup>54</sup>

*Since then, at an uncertain hour,*

Dopo di allora, ad ora incerta,

Quella pena ritorna,

E se non trova chi lo ascolti

Gli brucia in petto il cuore.

Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni

Lividi nella prima luce,

Grigi di polvere di cemento,

Indistinti per nebbia,

Tinti di morte nei sonni inquieti:

A notte menano le mascelle

Sotto la mora greve dei sogni

Masticando una rapa che non c'è.

'Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa,

Andate. Non ho soppiantato nessuno,

Non ho usurpato il pane di nessuno,

Nessuno è morto in vece mia. Nessuno.

Ritornate alla vostra nebbia.

Non è mia colpa se respiro

E mangio e bevo e dormo e vesto panni.'

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<sup>54</sup> In *Ad ora incerta*, in *Opere*, II, 576.

The poem is framed by two quotations: the first line (the emphases are Levi's) is from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the last is from *Inf. XXXIII*. 'At an uncertain hour' is the hour of poetry, but it is also the hour of irrational, involuntary memory. In the introduction to this collection, Levi sounds almost as if he needed to apologise for his having given in to the impulse of poetry:

Uomo sono. Anch'io, ad intervalli irregolari, 'ad ora incerta', ho ceduto alla spinta: a quanto pare, è inscritta nel nostro patrimonio genetico. (...) Posso solo assicurare l'eventuale lettore che i rari istanti (in media, non più di una volta all'anno) singoli stimoli hanno assunto naturaliter una certa forma, che la mia metà razionale continua a considerare innaturale.<sup>55</sup>

Coleridge's Mariner is, like Dante, one who has seen a different world and has returned to narrate his experience. While, however, Dante's narration is the recovery of a universal order, the Mariner's is an unexplained urge, a compulsive drive that marks the narrator apart even from his chosen listeners. Levi often speaks of himself as of one who *must* tell his story, and the shared nightmare of the prisoners is that of not being believed, or even worse, of not being listened to, and Levi's poems, it has been noted, often constitute the core of an idea to be then developed in his prose production<sup>56</sup>. 'Il Superstite' is dated '4 febbraio 1984', the citation from Coleridge reappears as epigraph in Levi's last volume *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986), in the same function as

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<sup>55</sup> *Ad ora incerta*, in *Opere*, II, 517

<sup>56</sup> '... sovente le poesie nascono in corrispondenza con la rievocazione del Lager o dei temi ad esso legati, tanto da assumere una funzione anticipatrice di racconti o riflessioni successive.' (Belpoliti, *Ad ora incerta: Note ai testi*, in *Opere*, II, 1545.

that of the poem *Shemà* for *Se questo è un uomo*. For what has been called Levi's 'testamento spirituale', the citation is more complete: 'Since then, at an uncertain hour,/ That agony returns:/And till my ghastly tale is told/This heart within me burns'. The poem begins with the feeling of memory and pain and only line 4 marks the still indefinite and uncertain presence of a protagonist, who is made visible through a negation: 'e se non trova chi lo ascolti/gli brucia in petto il cuore./Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni'. The passage from the third to the first person singular follows the vision of the nightmarish companions, the line 'Rivede i visi dei suoi compagni' being the last in which the subject is a third person singular. As the poem develops, memory transforms the protagonist, who can no longer keep the nightmare at bay, is forced to regain his identity, and speaks with a voice that echoes Charon's and the already mentioned concept or the victims as 'sommersi': 'Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa...'. The last line, rather than a mere quotation from *Inf.* XXXIII, is in fact a further example of that process of 'misquoting' Dante that has already been noticed.

The transformation of a line that is explicitly mentioned as a source by Levi himself should be seen as a clue in a process where the adaptation touches not only the single words, but the whole context and its semantic value. The final line of Levi's poem comes from the end of *Inf.* XXXIII: in the *Commedia* it appears immediately before that same episode which Levi mentioned in order to explain the attitude of the Germans at the time of the persecution of the Jews. In the icy landscape of the bottom of hell, Dante is talking to the soul of Frate Alberigo, the traitor who is ready to speak and tell about himself and the other sinners of this section of hell, if Dante agrees to clear from his eyes the ice made by his own tears. The punishment for traitors is to fall immediately into hell, while their bodies remain on earth, animated by a devil. Among such sinners there is Branca Doria, who is now behind Frate Alberigo. Dante can hardly believe

it: Branca Doria has not died: ‘Branca Doria non morì unquanche, /e mangia e bee e dorme e veste panni’ (*Inf.* XXXIII 140-141). There are at least two elements in this utilisation of the *Commedia* that justify the idea of a complex, troubled relationship between Levi and the text he decides to (mis)quote. The ‘I’ of Levi’s poem is an outburst of pain, a presence whose voice – introduced by a negation (the previously mentioned ‘se non trova chi lo ascolti’) – is animated by a progressive presence of negatives (‘...non ho soppiantato nessuno,/non ho usurpato il pane di nessuno,/nessuno è morto in vece mia. Nessuno. [...] non è colpa mia...’). This painfully reached identity is so strong as to bend to its needs the line from Dante. Yet, Dante’s line, in the *Divine Commedia*, famously expresses the incredulous surprise of the newly informed witness: it is Dante who is unable to believe at first that a person everyone would have thought alive on earth, is instead already among the dead and punished for a sin that does not allow either repentance or any procrastination of punishment. In Levi’s text the modernisation and the passage from third to first person singular mark the arresting consideration that the speaking voice is in fact denouncing its own condemnation, and yet rejecting the charge of betrayal while not believing that he will be believed. Although it does take a reader of Dante to connect the last line of ‘Il superstite’ to the context of *Inf.* XXXIII, Levi has not done anything to prevent the reader from arriving at the disquieting realisation that the pain of the victim is now doubled by his inability to accept his own survival, and this is one of the most disturbing and disquieting themes of *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi’s last work.

As Franco Fortini says, Levi’s poems often represent the dense nucleus of darkness which threatens even the strongest ethical resource to rationality: ‘Le sue poesie non sono abbozzi o accenni delle prose; stanno a tutta la sua opera di prosa come ‘Shemà’ sta a *Se questo è un uomo*,

il grido di apertura di chi si vieta quello finale.<sup>57</sup> The consideration is true and revealing especially where the recourse to Dante (through the medium of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*) is evidently part of the creative process. In '25 febbraio 1944', the author's indications, again, dictate the reference: 'Cfr. *Inf.* III 57, *Purg.* V 135, e T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*: 'I had not thought death had undone so many'', and, as Mirna Cicioni says, 'foreground the despair of a loss not comforted by belief in an afterlife.'<sup>58</sup> The short poem in fact attests the presence of two recurrent elements in Levi's world: that of the 'sommersi' and the use of the verb 'disfarsi':

25 FEBBRAIO 1944

Vorrei credere qualcosa oltre,  
 Oltre che morte ti ha disfatta.  
 Vorrei poter dire la forza  
 Con cui desiderammo allora,  
 Noi già sommersi,  
 Di potere ancora una volta insieme  
 Camminare liberi sotto il sole.

The unexpected element in the framework of references that Levi himself has set for the reader, is the reference to *Purg.* V 135. While *Inf.* III 57 is the famous and almost canonical vision of the innumerable, nameless sinners that Dante sees at the beginning of his journey, the

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<sup>57</sup> Franco Fortini, 'L'opera in versi' in *Primo Levi, il presente del passato*, ed. by Alberto Cavaglion (Roma: Franco Angeli, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> Mirna Cicioni, *Primo Levi. Bridges of Knowledge* (Oxford: Berg, 1995) p. 140.

citation from *Purg.* V refers to the voice of Pia de' Tolomei and her tragic, unexplained and equally famous remembrance of her marriage. Line 135 reads: 'salsi colui che 'nnanellata pria': the reference is to the obscure figure of a man who knows about the woman's birth and death. The last two terzine of the canto are dedicated to Pia's voice and spring from an atmosphere of suspended recognition, where the appeal of being remembered anticipates the essential accounts of the woman's earthly adventure:

‘Deh, quando tu sarai tornato al mondo  
e riposato de la lunga via’,  
seguitò ’l terzo spirito al secondo,  
‘ricorditi di me, che son la Pia;  
Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma:  
salsi colui che ’nnanellata pria  
disposando m’avea con la sua gemma’.

*Purg.* V 130-136

Primo Levi is unquestionably telling the reader that the reference is the male figure of line 135: 'salsi *colui* che 'nnanellata pria'<sup>59</sup>. Now, what every 'common reader' of these lines has been told since school days is the legend of Pia's brutal and bloody death, an event which Dante veils and suggests, but which, without his poem, would have most likely disappeared from future interest, if not from all records. Levi's note refers to a line whose connection to his own short

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<sup>59</sup> ‘25 febbraio 1944’, titled after the day before Levi's train reached Auschwitz, addresses (without naming her) Vanda, the woman who was to be swallowed up soon afterwards.’ (Cicioni, p. 140).

poem is by no means linguistically perceptible. The reference must therefore be found at a semantic level: A marriage took place and the man who became Pia's husband is the one who knows about her birth and death. What Pia's 'legend' adds to the episode is the fact that it is her husband who killed her. The fifth canto of *Purgatorio* is dedicated to the souls of those who died a violent, unexpected death and had no time to properly repent for their sins. As in the previously analysed cases of Capaneo and Branca Doria, it seems that here, as well, the context of the Dantean reference leads the reader toward an equally uneasy direction. Levi's poem voices a doubly defeated desire: that of living on ('di potere ancora una volta insieme/camminare liberi sotto il sole') and that of being able to believe and to desire ('Vorrei credere qualcosa oltre/ (...) vorrei poter dire la forza/ con cui desiderammo allora'). But while the texture of the poem points to the shared desire of the protagonists, and to the narrator's point of view, the author's note obliquely suggests the unachievable point of view of the dead.

While the 'haunting memories of irreparably lost people and moments', as Cicioni says, are often the core of Levi's poems, it is also true that his vocation to ambivalence (narrator and scientist; rationalist and perceiver of the irrationality of the world; humorist and witness of tragedies) appears almost everywhere.

As far as the Dantean background presence, for instance, in 'Un altro lunedì', dated 'Avigliana, 28 gennaio 1946', the attempt at recovering a perception of the daily normality of things is made through an ironical utilisation of Dante's stereotypes:

#### UN ALTRO LUNEDI'

'Dico chi finirà all'*Inferno*:

I giornalisti americani,  
 I professori di matematica.  
 I senatori e i sagrestani.  
 I ragionieri e i farmacisti  
 (Se non tutti, in maggioranza);  
 I gatti e i finanzieri,  
 I direttori di società.  
 Chi si alza presto alla mattina  
 Senza averne necessità.

Invece vanno in *Paradiso*

I pescatori ed i soldati,  
 I bambini, naturalmente,  
 I cavalli e gli innamorati.  
 Le cuoche e i ferrovieri,  
 I russi e gli inventori;  
 Gli assaggiatori di vino;  
 I saltimbanchi e i lustrascarpe,  
 Quelli del primo tram del mattino  
 Che sbadigliano nelle sciarpe.'

Così Minosse orribilmente ringhia  
 Dai megafoni di Porta Nuova  
 Nell'angoscia dei lunedì mattina  
 Che intendere non può chi non la prova.

This newly acquired Minos is anything but frightening, his voice deals with the bearable discomforts of a very human Monday morning, and the final lines – again a (mis)quoting – have clearly nothing to do with the most famous of Dante's sonnets. Here is probably at work that commonly shared habit of using Dante in the form of echolalia, that is traditional practice in Italian literature and culture. But this tendency deeply contrasts with a force that seems to prevail, that is the unquiet and controversial nature that shape memories and the means through which memories continue to live.

The poem ‘Schiera bruna’, dated ‘13 agosto 1980’ portrays much of this troubled attitude:

Si potrebbe scegliere un percorso più assurdo?

In Corso San Martino c’è un formicaio

A mezzo metro dai binari del tram,

E proprio sulla battuta della rotaia

Si dipana una lunga schiera bruna,

S’ammusa l’una con l’altra formica

Forse a spiar lor via e lor fortuna.

Insomma queste stupide sorelle

Ostinate lunatiche operose

Hanno scavato la loro città nella nostra,

Tracciato il loro binario sul nostro,

E vi corrono senza sospetto

Infaticabili dietro i loro tenui commerci

Senza curarsi di

Non lo voglio scrivere,  
 Non voglio scrivere di questa schiera,  
 Non voglio scrivere di nessuna schiera bruna.

What might have appeared as a neutral reference springing from the vision of the ants, has produced the memory of the lines from the *Commedia* where, to compare two lines of souls marching in two opposite direction, Dante employed the image of the ants:

così per entro loro schiera bruna  
 s'ammusa l'una con l'altra formica,  
 forse a spiar lor via e lor fortuna.

*Purg.* XXVI 34-36

The recourse to Dante tells us how readily this cultural and literary resource presents itself to the mind of the writer, but also how the literary monument does not absorb and limit the emotional drive. The Dantean suggestion begins with the expression ‘schiera bruna’, and then continues with an extended citation from *Purg.* XXVI, which, in this case, presents no changes, adaptations, or purposeful misquotations from the original. The lines following the citation deal with the stubborn, moody, stupid activity of the ants that build their city within our own, running on a track that could be deathly for them. The use of insects, or small animals (flies, mice, lice...) as symbols, on which to base meditations on the meaning of life, is traditional practice, but here Levi simply refuses to go on: as if the passage from the vision of the ants to the Dantean comparison led to an unbearable realisation and to a condition of extreme sufferance which the

poet refuses to accept. Levi does something that is technically the opposite of Dante's: in *Purg.* XXVI the poet moves from the vision of the souls and then compares them to ants, while in Levi's poem it is the vision of the ants that suggests first the Dantean comparison and then a possible development – which is in fact ultimately refused and denied – with human experience. The core of the creative process in Levi is the Dantean text (and this could explain the precision of the quotation), which has then developed into a suffocated cry of horror.

It is possible that a similar process could be at the origin of one of Levi's most disturbing and nightmarish short stories, 'Angelica farfalla'<sup>60</sup>. Only two stories of the collection *Storie naturali* are set in Germany: 'Angelica farfalla' and 'Versamina', both dealing with experiments, laboratories, desperate results where the 'successful' experiment stands for a further proof of the subversion of the world. 'Versamina' is the account of the discoveries made by a laboratory technician who observes the effects of a substance produced by the head of the same laboratory on a rabbit, a dog, and then on man. The substance induces a reverse of perception, so that whatever should be felt as painful becomes a source of pleasure, and ultimately leads to suicide. The story closes with the Macbeth quote that so often appears in Levi's meditations: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air' (sic).

'Angelica farfalla' is set in Germany after the end of World War II. The characters are a group of officers of the armies headquartered in Berlin and the inhabitants of a building where a mysterious event must have taken place. The soldiers inspect the filthy apartment; find strange bones, rags, feathers and guano. A girl mentions having been there 'when the ugly beasts got killed'. Further investigations lead to the discovery that experiments were carried out by a Doktor

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<sup>60</sup> *Storie Naturali*, in *Opere*, I, 434-441.

Leeb who had set himself the task of demonstrating that human beings are but the early stage of an evolution which eventually leads to a superior, winged creature: ‘angeliche farfalle’. What has actually happened in the apartment is told by the girl, and her account nightmarishly matches any report of the persecution of the Jews in Hitler’s Germany:

- Mi chiamo Gertrud Enk, - disse la ragazza. – Ho diciannove anni, e ne avevo sedici quando il professor Leeb installò il suo laboratorio nella Glockenstrasse. Noi abitavamo di fronte, e dalla finestra si potevano vedere diverse cose. Nel settembre 1943 arrivò una camionetta militare: ne scesero quattro uomini in divisa e quattro in borghese. Erano molto magri e non alzavano il capo: erano due uomini e due donne.

- Poi arrivarono varie casse, con su scritto “Materiale di guerra”. Noi eravamo molto prudenti, e guardavamo solo quando eravamo sicuri che nessuno se ne accorgesse, perché avevamo capito che c’era sotto qualcosa di poco chiaro. Per molti mesi non capitò più niente. Il professore veniva solo una o due volte al mese; solo, o con militari e membri del partito. Io ero molto curiosa, ma mio padre mi diceva sempre: “Lascia andare, non occuparti di quanto capita là dentro. Noi tedeschi, meno cose sappiamo, meglio è”. Poi vennero i bombardamenti; la casa del numero 26 restò in piedi, ma due volte lo spostamento d’aria sfondò le finestre.

- La prima volta, nella camera al primo piano si vedevano le quattro persone coricate per terra su dei pagliericci. Erano coperte come se fosse inverno, mentre invece, in quei giorni, faceva un caldo eccezionale. Sembrava che fossero morti e dormissero: ma morti non potevano essere perché l’infermiere lì accanto leggeva tranquillamente il giornale e fumava la pipa; e se avessero dormito, non si sarebbero svegliati alle sirene del cessato allarme?

- La seconda volta, invece, non c’erano più né pagliericci né persone. C’erano quattro pali messi di traverso a mezza altezza, e quattro bestiacce posate sopra.

- Quattro bestiacce come? – chiese il colonnello.

- Quattro uccelli: sembravano avvoltoi, per quanto io gli avvoltoi li abbia visti solo al cinematografo. Erano spaventati e facevano dei versi terrificanti. Sembrava che cercassero di saltare giù dai pali, ma dovevano essere incatenati, perché non staccavano mai i piedi dagli appoggi. Sembrava anche che si sforzassero di prendere il volo, ma con quelle ali...<sup>61</sup>

The account ends with the killing of the ‘beasts’:

- Gli avevano fatto la festa, con dei bastoni e dei coltelli, e li avevano già fatti a pezzi. Quello che era in testa a tutti doveva essere l’infermiere, mi è parso di riconoscerlo; e poi era lui che aveva le chiavi. Anzi, mi ricordo che a cose finite si prese la briga di richiudere tutte le porte, chissà perché: tanto dentro non c’era più niente. (p. 440)

This is a story where texture, contents, structure, and conclusion leave no room whatsoever for hope and consolation and is one of the most disquieting in the whole of Levi’s production. It is also, moreover, one of the few whose title (see ‘Capaneo’) indicates a direction: in this case ‘Angelica farfalla’ points directly to *Purg.* X 124-129:

non v’accorgete voi che noi siam vermi  
nati a formar l’angelica farfalla,  
che vola a la giustizia senza schermi?  
  
Di che l’animo vostro in alto galla,  
poi siete quasi antomata in difetto,

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Angelica farfalla’, *Storie naturali* in *Opere*, I, 439-440.

sì come vermo in cui formazion falla?

The Dantean reference is an element of the story, a part of the internal structural construction: unlike the title of ‘Capaneo’, the footnotes and the implicit reminders of the poems, in this case the very text of the *Commedia* is part of the narrative:

(...) Leeb formula l’ipotesi che... insomma, che gli angeli non sono un’invenzione fantastica, né esseri soprannaturali, né un sogno poetico, ma sono il nostro futuro, ciò che diventeremo, ciò che potremmo diventare se vivessimo abbastanza a lungo o se ci sottoponessimo alle sue manipolazioni. (...) C’è anche, in epigrafe, una citazione dalla Divina Commedia, in italiano, in cui è questione di vermi, di insetti lontani dalla perfezione e di «angeliche farfalle». (p. 438)

The title and the text, which both openly paraphrase the lines from *Purg.* X, lead to the consideration that the story derives its inspiration from its literary suggestion: in other words, it seems that, while its pervading ideas are deeply linked with the issues dominating Levi’s production, the actual plot of the story is shaped around the image of the monstrous realisation of an ‘angelica farfalla’, as if the tale had taken origin from the Dantean lines and then developed as an ironically tragic denial of the Dantean statements. The process would be the same as the one that might have originated the poem ‘Schiera bruna’. In both cases the literary source undergoes a process of de-mystification, so that Dante is made to say almost the opposite of what is present in his work. While *Purg.* X deals with the necessity of overcoming pride, in order to fully perceive the divinely induced potential of humanity, Levi’s text tells of dirt, deformity, suffering,

indifference, hopelessness, the title eventually becoming an extreme cry of ironical disillusionment, where pride can only be a crazy paranoiac syndrome.

The reference and the utilisation of Dante tend to acquire a coherent direction: that of making the source attain the ambiguous nature of a questionable model, and of making the monument lose its monumentality: what often happens is a raising of questions and a refusal of authority. Levi seems to speak to Dante, as so often man speaks to God in the Bible: direct, explicit, unforgiving questions, which open the issues, rather than solve them. As if the readers were witnessing a passage from Dante to Job. When the monument is viewed as such, and is not inserted in the circuit of painful memories or challenged as a voice coming from within, the result is often a different form of irony, and a lighter denunciation. In the short story 'Nel parco', which belongs to the collection *Vizio di forma*<sup>62</sup>, Levi presents his own literary preferences and choices, somehow anticipating the selection he was to make for his anthology *La ricerca delle radici*. The 'parco' is both a theme park and 'locus amoenus', and is inhabited by those characters of literature who have reached, and are still enjoying, the privilege of being remembered. It is a curious text, where Levi shows his enjoyment and appreciation for literature, together with his doubts about its purpose and meaning. Dante's work, embodied by Beatrice, is presented in an ironical mixture of recognition and detachment, which seems to summarise Levi's attitude, hiding under the lightness of an enjoyable invention a more indefinite sense of extraneousness. In the park, Beatrice lives in a medieval castle, almost a fort ('una minuscola fortezza'), which has no windows and which does not look particularly interesting from the outside ('dall'esterno dice poco'), but which, inside, becomes a place of wonder and amazement. Beatrice is the snobbish

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<sup>62</sup> In *Opere*, I, 671-680.

owner ('la proprietaria'), whose requests, claims, and whims can only be taken seriously, because she is 'un personaggio di Dante':

E' insopportabile, insomma: ma quando uno è un personaggio di Dante, qui è tabù. A mio parere, è una situazione tipicamente mafiosa: perché Paolo e Francesca devono continuare a fare all'amore indisturbati (e mica solo nel turbine, mi creda), mentre i Poveri Amanti hanno un mucchio di difficoltà coi guardaparco? Perché Cacciaguida nello chalet in cima alla collina, e Somacal, che già ne ha viste tante, giù nella baracca che non prende mai il sole? (pp. 677 – 78)

Presenting Dante through Beatrice is both an acute critical choice and an interesting standpoint from which Levi seems to dissect Dante's vision of the world. Beatrice is in fact the cultural, literary, and poetical invention around which Dante builds the *Commedia*. Levi presents his very personal and quite amusing considerations on literature and its normally unquestioned monuments, where the survivors are Villon, Caesar, various Cleopatras, Horace, Calandrino, Svejk, Pickwick..., but where 'cercherà invano un idraulico, un elettricista, un saldatore, un chimico, e mi domando proprio il perché'. Levi's 'angelica e mostruosa Beatrice' is a curious example of that constant attempt of Levi's at understating his own Dantean side, as if the risk of rhetoric could be neutralised by playing with the model and somehow reducing it to a sort of domesticity. This playful attitude is however well framed within the received tradition of a reader of Dante who is not pursuing experimental criticism or explicitly proposing innovative interpretation.

Levi's Dante speaks of and to the memory of a traditionally educated Italian, the citations rarely come from the less popular works, and the surface image the references produce do not

imply any change in the canonical vision of Italy's greatest poet. Yet I think there is sufficient ground to perceive that Levi has given his readers a subtle, disturbing, and ultimately subversive utilisation of the model. It is a journey, which might have started with young Levi's perception of his no longer being an unquestionable member of the society he had always considered his own:

Da pochi mesi erano state proclamate le leggi razziali, e stavo diventando un isolato anch'io. I compagni cristiani erano gente civile, nessuno fra loro né fra i professori mi aveva indirizzato una parola o un gesto nemico, ma li sentivo allontanarsi, e, seguendo un comportamento antico, anch'io me ne allontanavo: ogni sguardo scambiato fra me e loro era accompagnato da un lampo minuscolo, ma percettibile, di diffidenza e di sospetto. Che pensi tu di me? Che cosa sono io per te? Lo stesso di sei mesi addietro, un tuo pari che non va a messa, o il giudeo che 'di voi tra voi non rida'?<sup>63</sup>

In 'Caro Orazio', an 'impossible' letter that Levi addresses to the Latin poet Horace, Dante is mentioned as paragon of quotability: '... e il signor Fumagalli [...]Le riserva il secondo posto tra i coniatori di citazioni, dopo un certo Dante Alighieri di cui Le parlerò un'altra volta'. The literary game justifies the distancing, ironical tone, which involves both the creators of literature ('coniatori di citazioni') and the scholars ('un valantuomo nostro contemporaneo, bibliotecario a riposo, che ha dedicato la vita a raccogliere detti celebri').<sup>64</sup>

Very little remains of the glamour of literature: quotations collected by a retired librarian. (Should the game be taken to its extremes, Horace would not in fact need to be acquainted with

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<sup>63</sup> *Il sistema periodico*, in *Opere*, I, 773.

<sup>64</sup> 'Caro Orazio', in *Opere*, II, 946.

Dante, as the meeting already took place in *Inf.* IV 88-90, that is when Dante and Virgil meet the souls of the greatest poets in the Limbo). Curiously enough Dante and Horace were among the literary references in the short story ‘Nel Parco’, an exercise, as has been shown, on literature and on the effects literature creates on memory and tradition. This attitude is almost a constant characteristic in Levi’s narrative and it becomes especially evident when the subject matter openly departs from the recollection or meditation on Auschwitz.

In another short story, ‘Breve sogno’<sup>65</sup>, the light game of literature is played against Petrarch and Dante, and the implicit conclusion seems to ascertain the truth of the distance between literature and life: literature being a provisional mask, an artificial battlefield where things are imagined and therefore live the short life of dreams. Yet one wonders what is in fact Levi’s perspective. A palindrome, which Levi himself had devised and of which he was especially fond reads ‘in arts it is repose to life’ (which becomes ‘E’ filo tesò per siti strani’)<sup>66</sup>: a sentence that can be read as if the writer were afraid or at least conscious of an unspeakable danger inherent in literary expression. What literature obscurely says, once the veil of acceptability has disappeared, is almost always desperate and unexplainable.

Giorgio Calcagno’s contribution to the study of the presence of Dante in Levi bears the evocative title ‘Dante dolcissimo padre’. The author points out the massive presence of Dante’s texts in Levi’s writings, and suggests several ways in which this presence can be read as a model

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Breve sogno’, in *Opere*, II, 200.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Calore vorticoso’, in *Opere*, II, 100.

constantly and coherently followed by the modern writer, so that the relationship Dante – Virgil (to whom the quote famously refers) could be matched by the relationship Levi – Dante:

Nel poeta cristiano l’ebreo Levi vede – e vede benissimo – un campione ante litteram dell’umanesimo. Prima ancora che questa parola corra nell’Europa moderna. Dante già la incarna in sé. Come il suo Ulisse, Dante è il personaggio che cerca di conoscere, per poter essere meglio uomo<sup>67</sup>.

This relationship, rather than a virtuous affinity, is in fact both a mark and an open wound. Dante is clearly present in Levi’s texts, in his memory, and in his culture. Yet this presence does not only act as a positive energy to be employed against the darkness of the tragedy, but also hides and secretly reproduces and multiplies the tragedy itself. While never departing from that very ‘Levian’ decision to pursue the (extra) ordinary virtues of rationality, logic, and human wisdom, Levi sees, detects and reproduces the monster, although reserve, irony and even dissimulation leave the reader with the implicit responsibility to detect the more hidden side of the wound.

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<sup>67</sup> Giorgio Calcagno, ‘Dante dolcissimo padre’, in *Al di qua del bene e del male. La visione del mondo di Primo Levi*, ed. by Enrico Mattioda (Roma: Franco Angeli, 1999), pp. 167- 74 (p. 168).

### 3. FROM THE MAGMA OF LABORINTUS

Moving from Primo Levi's complex relationship with Dante, and approaching Edoardo Sanguineti's involvement with Dante, the reader is confronted with a vivid perception of the reverberating power of literature, of the ever-changing nature of literary relationships. In this chapter I will outline some explicit differences between Levi and Sanguineti in their approach to literature and its purposes, and move from there toward a more specific analysis of parts of Sanguineti's works where his Dantisms are especially productive agents of new meanings.

The language of Sanguineti's poetry is well known for its challenging, disturbing nature: the reader is confronted with a text which is also a test, and the process whereby the words on the page construct a meaning is overtly deprived of any tranquillising familiarity. After the considerations made in the previous parts of this work about the ethical nature of Primo Levi's writings and his constant effort at communicating the incommunicable, one is tempted to question the meaning and the purpose of Sanguineti's project, on the perhaps simplistic consideration that his language sounds more an obstacle to than an achievement of communication.

It might be helpful to remember what Primo Levi said about 'lo scrivere oscuro', one of the most characterising aspects of twentieth-century literature (and art):

E' un fatto contro cui non si può combattere: questa fonte di inconoscibilità e di irrazionalità che ognuno di noi alberga dev'essere accettata, anche autorizzata ad esprimersi nel suo (necessariamente oscuro) linguaggio, ma non tenuta per ottima od unica fonte di espressione.

[...]

L'effabile è preferibile all'ineffabile, la parola umana al mugolio animale.

[...]

Non è vero che solo attraverso l'oscurità verbale si possa esprimere quell'altra oscurità di cui siamo figli, e che giace nel nostro profondo. Non è vero che il disordine sia necessario per dipingere il disordine; non è vero che il caos della pagina scritta sia il miglior simbolo del caos ultimo a cui siamo votati: crederlo è vizio tipico del nostro secolo insicuro.<sup>68</sup>

Sanguineti's ideas about the purposes and the characteristics of what is commonly called 'obscurity' are perhaps less distant from Levi's than one might expect. In a 1994 seminar at the "Accademia d'Ungheria in Italia", Sanguineti considers a series of questions such as: What is readable? Why is one text considered difficult and another instead easy and clear? His answer is quite direct:

La facilità e la chiarezza oppure l'oscurità e il carattere arduo di un testo (non solo di un testo letterario ma anche visivo o musicale o cinematografico) non sono un dato intrinseco, ma un dato relativo e storico.<sup>69</sup>

What follows is probably more characteristic of Sanguineti's approach to the problem, that is his constant preoccupation with the ideological nature of language:

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<sup>68</sup> Primo Levi, 'Dello scrivere oscuro', *L'altrui mestiere* in *Opere II*, pp. 676 – 681.

<sup>69</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Intervento al seminario su "Avanguardia e comunicazione" (10 maggio 1996, Roma, Accademia di Ungheria). In: Bollettario n. 30/33, Modena, Associazione culturale 'Le Avanguardie' available from <<http://associazioni.monet.modena.it/avanguar/main.html>> [Accessed 4 July 2007]

In una condizione storica determinata esistono alcuni codici egemoni e occorre interrogarsi sulla loro funzione ideologica, chiedersi quale ideologia connota un determinato linguaggio, quale condizione di forza o egemonia assume rispetto alla pluralità dei linguaggi. Perciò vedo un pericolo sia in chi, non interrogandosi a sufficienza sul carattere storico concreto della comunicazione, tende a rifiutare l'avanguardia per una carenza comunicativa; ma anche chi innalza una bandiera di non-comunicabilità, anch'essa abbastanza astratta.

What matters, for Sanguineti, is not only the demystification of the apparent facility of a language, or the awareness of the thick level of embedded ideology hidden within a consoling familiarity, what really counts is the exit from the cycle of falsifications. The method consistently employed is the insistence on the irrational nature of language in an irrational world, in an effort to discover at last some ‘nocciole razionali sotto le polpe dei deliri’.

In poem 47 of the collection *Stracciafoglio* (1980), in a text written as a “monologo esteriore” to his own son, the voice speaks of a continuous, perhaps endless labour against the ever-reappearing virus of irrationality:

(e se una cellula, se un nucleo cede, se fiorisce impazzite metastasi,  
 ebbene, questo non significa, ancora, niente: perché altri tessuti esistono in composizione e in  
 ricomposizione: in organizzazione): (in nocciole razionali): (che ricercò da anni, sotto le polpe dei deliri):  
 e con il tuo papiro dell'aggregazione, acquistabile a metri, a centimetri, per i tuoi compagni: e con le tue  
 schede, i tuoi quaderni, i tuoi registri delle fonti (e con l'imperativo categorico, che dice, figlio mio,  
 realisticamente: devi provarli, assaggiarli, i tuoi limiti):<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, *Stracciafoglio. Poesie 1977-1979* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1980) pp. 56-57.

Elisabetta Baccarani, in the introduction to her analysis of Sanguineti's poetry, states very clearly that the poet's fight *against* irrationality is actually a fight *through* irrationality:

[...] Sanguineti sceglie la via dell'esasperazione fino ad esaurimento dell'irrazionalismo stesso, non operando con gli strumenti della rimozione, ma attuando quello che potremmo chiamare un "attraversamento" volto a invertire i sensi della percorrenza e correggere gli orientamenti [...]<sup>71</sup>

In order to recover an order, language must be reversed, and re-invented. As Sanguineti himself says in a stanza of *Novissimum Testamentum* (1982):

Signori, in questo nostro grande emporio,  
 il verso giusto è il verso alla rovescia:  
 confesso dunque che in questo casino  
 ci sta, in segreto, un ordine divino:  
 la provvidenza, che ci assetta tanto,  
 sarà di pietra, ma è filosofale:  
 e dentro avrà tanta filosofia,  
 da darci, alla rovescia, l'alchimia:<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Elisabetta Baccarani, *La poesia nel labirinto. Razionalismo e istanza «antileggeraria» nell'opera e nella cultura di Edoardo Sanguineti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002) p. 13.

<sup>72</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, *Il gatto lupesco – Poesie (1982-2001)* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2002) p. 134.

Only thanks to a process of reversion, can language finally attain its acceptability: ‘il verso giusto è il verso alla rovescia’. But in this very stanza, the reference to an ‘ordine divino’ almost automatically produces the references to the ‘provvidenza’ and the subsequent Dantean suggestion, which moves from *Par.* I 121-122:

La provedenza, che cotanto assetta,  
del suo lume fa ’l ciel sempre quïeto

Sanguineti’s upside down universe however contains both the Dante of *Par.* I and Dante’s condemnation of alchemy in *Inf.* XXIX 136-139:

sì vedrai ch’io son l’ombra di Capocchio,  
che falsai li metalli con l’alchimia;  
e te dee recordar, se ben t’adocchio,  
com’io fui di natura buona scimia.

Besides, if the statement ‘l’unico verso giusto è il verso alla rovescia’ is read with a slightly increased attention to the various possible meanings of the word ‘verso’ (not only ‘line’, but also ‘direction’, for example), the whole significance of the sentence could change and imply either an evaluation of poetry (the only right line being the line that moves, or reads, backwards) or a more general address to man’s attitude to his own destiny (the only right direction is the one that reverses the expected pattern). In other words, the awareness that language is the container and the symptom of the universal disease, leads to the subsequent realisation:

[...] siamo adagiati, piuttosto, su “una gigantesca montagna di cadaveri”. E se le opere dei grandi hanno grandezza, se semplicemente hanno un senso, è perché testimoniano, se mai pervengono a testimoniare, del dolore irrimediabile degli uomini. Non è un problema di estetica, infine, ma di etica.<sup>73</sup>

This means that his battle is not only against the blinding familiarity of commonly practised communication, but involves the whole position, meaning and acceptability of literature: just as the poet moves through the planned foregrounding of the irrationality of language in order to produce some ‘nocciali di razionalità’, so his battle against canonical literature is fought from within literature itself, and often through extremely sophisticated literary suggestions. As Baccarani says:

[...] la sua battaglia antileggeraria si svolge per lo più ‘dall’interno’, e agli attacchi frontali condotti con una scrittura bassa, prosastica e prosaica in nome di uno stile che è un ‘non avere stile’, si alternano i colpi inferti con le armi affilatissime della iperletterarietà.<sup>74</sup>

What surprises and fascinates us in Sanguineti’s poetry is in fact this double voice: the rhythm and the occasional sound of everyday language mixed and de-familiarised through the sudden insertion of hyper-literary references. To make the situation even more intriguing is the fact that the literary references can appear as the trivial, superficial occurrence of a cultural belonging, and yet the citation very often hides a network of sophisticated connections. Not

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<sup>73</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, *Ideologia e linguaggio. Nuova edizione* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2002)

<sup>74</sup> Baccarani, p. 13.

simply the debris of a collapsed cultural universe, the citation is, rather, the abandoned sign, whose deciphering relies on the reader's attitude, culture, and readiness to cope with the task. In this obscured universe, actual illumination and understanding pass through the comprehension, and not the elimination, of the obscurity.

Dante is an icon of cultural belonging, and as such he is inserted within the modern text, yet the appearance of Dante can often be dimmed through the employment of several tactics. One is the overfamiliarity of the model: the reference appears in a context that explicitly challenges the availability and the formality of the text being quoted. A possible example can be seen in *Novissimum Testamentum*:

la cocca mia, la tanto coccolata,  
 che ho generato con la mia signora,  
 purché continua come è incamminata,  
 non finirà, per me, credo, in malora:  
 tanto gentile e tanto pare onesta,  
 che a lei la vita le sarà una festa:  
 se fresco morto mi verrà a cullare,  
 tutto allegro io mi corro a addormentare:<sup>75</sup>

This technique shows the source and denounces the process whereby there is no “original” or “authentic” meaning: the line ‘tanto gentile e tanto pare onesta’ by changing the original order of the words from the XXVI sonnet of the *Vita Nuova*, alters its own authenticity

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<sup>75</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, *Novissimum Testamentum* (ottobre-novembre 1982), in *Il gatto lupesco*, p. 131.

and locates it a newly attained double value of the verb ‘pare’. Sanguineti’s line combines the medieval meaning of the verb ‘parere’ (with the value of ‘essere con evidenza, in modo evidente a chi osserva’) and its modern meaning (connected with the idea of ‘sembrare, essere in modo apparente’).<sup>76</sup> The result is an ironical revitalisation of the model and a conscious emphasis placed on the popular, every-day, misuse of the source.

Another tactic is the subtraction of the reference: the reader is given a clue, which apparently leads to a well known Dantean reference, only to discover that the actual source is in fact a ‘satellite text’ – and here the best examples are connected with Sanguineti’s constant utilisation of Benvenuto da Imola’s commentary on the *Commedia*, from the experience of *Laborintus* in 1956 to the stage version of the *Commedia* in *La commedia dell’Inferno* in 1989.

Sanguineti, however, plays a complex game with his citations: apparently accidental and incidental, they combine and conjure the idea of a cultural discourse which is composed of debris, colloquialisms, slogans, lost references: what is perceived is most of all the tension, the energy and the desire for meaning. The linguistic puzzle is a device that touches the actual position and meaning of the single words, but is also fully visible in the recurrent use and manipulation of sources: a game based on the perception of culture as an iterative reproduction of ideologies.

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<sup>76</sup> For the transformation of the lexical value of the words employed by Dante in the sonnet, see Gianfranco Contini, ‘Un sonetto di Dante’, in Gianfranco Contini, *Un’idea di Dante* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976) pp. 21-31 (p.23): “Ben tre vocaboli del primo verso stanno in tutt’altra accezione da quella della lingua contemporanea. *Gentile* è ‘nobile’, termine insomma tecnico del linguaggio cortese; *onesta*, naturalmente latinismo, è un suo sinonimo [...]; più importante, essenziale anzi, determinare che *pare* non vale già ‘sembra’, e neppure soltanto ‘appare’, ma ‘appare evidentemente, è o si manifesta nella sua evidenza’.”

Sanguineti's creative adventure begins with the poetry of *Laborintus*, an extremely complex text, composed of 27 sections, where the voice emerges from an 'I' and whose essence is a constant accumulation of unexplained languages, references, quotes. The Dantean dimension of the poem is suggested by several critical observations: a 'nékyia', a 'somnium', a descent, '*Laborintus* is a descent into a psychic hell' says Michael Caesar<sup>77</sup>, and the poem is in fact a poetical cycle which moves from the 'Palus Putredinis' of the first line<sup>78</sup>:

composte terre in strutturali complessioni sono Palus Putredinis

(*Laborintus* p. 11)

to the enigmatic conclusion, where the speaking voice seems to have reached a form of survival or non communicable understanding:

HEC EST (λ); quae pingitur (λ) intelligitur! (Ruben!); (idem de Timanthe);

oh dicam ergo; DISTINCTA; (una oh cum Averroë):

[astrologia nostri temporis;

(dicam); oh nulla est (...); (λ) DECENTER; (idem

[Eunapius); (FABRICA!)

<sup>77</sup> Michael Caesar, 'The late 1950's and the 1960's', in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, ed. by Peter Brand and Lino Pertile, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Revised Edition: 1999) pp. 561-606 (p. 573).

<sup>78</sup> *Laborintus* is quoted from Edoardo Sanguineti, *opus metricum 1951-1959*, (Milano: Rusconi e Paolazzi Editori, 1969). All references to *Laborintus* are cited from this edition and will henceforth be given in the form *Laborintus* followed by the page number(s). Where quotations from the same source are given in succession, the reference will be included in the text rather than as a footnote.

(λ): quae pingitur:

(*Laborintus* p. 70)

Sanguineti's purpose in *Laborintus* has much to do with the denunciation of an alienated existence, and the language in which the denunciation must take form bears the obsessive chaotic nature of the world from which it comes. The process employs fragments, foreign languages, repetitions, and purposely tends to achieve the effect of a dreamlike display of mental images, where the readers are placed in front of their own cultural milieu, while being, at the same time, made unable to perceive it in a traditional, peaceful way. Sanguineti's statement is based on the concept that language is ideology, and, therefore, not a neutral instrument, but, instead, the embodiment and the repetition of its own alienation.

In spite of its experimentalism, the language of the beginning of *Laborintus* sounds like an echo of Dante's 'livida palude' of *Inf. III*, where the actual entrance into Hell is marked by the passage of the river Acheron and the meeting with Charon (the 'nocchier de la livida palude'). The image (livida palude) returns, in the course of *Laborintus*, in connection with the concepts of corruption, putrefaction, and with the image of water (and therefore of regeneration) in section 26, that is the one before the last :

ah il mio sonno; e ah? involuzione? e ah e oh? devoluzione? (e uh?)

e volizione! e nel tuo aspetto e infinito e generantur!

ex putrefactione; complesse terre; ex superfluitate;

livida Palus

livida nascitur bene strutturata Palus; lividissima (lividissima terra)

(lividissima): cuius aqua est livida; (aqua) nascitur! (aqua) lividissima!

(*Laborintus* p. 26)

The image of the ‘livida palus’ develops until the conclusion of the same section, where the ‘composte terre’ of the beginning reappear, and are finally connected with a possible regeneration, or the idea of a final synthesis of the solid and the liquid elements:

complesse composte terre (pietre); universali; Palus;  
 (pietre?) al tuo lividore; amore; al tuo dolore; uguale tu!  
 una definizione tu! liquore! definizione! di Laszo definizione!  
 generazione tu! liquore liquore tu! Lividissima mater:

(*Laborintus* p. 69)

However, as previously mentioned, we are experiencing Dantisms filtered through Benvenuto da Imola’s XIV century’s comment on Dante’s text<sup>79</sup>. This means that the image, which so easily presents itself to the reader’s memory, is not a direct reference to the *Commedia*, but is, instead, a subtly and doubly charged reference to a more complex cultural background: the reader is apparently given a solid reference (the infernal landscape of *Inf.* III), but the mental journey from Dante’s Hell to Sanguineti’s Labyrinth passes through the interpretation of Benvenuto, itself – in fact – an ideological component, in spite of its belonging to the very origins of Italian literary criticism.

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<sup>79</sup> For Sanguineti’s employment of Benvenuto da Imola, see Baccarani, pp. 132-140.

Baccarani's hypothesis develops in a slightly different direction from Lidia Bertolini's, who maintains that the Dantean nature of *Laborintus* does not reside in its employment of Dante's language but, rather, in the drowning of the narration in the irrational:

[...]non è il linguaggio in senso stretto che dà sintomi di Dantismo (non più che con la ‘livida Palus’ che qui indica un momento profondissimo della storia e dell’essere in seno alla madre): è tutto il senso di affondamento nel negativo oscuro e irrazionale che fa pensare alla discesa infernale di Dante; e del resto, è giusto riconoscere che la nostra memoria culturale non può sfuggire a questo accostamento, di fronte a una simile materia.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, Bertolini (besides considering Dante's journey itself as an ‘affondamento nel negativo oscuro e irrazionale’, which does not seem an acceptable analysis of Dante's *Inferno*) sees Sanguineti's Dantisms as incidental occurrences, emerging from a cultural memory, but not operating at a linguistic level:

[...] per quel che riguarda [...] la memoria di Dante, non pensiamo a una suggestione o stimolazione di tipo linguistico. Più che ricorrere alla memoria di Dante, pare che Sanguineti vi incorra; come si incorre nella memoria di cose viste o sognate, e da gran tempo possedute.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Lidia Bertolini, ‘Memoria del viaggio dantesco agl’Inferi in Pasolini e in Sanguineti’ in *Letteratura Italiana Contemporanea*, IX, 23, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi and Mario Petrucciani (Roma: Lucarini, 1988) pp. 241-257 (p. 234).

<sup>81</sup> Bertolini, p. 239.

Yet, what is particularly interesting is that the Dantism of *Laborintus* is not only a ‘situational’ landscape, but a verbal one as well. It seems especially revealing of Sanguineti’s subtle, manipulative and hyper cultural attitude that his Dante, instead of coming directly from the *Commedia*, is first alluded to, and then denied by an operation which employs a text (Benvenuto’s) both available to the readers’ memory (many modern commentaries of the *Commedia* contain parts of Benvenuto’s commentary) and distant from the cultural references of anyone who is not a Dante scholar.

Da un’analisi sommaria degli inserti presenti nel poemetto – says Baccarani – risulta infatti che anche alcuni frammenti della sezione 25 – frammenti che risvegliano nella mente del lettore, immagini cariche di risonanze dantesche – appartengono alla penna di Benvenuto.<sup>82</sup>

This means that the cultural canon (Dante) is not inserted as the statement of a familiarity between writer and reader: the citation blurs the cultural image and spoils its potential recognition. Simulation and dissimulation of possible sources seem to be one of the characteristics of *Laborintus*, a text that is both a labyrinth, a maze, and a “labor intus”, a work and a labour within the protagonist’s mind, culture and reminiscences. With another double reference to a cultural (and verbal) landscape, Sanguineti’s epitaph on his work is:

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<sup>82</sup> Baccarani, p. 136.

TITULUS EST

LABORINTUS

QUASI LABOREM

HABENS INTUS

Where the obvious Dantean reminiscence is Dante's letter to Cangrande about the chosen title and the self-definition of the author:

Libri titulus est: 'Incipit Comedia Dantis Alagherii, florentini natione, non moribus'

But the actual title of Sanguineti's poem is curiously the same as that of a much more obscure text, an "Ars poetica", entitled *Laborintus* and written in the thirteenth century by Eberhard the German, which begins with an admonition to the poet, by the allegorical character Elegia, to consider the burden of learning and which contains the description of the unhappiness of those who spend their lives studying and teaching.<sup>83</sup> The modern employment of the medieval title exploits the ironical potential of the adaptation, as the poet's *labor* is probably destined to the same solitude felt by the medieval scholar.

The dissolution of the language, however, hardly enables the recognition of single fragments, which occasionally emerge as questionable, unreliable suggestions. The text, in Sanguineti's intentions, has fully and definitely become a challenge, and an open battlefield for

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<sup>83</sup> See "Everardo Alemanno", by Francesco Tateo, in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, vol. II, pp. 769-770: 'Poeta e retore (sec. XIII), [...] è noto come autore di un'arte poetica intitolata *Laborintus* e composta verso la metà del secolo XIII. [...] Il titolo, che risale certo al «Labyrintus» degli antichi, è da ricollegarsi con l'etimologia medievale «labor habens intus» e quindi allude alla miseria e alla fatica dell'opera didattica.'

the reader, so that the few direct, evident, and clear Dantean references in *Laborintus* become possible arrows indicating direction of meaning, but never actually emerge or acquire a privileged position. An example of the possible dissimulation of a Dantean inspiration is in Section 22 of *Laborintus*, which ends with the following lines:

ELLE me remontre enfin qu'ELLE mourra (coloro i quali si apprestano)  
(a compiere un'opera) si je ne veux (del tipo ora indicato) l'aimer!

*(Laborintus p. 61)*

The coexistence of a text in Italian, imprisoned within the so frequently employed brackets, and of another text, apparently independent, in French, shows once more the idea that the speaking voice moves across different worlds and is being caught in its troubling essence of belonging to them all. The multiplicity of the references and the interplay of modalities are part of the poetic drive of Sanguineti's experimentalism. The conclusion of section 22 of *Laborintus* is the double statement 'coloro i quali si apprestano a compiere un'opera del tipo ora indicato' and 'Elle me remontre enfin qu'elle mourra [...] si je ne veux [...] l'aimer'. The former sounds as a self-reference to the work being now concluded, and is both hidden and emphasised by the fragmentation and the brackets through which it is presented. The latter, equally hidden and emphasised, but this time through the employment of a foreign language, could be seen as an almost equivalent statement about the end (the death) of a being (Elle), conditioned by the speaking voice's will (si je ne veux) to love her (l'aimer).

Once confronted with the final lines of the *Commedia*, the final words of *Laborintus* might acquire a curiously unexpected value. Dante's *Paradiso* famously ends with the vision of

God and with the line ‘l’amor che move il sole e l’altra stelle’. It is this love which enables the protagonist to accomplish the vision: the poet has finally confessed his deficiency and can no longer see nor recount what he had seen, when his desire and his will are determined to move in harmony with the whole by the love of the universe (‘l’amor che move il sole e l’altra stelle’).

The definition of a God that ‘moves because he is loved’ – as Aristotle says ‘movet ut amatum’, translated by Dante at the beginning of *Paradiso* with ‘... la rota che tu sempiterni / desiderato’ (*Par.* I 76-77) – is remarkably reproduced and subverted by these lines of *Laborintus*, where it is the love, or better, the will to love, of the protagonist that conditions the existence of the addressee, the mysterious ‘Elle’. Sanguineti’s protagonist therefore becomes the questionable, unreliable but unique producer of existence for his universe: it is the disposition of the poet’s ego that determines the life of his interlocutor: ‘elle mourra si je ne veux l’aimer’. In the universe of *Laborintus*, the journey of the ego has fully and irrevocably become an adventure within the speaker’s own mind.

The most evident and direct Dantean citations of *Laborintus* are perhaps those that, in fact, mark the explicit distance from Dante. Section 2 and section 13 offer two interesting examples of how the source is referred to in order to underline its unattainable nature. In section 2 of *Laborintus* the main thread seems to be that of a fluid, unaccountable accumulation of suggestions, moving from the image of the “Mare Humorum” and the series of verbs (guardami, dilatami, combinami, toccami) which allude to an indefinite interlocutor.

E una volta Mare Humorum guardami bene (la rottura di una personalità)

e dilatami (tutto suscettibile di assentimento) e combinami in un’epoca

indirizzando i sensi (il tempo dell'occhio che risuona nel quieto addome) e  
 toccami  
 perché io sono al più giusto confine organico sepolcro [...]

(*Laborintus* p. 13)

The two elements: the Mare Humorum (which in the following lines will become first a Lacus Somniorum and then a Mare Lacus) and the presence of a “tu”, (to whom the speaking voice addresses a series of imperatives), might induce the reader to anticipate the presence of a Dante citation in the final part of the same section:

Il tenero mattino conduce la mastite a visitare il triste cervelletto  
*Sensibile al vento per incantamento est duplex intellectus*  
 E tu ascoltami bene amore Mare Lacus  
 Non c'è più *divertimento*  
 [...] (emphases mine)

(*Laborintus* p. 14)

The reference is to one of Dante's most famous sonnets: *Guido i vorrei che tu e Lapo e io*, and the Dantean reminiscence is related to its second line ‘fossimo presi per incantamento’:

Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io

*fossimo presi per incantamento,*  
*e messi in un vasel ch'ad ogni vento*  
*per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio,*  
 (Emphases mine)

Dante's text is alluded to, especially through the echoing of the characterising rhyme in – ento (incantamento, vento, impedimento, talento), but nothing could be more distant from *Laborintus* than this literary dream turned into poem, where the interlocutor is 'the first among Dante's friends', Guido Cavalcanti, and the characters share the same ideological milieu. While the whole sonnet communicates the ideal and sophisticated aspirations of aristocratic friendship, Sanguineti has gone through the dissection of that dream, and has come back with the realisation that the dream is in fact, first of all, a suspension of rationality. As Baccarani says: ' [...] a risveglio avvenuto – il cervelletto, visitato durante il sonno da demoni in forma di succubi, è detto 'sensibile al vento per incantamento': una famosa rima dantesca viene quindi richiamata e piegata a significare le ingannevoli forze di fascinazione che si scatenano nella psiche ogni qual volta la ragione si assopisce.'<sup>84</sup>

In some cases *Laborintus* presents possible citations, almost pretexts to be verified according to a shared cultural background, which, however, do not acquire an unequivocal referentiality, although compelling and disturbing. Section 13 of *Laborintus* is dedicated to Ellie's unreachable nature:

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<sup>84</sup> Baccarani, p. 127.

oh torrenti subordinati della realtà oh Ellie occulta  
disastroso oggetto mentale

*localizzazione dell'irrazionale quaderno*

oh incanto universale del valore  
ogni storia è una generazione equivoca dell'ispezione  
e tu sei l'anima delirante del quadruplice mondo  
(emphases mine)

(*Laborintus* p. 39)

the line 'localizzazione dell'irrazionale quaderno' reminds us of the central lines of *Par.* XXXIII, 85-87, dedicated to the first part of Dante's vision, that is the coexistence of God and the universe in a harmonious order:

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,  
legato con amore in un volume,  
*cioè che per l'universo si squaderna.*

(Emphases mine)

Dante's text presents and develops the medieval image of the universe as a book, and opposes the verb 'internarsi' (connected both with the idea of what is "internal", and with the

essential reference to the trinity) to the verb ‘squadernarsi’ (connected with the “quaderni”, that is the parts of that same book, and the implicit suggestion of a disorder and instability). Dante’s world is a partial, provisional image of the real Book, where the meaning is finally and clearly written and offered to the vision of the poet (‘la forma universal di questo nodo / credo ch’i’vidi’: *Par. XXXIII*, 91-92).

Sanguineti’s reference to irrationality does not provide us with the promise of a rational counterbalance and his possible reference to Dante’s vision of the world, as it appears in *Paradiso XXXIII*, acts as an increased denunciation of the irremediable lack of rationality in our universe. The final lines of section 13 of *Laborintus* contain, however, a possible actualisation of the Dantean opposition between the ‘internarsi’ of God and the ‘squadernarsi’ of the universe:

oh totius orbis thesaurus mnemonico thesaurus  
semper semper sarai la mia lanterna magica  
et nomina nuda tenemus  
in nudum carnalem amorem et in nudam constructionem  
corporis tui

(*Laborintus* p. 40)

The harmonisation is totally unexpected, as it opposes the existence of a ‘universal memory’ (‘mnemonico thesaurus’), a vision of the whole history of mankind or, better, of what is recorded and remembered of that history, and, on the other side, the bare, existential evidence of

what mankind actually experiences: bodily love ('nudum carnalem amorem'). However, a provisional conclusion on the Dantisms in *Laborintus* ought to maintain that, beyond the actual presence of Dantean citations (or 'meta-citations': through Benvenuto or Eberhard the German), there is a sort of background Dantism, a narrative and cognitive texture that reveals the cultural and ideological monument represented by Dante.

If one compares the 'selva' of the *Commedia* to the 'palude' of *Laborintus*, the cultural opposition between the two journeys becomes curiously clear, and each poem communicates and lends part of its own nature to the other. Dante's 'selva' and Sanguineti's 'palude' stand for existential and social chaos, but while Dante's 'selva oscura' is a first step towards a conclusion made possible by the subsequent progression of the journey, Sanguineti's 'palus putredinis' is both point of departure and of arrival. The cognitive value of Dante's journey is one of the fundamental threads of the whole *Commedia* and Sanguineti's voice in *Laborintus* (Section 5) explicitly mentions its will to know:

io voglio conoscere (non importa se non puoi sognarmi)

ho formulato molte ipotesi per vivere [...]

(*Laborintus* p. 21)

The same Section 5 founds most of its statements on the very ideas of a cognitive adventure and of an aspiration to a possible order. It is fascinating to discover that these propositions derive from Epistle XIII, that is the document through which Dante defines, explains

and locates his *Commedia* within the cultural instances of his time. The Latin words of Section 5 (emphases mine) are direct citations of Epistle XIII:

il livello mentale virtuale si abbassa questi paesi sono prosciugati  
 da prolungate speculazioni promuovo l'agitata soluzione isagogica  
 della tua congestione nella Terra Pacis con una orazione  
 in specifico ordine (tabulae motuum) in ragionevole bellezza  
*quod istius operis volta al particolare non est simplex sensus*  
 in una parola *subiectum est homo* organicamente *totius operis*

( *Laborintus* p. 20)

Dante believes in the order of the universe and bases his vision of that order on the idea that it is possible and necessary to show and understand it. For Sanguineti it is important to deal with the historical (and therefore ideological) nature of any knowledge: for him order is the praxis of consciously going through the disorder of the universe. Modern man's knowledge is a realisation of failures (Section 11):

la nostra sapienza tollera tutte le guerre  
 tollera la peste mansueta delle discipline

( *Laborintus* p. 34)

The image of the descent is recurrent in *Laborintus*, as if the real journey was only 'ad inferos'. It is a journey, however, which unifies departure and arrival. Let us compare two fragments from Section 6:

[...] vulva essenze radicali

est porta Inferni peso gravitazionale ma esistenza come complicazione

(*Laborintus* p. 23)

dialogo tecnico come tecnica del dialogo complicazione

come descendant in Infernum viventes

ma finalmente anarchia come complicazione radicale

(*Laborintus* p. 24)

and one from Section 24:

grido

(palus) oh revertimini

e discendo in origine nell'ombra mecum

affaticata le COMBLE de la volonté Vallis mea

(*Laborintus* p.65)

One cannot escape the feeling that, in accord with the contemporary development of critical approaches, *Laborintus* is also a research and reflection on the function of poetry. From the title to the explicit and implicit quotations, from the choice of hyper literary references to the recurrence of a colloquial register in the fragmented rhythm of the lines, the poem reflects (on) itself. The speaking voice in *Laborintus* experiences and tests its own nature and creates a system of references that challenges every canonical form of communication: characters, landscape and

language are deprived of those automatic references which the reader tends to expect. As Fausto Curi says:

Una delle più importanti novità di *Laborintus* sta in questo, che Sanguineti abolisce la finzione dell'immediatezza della lingua poetica. Ciò che il linguaggio del poemetto comunica in primo luogo è la sua innaturalità, il suo essere il risultato complessivo e in certa misura coatto di una serie di prelievi compiuti in diversi “testi” allontani, o di un’elaborazione che rende evidente, accentuandola al massimo, la non-coincidenza di ciò poetico e di ciò empirico, ma manifesta soprattutto un’altra, capitale non-coincidenza, anzi, una frattura, quella che ha scisso il soggetto dal linguaggio.<sup>85</sup>

Sanguineti does in fact abolish the mystifying social agreement, which consents to overlooking the loss and lack of actual communication. His text provides the reader instead with an increased awareness of the distance between the linguistic instrument and the factual achievement of a message. The reader is made to collaborate in the creation of meaning, or in its discovery: as in the solution of a language puzzle, the result depends on the engagement of the reader, in the poetic, ideological, and cultural puzzle, the reader is no longer a mere spectator. What happens in Sanguineti’s *Laborintus* is curiously similar to the passage from the passive to the active reception of tradition, which, according to Hans Robert Jauss – one of the founders of modern reception theory – marks the turning point from the medieval to the modern age:

Quando la differenza e la molteplicità delle interpretazioni possibili non vengono più ricondotte al contenuto obiettivo del senso della scrittura, ma alle condizioni soggettive della comprensione, o meglio

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<sup>85</sup> Fausto Curi, *Edoardo Sanguineti – Opere e Introduzione Critica* (Verona: Anterem Edizioni, 1993), p. 54.

al risultato dei diversi modi di interpretare, inizia la svolta verso la moderna ermeneutica, per la quale il senso del testo non viene più stabilito d'autorità, bensì affidato alla ricerca di un'intelligenza a sua volta produttiva. [...] Questa trasformazione della ricezione da passiva ad attiva, da solamente ricettiva a produttiva, si manifesta nella storia del concetto stesso solo al punto di svolta tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna.<sup>86</sup>

In the light of this argument, Sanguineti's employment of Epistle XIII (as well as the complex inter-relation of his citations), acquires the characteristics of something both innovative and extremely traditional: as if the readers were experiencing as new a passage that has already taken place. In this avant-garde piece, we are departing from the reading habits of our age (whether we decide to call it Modern or Medieval) and are required to look at a text as if it was an actual palimpsest and behave as if the whole burden of interpretation was, once more, on our shoulders.

One of the innovative aspects of Sanguineti's operation lies in the fact that his texts comprehend and display an encyclopaedia of knowledge, and therefore the Dantean reference in *Laborintus* is one among many. Yet one could suspect a privileged position of Dante, in spite of the width of the cultural and literary references present in the 27 sections of *Laborintus*, considering the contemporaneous engagement of Sanguineti as a critic of Dante (his *Interpretazione di Malebolge* was first published in 1961, but the study had originally been written as his *Tesi di laurea* in 1956, that is a year well within the period of *Opus metricum*: 1951-1959, which includes *Laborintus*). The suspicion becomes a certainty when, in 1963, asked

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<sup>86</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, 'La teoria della ricezione. Identificazione retrospettiva dei suoi antecedenti storici', in *Teoria della ricezione*, ed. by Robert Holub (Torino: Einaudi, 1989), p. 6.

to produce a work to celebrate the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante's birth, Sanguineti, together with the composer Luciano Berio, produced a piece of musical theatre: the libretto bearing the title *Laborintus II*. The technique employed was a montage of citations from the Old Testament, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, Dante's *Vita nuova*, *Convivio* and *Inferno*, Pound's *Cantos*, Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and Sanguineti's own poems, either already written for *Laborintus* or especially produced for the new work, as Vivienne Hand reports in her essay on the whole project.<sup>87</sup>

The text of *Laborintus II* is less complex than that of the original *Laborintus*: the sources are definitely more detectable and the process of manipulation tends to produce a synthesis whereby the narrative thread is much more recognisable. The libretto moves from the origin of civilisation (the pre-deluge city founded by Cain), introduced through an abridged version of a sentence ('a civitate Enoch in Naiad') from Book XV of Isidore's *Etymologiae*. As pointed out by Vivienne Hand in *Sweet Thunder*, her study on Italian librettos of the twentieth-century, 'Book XV, entitled 'De Aedificiis et Agriis', discusses the origins of pre-diluvial and post-diluvial towns and lands'<sup>88</sup>. Sanguineti's text systematically abridges all the originals and then presents a compendium of civilisation through a selection of texts that proceeds from what is felt as the actual beginning, that is the beginning of hope and love. The author makes use of a

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<sup>87</sup> Vivienne Hand, 'Laborintus II: A Neo-avant-garde Celebration of Dante', in *Italian Studies* LIII (Leeds: Society for Italian Studies, 1998). The text includes an appendix with the libretto of *Laborintus II*. All the citations from *Laborintus II* are from Vivienne Hand's reproduction.

<sup>88</sup> Vivienne Hand, *Sweet Thunder. Music and Libretti in 1960's Italy* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006), p. 73.

recycled and recombined passage from the beginning of *Vita nuova*<sup>89</sup> and subsequently touches the opposition of Good and Evil (Babylon and Jerusalem, again an abridged extract from Isidore)<sup>90</sup>; mankind's loss of direction (contamination of fragments from *Inferno* I and Eliot's *East Coker*, parts II and V)<sup>91</sup>; illness and premonition of death (the protagonist's illness in chapter XXII of *Vita nuova*)<sup>92</sup>; the poetic drive (conclusion of *Vita nuova*)<sup>93</sup>; man's submission to the

<sup>89</sup> ‘In quella parte; in quella parte della mia memoria; in quella parte del libro; in quella parte del libro della mia memoria incipit vita nova: e apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore, umile e onesto, sanguigno: ecce Deus, ecce Deus fortior me: dominabitur mihi.’

<sup>90</sup> ‘Sion speculatio  
a Babylone urbe  
vocata vocata est Hierusalem  
ab urbe Salem in Syria  
et Iebus et Salem vocata est Hierusalem  
Solyma noncupata est  
Aelia vocitata est  
Hierusalem pacifica  
a Babylone urbe ab urbe.’

<sup>91</sup> ‘e nel mezzo  
e in una selva  
selvaggia selva e aspra  
ed una lupa  
una lupa  
ma questa bestia uccide  
uccide  
not only in the middle of the way  
in the middle  
but all the way in the dark wood  
in the bramble  
the years of *l'entre deux guerres*.’

<sup>92</sup> ‘una dolorosa infermitade: per nove dì amarissima pena; e poi ne lo nono giorno, sentendomi dolere quasi intollerabilmente, a me giunse uno pensero: e cominciai a piangere: e cominciai a travagliare ed a imaginare in questo modo: Dolcissima Morte vieni a me vieni a me Or vieni a me, io porto già lo tuo colore. Io piangea con gli

power of love (fragment from the first dream of the *Vita nuova*)<sup>94</sup>; the succession of generations (Isidore); modern man's involvement in the Babel of nonsense (Sanguineti's fragments from *Laborintus* added to new lyrics especially produced for *Laborintus II*)<sup>95</sup>; the capital sin of usury (*Inferno* XI, with its dogmatic definitions, and Pound's denunciation of the same sin)<sup>96</sup>; the hell and guilt of neo-capitalistic society (*Inferno* III and VII)<sup>97</sup>; the actual, modern experience of

occhi, bagnandoli di vere lagrime, e io chiamava la Morte e dicea: "Dolcissima Morte, Dolcissima Morte, vieni a me, io porto già lo tuo colore."

<sup>93</sup> 'io vidi cose: che mi fecero proporre di non dire, io vidi cose: io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto: mi fecero proporre di non dire di lei: io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna.'

<sup>94</sup> 'mi dà orrore (uno soave sonno); ma allegro; ma con tanta letizia; ma una maravigliosa visione; e di pauroso aspetto; (amore), piangendo, mangiando dubitosamente; (una nebula di colore di fuoco): ego dominus, ego dominus tuus; (una figura); (uno segnare, amore); e la donna, in amarissimo pianto in grande angoscia, piangendo vide cor tuum.'

<sup>95</sup> tutto tutto tutto dalla biblioteca al babbuino: dal 1265 al 1321: dal cianuro di potassio alla cronaca cittadina: dalla cresima alla corte dei conti: dalla oscurità in cui è sempre immersa la nostra vita alla rendita del 4%; dalla carotide alla tibia; dall'elefante di mare, grande foca del Pacifico, fornita di due lunghe zanne al 1965: dal fegato al frigorifero: dal francobollo al formaggio: dalla prova del 9 al cavallo di Troia: dal lapsus linguae alla rivoluzione russa: dall'endecasillabo al tabacco da fiuto: dal piedistallo che sa sostenere tutte le colonne alla folgorazione: atto e effetto del folgorare: alla pietra focaia: alla luna: al rame: alla polvere.'

ah per te ho inventato il rame e la polvere: ho liberato la lettera "erre" e la lettera "ci" da un penitenziario di tabacco: ho trascinato lepri e chiodi in Paradise Valley: di te ho anche detto *perfectiones intelligibiles*: ho detto: *novimus enim tenebras aquas ventos ignem fumum*: vediamo insieme il passato, il futuro: ho detto: *quoi qu'elle fasse elle est désir improportionabiliter excedens*.

ho detto ho detto ho detto ho detto ho detto ho detto ho detto.'

<sup>96</sup> 'Natura lo suo corso prende da divino intelletto e da sua arte: l'arte vostra quella segue come 'l maestro fa il discente: da queste due conviene prender sua vita ed avanzar la gente: l'usuriere altra via tene: per sé natura e per la sua seguace dispregia.

With usura hath no man a house of good stone, with usura hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall *harpes et luthes*: with usura no music is made to endure not to live with but is made to sell and to sell quickly: with usura, sin against nature: with usura the line grows thick.'

<sup>97</sup> 'PER ME NELLA CITTÀ DOLENTE

PER ME NELL'ETTERNO DOLORE

Hell (Sanguineti's new lyrics and fragments from *Laborintus*)<sup>98</sup>; a final ethical address to the purpose of art (passage from *Convivio* about the power exercised by music on the human mind) and the possibility of renewal (lyrics especially composed for *Laborintus II*).

Vivienne Hand's essays show and define the relation between the original texts and Sanguineti's adaptation and hers is a step-by-step guide to Sanguineti and Berio's project. Although little can be added, I would like to point out how, especially where Dante's texts are being employed, there seems to be a coherent line, which unifies the poetics of *Laborintus* and that of *Laborintus II*.

The first citation from the beginning of *Vita nuova* drastically reduces the first and second paragraphs of the original and presents a selection whereby all personal indications are eliminated and what is saved resounds as a universal message: names, chronological indications, biographical facts are suppressed and the reader is left with the bare essence of the story. The repetitions seem to mime the process whereby memory itself is built: first an apparently neutral item ('in quella parte'), then the addition of a localisation ('in quella parte della mia memoria'), coupled by a further specification ('in quella parte del libro'). As soon as the fragments have recomposed the materials of the recovered whole, the sentence flows towards the title ('in quella

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PER ME TRA LA PERDUTA GENTE  
 tutto l'oro ch'è sotto la luna  
 e che già fu, di quest'anime stanche  
 non potrebbe farne posare una.  
 Si percotean non pur con mano,  
 ma con la testa e col petto e coi piedi,  
 troncandosi co' denti a brano a brano.'

<sup>98</sup> 'Tutto, tutto, tutto, dalla caramella al miele: dalla guerra di frontiera cino-indiana agli idola tribus '

parte del libro della mia memoria incipit vita nova') and the apparition can take place ('e apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore').

A similar "oriented reduction" occurs with the citation of what is perhaps the most famous (and abused) of Dante's lines:

e nel mezzo  
e in una selva  
selvaggia selva e aspra  
ed una lupa  
una lupa  
ma questa bestia uccide  
uccide

The original is once more reduced and bent to generate a hammering rhythm: by breaking and fragmenting Dante's lines, Sanguineti animates the cultural debris and paradoxically gives life to cultural reminiscences. What remains is the visual impact of the central images: the setting (the wood) and the monster (the she-wolf). While all the rest is silenced, the reader is given the responsibility both of recomposing the "lost" original and of recognising the actual, modern core of the message. Therefore, here the expression 'nel mezzo' becomes an absolute "middle": of the journey, of the way, of life, as Eliot's fragment explicitly tells us:

not only in the middle of the way  
in the middle

but all the way in the dark wood  
in the bramble

(East Coker, part II)

the years of *l'entre deux guerres*.

(East Coker, part V)

Eliot's bramble gives substance to what could have remained a distant cultural monument and makes the lines from the *Commedia* display their poetical energy in a totally unexpected context. Sanguineti, by making the Dantean text an anticipated comment on Eliot's lines, acts both as a critic and as a poet.

The processes of reduction, fragmentation, and repetition are then aimed at focussing on the central image of Death. In the next citation from *Vita nuova* XXIII, Sanguineti's text once more silences Dante's reference to Beatrice, together with the vision of her future death and the apocalyptic dream which accompanies it: the modern *Laborintus* does not need the passage from the protagonist's illness, the perception of his own fragility, the premonition of Beatrice's death. The subsequent realisation that death itself, therefore, must necessarily be 'dolcissima'. It is as if the modern journey (not unlike what had happened in *Laborintus*) were an absolute and therefore a solitary adventure within man's own awareness.

The following reference to the *Vita nuova* is from the last chapter of the text, where Dante expresses his project of a new poetry. It is the conclusion of a cycle and the announcement (perhaps 'post eventum') of the *Commedia*. As argued by Sanguineti himself in his 1977

Introduction to an edition of the *Vita nuova*<sup>99</sup> Dante had reached a point of paralysis, from which only a totally different approach to poetry could offer a solution:

Era dunque fatale, in qualche modo, l’arresto che qui si verifica. E l’operazione poetica di Dante non può che indugiare, adesso, alle soglie di una perpetua ripetizione: cristallizzata l’immagine amorosa, assunta la donna ‘in loco degno’, come ‘spiritual bellezza grande’, ogni sviluppo è impedito, la dialettica del ‘libello’ è spenta.<sup>100</sup>

It is quite impressive to consider the dramatic reduction, which *Laborintus II* operates on the fluent, rich prose of the original where the wealth of relative clauses, the complexity of the references, the display of a temporal pattern include past, present and future in a harmonious design. Chapter XLII reads as follows:

Appresso questo sonetto apparve a me una mirabile visione, ne la quale io vidi cose che mi fecero proporre di non dire più di questa benedetta infino a tanto che io potesse più degnamente trattare di lei. E di venire a ciò studio quanto posso, sì com’ella sae veracemente. Sì che, se piacere sarà di colui a cui tutte le cose vivono, che la mia vita duri per alquanti anni, io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d’alcuna. E poi piaccia a colui che è sire de la cortesia, che la mia anima se ne possa gire a vedere la gloria de la sua donna, cioè di quella benedetta Beatrice, la quale gloriosamente mira ne la faccia di colui *qui est per omnia secula benedictus*.

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<sup>99</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, ‘Per una lettura della *Vita nuova*’, in Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova* (Milano: Garzanti, 1977) .

<sup>100</sup> Sanguineti, ‘Per una lettura della *Vita Nuova*’, p. XLII.

Sanguineti has brilliantly caught the core problem of the whole passage, that is the concept of ‘saying’, of ‘dire’. The verb ‘dire’ is form and substance of Sanguineti’s creative-critical manipulation of Dante’s text. Both in the original and in its modern transcription, the fundamental issue is represented by what and how the poet should be ‘saying’, therefore it is the very form of this ‘dire’ which is fragmented and reduced almost to infant babbling:

io vidi cose: che mi fecero proporre di non dire, io vidi cose: io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto: mi fecero proporre di non dire di lei: io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d’alcuna.

Dante’s final achievement (‘dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto di alcuna’) is introduced through a series of short, broken utterances where the majority of words are of one or two syllables, where the negatives dominate, as if the final aim to reach were the infant talk, and therefore an absolute formal innocence. The final image of *Laborintus II*, as well as of the novel *Capriccio italiano*, is the sleep of children, a sort of unquestionably innocent, speechless and heavenly image: a paradise built on the cancellation of ordinary communication. The hyper-intellectual and labyrinthian research on the sources lead toward the cancellation of time, and the pattern surprisingly reproduces the conclusions of Dante’s *Paradiso*. The search and the achievement are deeply dramatic and are not meant to offer easy solutions and consolations.

In the following Dante citation, the insertion of fragments between brackets creates a sort of emotional double track of meanings. The same technique had been widely employed in *Laborintus* and here it produces an ambivalent and dramatic narrative line, where attraction and repulsion, desire and fear are shown while playing in the protagonist’s mind:

mi dà orrore (uno soave sonno); ma allegro; ma con tanta letizia; ma una maravigliosa visione; e di pauroso aspetto; (amore), piangendo, mangiando dubitosamente; (una nebula di colore di fuoco): ego dominus, ego dominus tuus; (una figura); (uno signore, amore); e la donna, in amarissimo pianto in grande angoscia, piangendo vide cor tuum.

In this case, however, Sanguineti does not simply reduce and compress the Dantean source. The manipulation operates extensively and, in spite of its apparent familiarity, the modern text has actually dislocated and then pasted together fragments from quite distant parts of chapter III of *Vita nuova*. It is the part of the book where the narrator first describes the enigmatic dream in which Amore forces the woman to eat her lover's heart, and then presents the same experience in the first sonnet of the whole composition, 'A ciascun alma presa e gentil core'. While only two utterances from the sonnet ('mi dà orrore' and 'ma allegro') are reproduced in Sanguineti's transcription, the rest of the text derives from the prose of chapter III. The substance of the medieval dream is translated into a modern nightmare, whose basic materials are the same and whose realisation is curiously similar to the novels that Sanguineti was writing in the same years, as will be argued in the next chapter.

The fact that Dante has become one of the components of the author's biographical experience is suggested by the detail of the dates of Dante's birth and death included in the chaotic enumeration which follows: a list meant to comprise everything: 'tutto tutto tutto dalla biblioteca al babbuino: dal 1265 al 1321 [...]', but what is even more impressive is the readiness with which Sanguineti touches and transforms the original, making it speak even more directly to the modern ear. Sometimes the touch is apparently a mere formal adjustment, as in the following

fragment from *Inferno XI*, where the poet-critic's intervention, besides the already familiar technique of compression of the original, is the passage from poetry to prose. *Laborintus II* reads as follows:

Natura lo suo corso prende da divino intelletto e da sua arte: l'arte vostra quella segue come 'l maestro fa il discente: da queste due conviene prender sua vita ed avanzar la gente: l'usuriere altra via tene: per sé natura e per la sua seguace dispregia.

In this case the operation of selection and reduction applies the rather simple principle of omitting the cultural references to Aristotle and the Bible, making the text acquire the value of a self evident statement which does not need the support of the Auctoritas (in emphases the parts of the text which appear in *Laborintus II*):

«Filosofia», mi disse, «a chi la 'ntende,  
nota, non pure in una sola parte,  
come *natura lo suo corso prende*  
*dal divino 'ntelletto e da sua arte*;  
e se tu ben la tua Fisica note,  
tu troverai, non dopo molte carte,  
che *l'arte vostra quella*, quanto pote,  
*segue, come 'l maestro fa 'l discente*;  
sì che vostr'arte a Dio quasi è nepote.  
*Da queste due*, se tu ti rechi a mente  
lo Genesì dal principio, *convene*

*prender sua vita e avanzar la gente;*  
*e perché l'usuriere altra via tene,*  
*per sé natura e per la sua seguace*  
*dispregia, poi ch'in altro pon la spene.*

*Inf. XI 97-111 (emphases mine)*

This poetry turned into prose displays the didactic purpose of the original (Virgil explaining the sinful nature of usury) and the juxtaposition of *Inferno* XI to Pound's text (Canto XLV of the *Cantos*) operates as cultural counterbalance giving dramatic concrete evidence of the sin of usury:

With usura hath no man a house of good stone, with usura hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall *harpes et lutes*: with usura no music is made to endure not to live with but is made to sell and to sell quickly: with usura, sin against nature: with usura the line grows thick.

Sanguineti's operation is performed so as to give the perception of how the modern poet fulfils and completes the medieval one. It is one of the guiding lines of Sanguineti's later work on the *Commedia*, his *Commedia dell'Inferno* (1989), where Pound and usury are one of the dramatic cores, and where the contamination of the original is purposefully conceived as a contamination of genres (poetry, prose, drama), of authors (Dante, Dante's contemporaries, modern poets), and of form of performances (television, theatre, disco, circus). The reader-listener-spectator of the *Commedia dell'Inferno* is offered the chance of perceiving Dante's *Commedia* as a shared experience, the reader-listener of *Laborintus II* is made to perceive the

complexity of a cultural material, where Dante is being “celebrated” through his modern practicability, through his readiness of being translated and introduced into new contexts.

In *Laborintus II* Berio’s music realizes the cohesive function and the poetic tension which, in *Laborintus*, are sustained by the conglomerated wealth of the lines, where colloquial, literary, foreign (and ultimately altogether alien) suggestions act on the constantly surprised reader. *Laborintus II* is an explicit celebration of Dante and its verbal structure brings to the surface the Dantisms that might have remained hidden in the magma of *Laborintus*. What is similar in the two texts is the use of “cultural constellations” around Dante: again the guiding issue is that of language as ideology, and therefore the linguistic components are presented as manipulations operated by tradition and culture.

Dante is the core of a process that begins with the Latin version of the Old Testament and with Isidore’s medieval picture of the world and continues with the modern actualisation of Pound, Eliot, and Sanguineti himself. The celebration of Dante is a journey from the Latin of the early medieval world, through the Italian of the *Vita nuova*, *Convivio* and *Inferno*, to the English of twentieth-century modernism. What happens in *Laborintus II* is not only a contamination of texts, languages and visions of the world: the whole operation is in fact a contamination of poetic creativity and critical exegesis.

#### 4. THE CREATIVE GAME OF CRITICISM

A revealing instance of Sanguineti's cultural coherence and pervading ironical attitude is in an essay on neo-avant-garde novels, 'Il trattamento del materiale verbale nei testi della nuova avanguardia' (1964). It is an investigation applied to Sanguineti himself and to two writers (Filippini and Di Marco, authors, respectively of the novels *Fughe* and *Settembre*), with quotations and examples aimed at achieving a 'model' avant-garde novel, which eventually happens to be Sanguineti's own *Capriccio italiano*. Sanguineti defines the curious process and the unexpected purpose of his critical enterprise, and turns upside-down the uses and customs of literary criticism (and mannerisms):

Anziché muovere da un testo, e con sano procedimento venire deducendo fino all'ultima conclusione interpretativa, procederemo a ritroso, e salpando dalla astratta ipotesi di un testo, dalla sua mera possibilità ideale, lo dedurremo criticamente.<sup>101</sup>

A sentence and a purpose which, by ironically departing from the 'healthy' (i.e. 'traditional') habit of considering the text as a given, unquestionable item (something 'real', and objectively experienced), ironically suggest that, instead, literature and literary criticism are always ideologically oriented (the text is not an experienced item, but an 'abstract hypothesis'!), even - and in particular - when criticism advertises itself as a mere textual analysis. Sanguineti

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<sup>101</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Il trattamento del materiale verbale nei testi della nuova avanguardia', *Lettere Italiane*, anno XVI, n. 4, ottobre – dicembre 1964, p. 445.

aims at the paradoxical rehabilitation of literary criticism, and, through an implicit reference to a sort of ‘scientifical, deductive method’, addresses literary criticism as a form of factual understanding, and adds a reference that reminds the readers of Marx’s criticism against Hegel (that ‘camminare acrobaticamente sulla testa’ can only refer to Marx’s criticism on Hegel):

Cosa meno eversiva di quanto non possa sembrare a prima vista, e che è quasi un rimettere in posizione eretta un metodo che, sino ad oggi, ha sempre camminato acrobaticamente sulla testa.<sup>102</sup>

The whole essay is consistently devoted to the self-awareness of the literary discourse as a crossroads of literary and cultural streams, while the Dantean perspective echoes in the background. When Sanguineti presents his considerations and his method, the verbal texture of his prose constantly reverberates with Dante’s texts, as if it were only natural to voice a literary reflection on modern avant-garde writings through the employment of semi-hidden Dantean elements. An example from the very beginning of the essay:

Ma perché *la forma* del dire non sia troppo *sorda* a rispondere alla *materia* che abbiamo assunto, un pizzico di avanguardismo critico ci pare non possa guastare, che, anzi, addirittura ci voglia.<sup>103</sup>  
 (emphases mine)

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<sup>102</sup> Sanguineti, ‘Il trattamento del materiale verbale’, p. 446.

<sup>103</sup> Sanguineti, ‘Il trattamento del materiale verbale’, p. 445.

Where the lexical items are a memory reverberation from *Par. I* 127-129:

Vero è che, come *forma* non s'accorda  
 molte fiate a l'intenzion de l'arte,  
 poiché a risponder la *materia* è *sorda*,  
 (emphases mine)

The reference is assumed for its lexical power, but surprisingly enough, also in order to contradict Dante's statement. In Sanguineti 'la forma' might be 'sorda' toward the 'materia', which means that the chosen 'form' might be insufficient for the 'matter' the critic has to deal with, Dante's text, instead, tells us that sometimes the 'forma' is not consistent with the purposes of art because the 'materia' is 'sorda', that is intrinsically unable to achieve the aims meant by God. It is as if the canons (Dante, in this case) were constantly employed and traversed by Sanguineti in order to distance them.

One more example of 'untruthful' adaptation of Dante's texts within Sanguineti's critical discourse can be seen when the critic faces the concrete possibility of producing an avant-garde novel:

Quel vedere un tizio il quale, fingendo un progetto, attua, nel progetto, il progetto medesimo, trovandosi fra le mani, alla fine del proprio sogno, la più solida e certa realtà, e insomma, questo fare non facendo, per la contraddizione che lo consente, e anzi lo impone, precipita spontaneamente, se non in farsa, almeno (pensate sempre sull'altro versante, a Pirandello), in grottesco.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Sanguineti, 'Il trattamento del materiale verbale', p. 446.

The whole situation and the repetition of the word ‘progetto’ mimes the Dantean repetition of the words ‘sogno’, ‘sognando’, ‘sognare’ and the situation presented in *Inf.* XXX 136-141:

Qual è colui che suo dannaggio sogna,  
 che sognando desidera sognare,  
 sì che quel ch'è, come non fosse, agogna,  
 tal mi fec'io, non possendo parlare,  
 che desiava scusarmi, e scusava  
 me tuttavia e nol mi credea fare.

Within the same paragraph the reader finds one of the most popular Dantean echoes, that is the reversal of *Inf.* XXVII 120, the almost proverbial ‘per la contradizion che nol consente’, which marks the damnation of Guido di Montefeltro. Sanguineti considers Dante’s citation as a form of linguistic thesaurus that does not need to be indicated or made explicit: here, as well as in the linguistic magma of *Laborintus*, there are language components (‘la contraddizione che lo consente’, ‘Ma perché la forma del dire non sia troppo sorda a rispondere alla material’), which Sanguineti takes into consideration as elements of a commonly shared cultural background and which have evidently become part of Sanguineti’s cultural biology. The critic submits to the reader the explicit suggestion of Pirandello, but Dante (together with Manzoni and Boccaccio) remains in a privileged position, always present and seldom made explicit. We might be much closer than expected to the considerations made by Primo Levi on Dante not ‘needing’ to be

mentioned among one's cultural roots, because certain authors (he mentions Dante, Leopardi, Manzoni, Flaubert) 'sono (o dovrebbero essere) patrimonio di ogni lettore').<sup>105</sup>

The design of Sanguineti's essay is based on the analysis of current avant-garde novel writing, and Sanguineti purposely translates the modern instances produced by contemporary novelists and himself into an ironical *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, where the different styles are the canonical 'tragico', 'elegiaco' and 'comico', and the final aim is the anticipated description of a narrative form which is Sanguineti's own novel:

Giacché, se vogliamo definire tragico (nel vecchio senso) lo stile di Filippini, se non altro in grazia dei suoi alti stilemi fenomenologici, ed elegiaco, con la sua perspicace medietà, lo stile di Di Marco (e vi lascio intanto, come oggetto di meditazione, l'equa corrispondenza di tragico e irreale, di elegiaco e di possibile), abbiamo ora il desiderabile 'campione' di un inferiore stile comico (sempre nel vecchio senso), quale a noi mancava: a rappresentare, ahimè, quello stile del reale, che, per perfezione di paradosso, fa il palombaro nel mare dei sogni.<sup>106</sup>

Sanguineti defines himself as 'the third writer', a form of self-definition that echoes and mimics Dante's self address in *De Vulgari* as 'amicus eius' (that is, in the treaty on language Dante mentions himself as 'the friend of Cino'- meaning Cino da Pistoia - and never explicitly mentions himself and his own name). The appropriation and the transparent recurrence even to the formal and minor characteristics of an immensely distant critical network (Dante's analysis of

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<sup>105</sup> See Chapter I, p. 17.

<sup>106</sup> Sanguineti, 'Il trattamento verbale', p. 447.

the state and the perspectives of what was in fact an ‘avant-garde’ form of writing, the employment of the vernacular) is, in Sanguineti, both playful and surprisingly appropriate.

According to Sanguineti’s conclusions, the modern writer will have to engage himself in a journey - could one forget Dante’s (and the medievals’) *itinerarium mentis*? - and his tale will have to take the form of a succession of events, which he calls ‘stazioni’. The same definition used by Sanguineti to describe the structure of *La Commedia dell’Inferno*, his theatre adaptation of Dante’s *Inferno*: ‘[...] una sorta di selezione naturale degli episodi, che procede sulla base dell’inclinazione intrinseca al dettato dell’*Inferno*, e costruisce, pressocché spontaneamente, una “sequenza” di scene, di “stazioni” [...]’<sup>107</sup>

Sanguineti’s whole project in devising a new form of narration, in spite of its explicit link with the world of the dreams and of the unconscious, sounds very much like a description, or at least a possible interpretation, of the *Divine Commedia*, although Sanguineti presents it as the realisation of his own ‘modern novel’:

Il quale stile comico, perché la ricetta sia completa, e l’ars dictandi canonicamente rispettata, si articolerà in un racconto ‘per stazioni’ successive come direbbe Spitzer, che mima l’itinerario dell’anima verso la capanna nella foresta, oniricamente travestita in questo o in quel modo, con tanto di discesa agli Inferi, e colloquio con le ombre, e iniziazione, insomma, al sesso e alla morte.<sup>108</sup>

While presenting his novel *Capriccio italiano* (a fragment of which is in fact anthologised in the same essay) Sanguineti’s purpose is openly that of making his creative operation fit within

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<sup>107</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, *Commedia dell’Inferno*, (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1989), p. 87.

<sup>108</sup> Sanguineti, ‘Il trattamento verbale’, p. 459.

a critical design. The novel, whose central event is the birth of the narrator's third son, is composed of 111 short chapters and is written in a prose apparently and insistently deprived of all the expected frameworks of a traditional novel. Both in *Capriccio italiano* and in *Il gioco dell'oca*, Sanguineti's second novel, which was published in 1967, repetitions, colloquialisms, appearance and disappearance of characters depend on laws that the reader is hardly made to share. The writer appears constantly aware that his tale carries and defines his ideological position. This makes it necessary and inevitable to design the narrative as a succession of dreams, nightmares, and disconnected incidents where events and characters lose all customary appearance of rationality or identity.

While the poetical experiments of *Laborintus* and *Laborintus II* contain and almost naturally produce the perception of a cultural background against which the poet's voice must be heard, Sanguineti's narrative production, first with *Capriccio italiano* and then with *Il gioco dell'oca*, must even more carefully avoid the possibility of being perceived as a naturalistic, mimetic reproduction of episodes. The writer is 'a palombaro nel mare dei sogni' and his words induce a planned detachment from any illusion of mere replication: almost the script, or the musical score, of a drama that is happening elsewhere, the novel is a descent into a psychic and existential depth, which, however, includes a final recovery and the achievement of a conclusive order.

The first chapter of *Capriccio italiano* introduces characters connected with previous, unknown, and yet necessary, events and compels the reader to surrender to a pattern that excludes immediate understanding, in spite of the superficial directness of the statements:

Spostammo le sedie verso la parete, mentre i quattro, tenebrosi, attaccavano *When I stop*. Il ragazzetto storto si gettò un'altra volta sul magnetofono. Mia moglie, adesso, era con E., in quell'angolo. Erano saliti a bere un'aranciata al banco. Poi si erano infilati nel camerino del direttore. Mia moglie, adesso, mi guardava. Si era tolta una calza e si stava fasciando un polso, forse. Mi fece anche un cenno di saluto.<sup>109</sup>

The whole design of this prose becomes perfectly consistent once the reader realises he is made to witness the report on someone's dream. While the references and all the deictics employed by the narrator imply an unreachable identity, the final image of the first chapter includes a direct reference to *Inferno* III:

Il ragazzetto storto premette il tasto nero, perché il pezzo, adesso, era finito. Il lago era nero e nebbioso, per questo non c'era più nessuno. Fece un breve tratto curvo e, sotto, un breve segmento. 'La barca di Caronte,' disse, 'Se rovesciamo l'epigrafe'. Eravamo senza remi, e il vento era caduto. (p. 9)

While Charon's boat can only be connected with all the potential suggestions of the beginning of an infernal journey, the calm, black, and foggy lake appears as a repositioning of the escapist dream of perfection and youth which was the core of the sonnet *Guido i' vorrei*. That very dream had appeared in the course of *Laborintus* as a suspension of rationality, and had in fact been seen as a suspension of human rationality. In the obscure symbolism of the dream in *Capriccio italiano*, Charon's boat can be seen only 'se rovesciamo l'epigrafe', that is, only if the

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<sup>109</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, *Capriccio italiano* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1963), p. 7. All references to *Capriccio italiano* are from this edition and will henceforth be given in the form *Capriccio* followed by the page number(s).

narrated event (or the statement that shows the event) is turned upside down: if, instead of reading the novel as a journey towards birth (the narrator's son), the same plot is read and perceived as the unavoidable race toward one's most secret self.

As Lidia Bertolini notices in her comparative analysis of the Dantean presences in Pasolini's and Sanguineti's works,<sup>110</sup> the Dantean source, here in *Capriccio italiano* as well as in the rest of Sanguineti's production, accomplishes the task of providing a layer of commonly shared, but also mysteriously deep, cultural background – Bertolini mentions the fact that *Capriccio italiano* has been defined as an 'odissea junghiana'<sup>111</sup> – where Dante himself appears as a 'magical element':

Nonostante il proposito di scandalizzare a forza di abbassare il livello dell'espressione dalla soglia letteraria, anche qui la reminiscenza colta, sebbene non offerta in chiare stratificazioni quanto lo è nelle poesie, pullula; e si forma e si affaccia anche l'immagine dantesca, come una cifra magica, o come un campione scelto e incapsulato, tramandato e da tramandare, ma non in vista.<sup>112</sup>

Perhaps one of the most productive approaches to Sanguineti's narrative might be the perception of the scattered nuclei of condensed cultural inheritance, 'campioni scelti e incapsulati', as Bertolini says, whose presence in the context testifies to the permanence and at the same time the ambiguousness of a literary (and cultural) tradition.

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<sup>110</sup> Bertolini, p. 253.

<sup>111</sup> Bertolini, p. 255.

<sup>112</sup> Bertolini, p. 253.

Some of the 111 short chapters induce possible connections with the *Commedia*, its sights and torments acquire the duration of technical reproduction (the tape), which increase and isolate the pain that memory alone would normally encapsulate:

Il nastro gira lentissimo. Ci fatica tanto a parlare, adesso, quella donna che ci parla dal nastro, che adesso vengono come dei grandi sospiri, da tutta quella lentezza del nastro, ma come degli spasmi fatti dentro la gola, che adesso è una cosa che ci tormenta tanto, a sentirli che durano così tanto [...]

*Capriccio*, p. 144

Or the memory of *Inf. XXX*, as Mastro Adamo seems to be at the origin of the images produced in *Capriccio italiano*:

“Ho bevuto troppa acqua,” dissi. “Ma ti fa bene,” disse R., “vedi.” “E poi,” disse sempre R., che mi toccava, tanto per dire, quel legno che ci avevo, “che cosa dovrei dire, io, allora?” E disse: “Io sono come idropica.” E me la sentivo come idropica, è vero, soprattutto di sotto, cioè soprattutto nel ventre, che mi sembrava di sentirsi come delle vene gonfie che battevano, ma che non capivo se battevano in lei, se battevano in me, quelle vene vive. (p. 152)

But perhaps the most interesting instance, together with the image of Charon’s boat at the beginning, is almost at the end of the novel, when the two main characters, the narrator and his wife, are made to utter their own names:

“Ahimé,” dissi a quelle, “che io non posso abbandonarla, non posso.” E piangevo, lì disteso per terra, lì tutto schiacciato. E mi alzo, e corro dietro a mia moglie, che brucia tanto, che la chiamo per nome.

“Luciana,” le dico, che lei si chiama così, appunto, “perché bruci tanto?” E lei corre, che non si volta mai indietro, niente, ma che anche correndo, però anche bruciando, parla. “Edoardo,” mi dice. “Poi dice “Oh, Edoardo,” che questo è il mio nome, proprio, “salvami, salvami.”

*Capriccio*, p. 164

It is in the memorable encounter of Dante and Beatrice, in *Purg.* XXX 55-57, that the name of the narrator is famously mentioned for the first and only time in the whole poem.

Dante, perché Virgilio se ne vada,  
non pianger anco, non piangere ancora;  
ché pianger ti convien per altra spada.

In the situation produced by Sanguineti, the names are mentioned and the naming is stressed ('che la chiamo per nome/che questo è il mio nome, proprio'), which leads us to think that the incident is meant as an open reference to a narrative event in the *Commedia*, where rebirth is the focus and where the whole course of the narration will be taking a different direction. It seems that the modern journey has produced a modern salvation. There is no longer room for a self-confident Beatrice, as she has disappeared from the cultural landscape, and so has the journey towards theological salvation and earthly paradise. What remains is the earthly hell of fear and pain, but also of bodily and matrimonial consolation: ‘salvami, salvami’ says the narrator’s wife, and transforms the topos of the unreachable beloved into the expression of the concrete relationship between man and wife. Sanguineti has produced, however, a density of cultural references, which are available but not necessary to the acceptability of the situation. The

canon does not need to be detected in order to make it possible to follow or make sense of the narrative. Yet the canon lies in the depth of the reader's cultural background: an almost scholastic demonstration of the fact that the collective unconscious presupposed by Sanguineti includes Dante's archetypal presence. *Capriccio italiano*, in spite of its nightmarish disposition, moves from a situation (the narrator's wife's pregnancy) and reaches a conclusion (the actual birth of the couple's son). It is a novel planned and produced along a narrative thread, which results in an unexpected narrative coherence. It is therefore possible to detect, at the level of plot, another subversion of the Dantean inheritance. While the episodes of the *Commedia* are coherently, and even dogmatically, chained together because of their deep cultural cohesion, the 'stazioni' mentioned by Sanguineti in his essay on neo avant-garde literature (that is the narrative nuclei that should support the narrator's search), can no longer be identified or located within a shared network of cultural references. Without the joined efforts of commentators, philologists, and historians, the greatest part of the *Commedia*'s references would be equally lost; and to the ear of a theoretical common reader, Dante's lines might easily become partially inaudible. The point is that while Dante presupposes his own difficulty together with the possibility – and the necessity – of being correctly understood, Sanguineti plans the loss of his own coherence and includes Dante in the elements that make his narrative universe virtually impenetrable.

If *Capriccio italiano*, in spite of its fragmented structure, is still the narration of a story, with *Il giuoco dell'oca* the narrative game dissolves its own rules: the whole plot is structured in order to deny the acceptability of rational sequence. The order to be followed in reading the text,

according to the author, should be marked by pure chance<sup>113</sup>, so that the order, which does appear on the page, is but a questionable proposal. The reader should literally play dice with the text, and move from one chapter to the next just like a player of the ‘gioco dell’oca’: stopping, returning, moving back and forth according to the paradoxical logic of a game, where the rule, by being accepted, becomes the irrational non movable mover of the whole process. The reader’s privilege of defining his own textual adventure, dictated by the game’s framed irrationality, sanctions a perhaps too evident and symmetrical opposition to the structure of the *Commedia*, where Dante’s journey is not only the well-known medieval structure of the three realms, but, and more, Dante’s very own journey toward salvation. In spite of this – or, rather, in planned opposition to this - the Dantean images are more frequent in *Il giuoco dell’oca* than in *Capriccio italiano*.

In Sanguineti’s second novel the arrows pointing toward Dante are often almost a reverberation of mingled situations, rather than a single reference to a definite episode or oriented quotations. A first example in the sixth of the 91 short chapters:

Questa, dove noi siamo arrivati adesso, è già la casa del ponte. Stiamo guardandoci i morti, dal ponte che guarda il fiume. Li riconosciamo tutti, noi due, questi morti che ci sono qui, lì nel fiume. Li chiamiamo per nome, con le mani raccolte intorno alla bocca, i morti, come gridando nel tubo delle mani. Ma i morti, si capisce, non rispondono niente. Stanno nell’acqua gelata, bianchi del ghiaccio che corrono

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<sup>113</sup> See Sanguineti’s cover note on the first edition of the novel: Edoardo Sanguineti, *Il giuoco dell’oca* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1967).

via sopra l'acqua, leggieri. Stanno come stanno i pesci in un vivaio, d'inverno, quando gli gettano da mangiare, lì ai pesci, giù alla riva.<sup>114</sup>

The whole situation, with the impossible communication between the dead and the living, and the position of the observers on the bridge, might be linked with *Inf. XXIX*, where Dante and Virgil discuss the presence of Dante's relative Geri del Bello, his complaint for not having been revenged by Dante, and Virgil's exhortation to proceed with the journey and leave Geri to his destiny of damnation:

«Se tu avessi», rispuos' io appresso,

«atteso a la cagion per ch'io guardava,

forse m'avresti ancor lo star dimesso».

Parte sen giva, e io retro li andava,

lo duca, già faccendo la risposta,

e soggiugnendo: «dentro a quella cava

dov'io tenea or li occhi sì a posta,

credo ch'un spirto del mio sangue pianga

la colpa che là giù cotanto costa»

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<sup>114</sup> Sanguineti, *Il giuoco dell'oca*, pp. 19-20. All references to *Il giuoco dell'oca* are cited from this edition and will henceforth be given in the form *Giuoco* followed by the page number(s).

Allor disse 'l maestro: «Non si franga  
lo tuo pensier da qui innanzi sovr'ello.

Attendi ad altro, ed ei là si rimanga  
ch'io vidi lui a piè del ponticello  
mostrarsti e minacciar forte col dito,  
e udi' 'l nominar Geri del Bello.

*Inf. XXIX 13-27*

«O duca mio, la vïolenta morte  
che non li è vendicata ancor», diss'io,  
«per alcun che de l'onta sia consorte,  
fece lui disdegnoso; ond'el sen giò  
sanza parlarmi, sì com'io estimo:  
e in ciò m'ha el fatto a sé più pio».

*Inf. XXIX 31-36*

Besides the reappearance of the bridge, the relationship between the dead and the living, and the (subverted) *topos* of the recognition by/of the dead, the central issue of both texts is the lack of communication: in the episode from the *Commedia* the attempt comes from the dead, Geri's purpose is to chain Dante to the system of revenge which Dante refuses but still recognises as a social option. In *Il giuoco dell'oca*, the attempt to communicate comes from the living, who recognise the dead and call them. The incident could be read as a visual representation of modern

man's attempt at communicating with his own past, at calling it back, and his realisation that 'i morti, si capisce, non rispondono niente'.

What is more, two other narrative elements can easily be juxtaposed to elements of Dante's *Commedia*. The ice, which in the last cantos of *Inferno* marks and paralyses the sinners, is still present in Sanguineti, but, in full opposition to what had happened in Dante's hell, Sanguineti's dead move like fish in a 'vivaio', and the comparison seems to come directly from Dante's *Paradiso*, in the famous comparison between the souls moving toward Dante and fish rushing to be fed:

Come 'n peschiera ch'è tranquilla e pura  
 traggonsi i pesci a ciò che vien di fori  
 per modo che lo stimin lor pastura,  
 sì vid'io ben più di mille splendori  
 trarsi ver' noi, e in ciascun s'udia:  
 «Ecco chi crescerà li nostri amori».

*Par. V 100-105*

The Dantean reminiscences act as a stream, combining together different sources from different contexts, and, as well as the various images of Sanguineti's game, are meant to appear as unexplained stations in a path belonging to no map. In chapter VII, in spite of the evident transformation of structure, elements and relations, it is almost compulsory to perceive the

relationship between the modern text and its Dantean precedent. Sanguineti's 'station' reads as follows:

La gente pende giù da un albero, attaccata per i capelli, lì ai rami. Sembrano tanti frutti, quella gente, attaccata come sta. [...] Ai piedi dell'albero ci sono dei fiori, dei cespugli. Ci sono cinque pianticelle di fragole, lì davanti. Poi, ancora ai piedi dell'albero, ci sono due uccelli, con le ali aperte. C'è un uccello con la testa di donna, e c'è un uccello con la testa di uccello. L'uccello con la testa di uccello ha la testa di profilo, con un lungo becco, come un pugnale. Ha un'ala sola. Si affaccia dietro a una roccia. Ma l'uccello con la testa di donna, invece, è un altro sole. E' un sole, però, che non è più un sole, in fondo, che è soltanto un uccello, ormai. Ha un corpo sottile, le zampe in un cespuglio, le trecce.

*Giuoco*, pp. 21-22

The dead, the bushes, the woman-bird, in spite of the transformed setting, seem to define a sort of final realisation of the sinners' destiny, as narrated by Pier delle Vigne in *Inf.* XIII 106-108:

e per la mesta  
selva saranno i nostri corpi appesi,  
ciascuno al prun dell'ombra sua molesta.

And again, in chapter IX, a flux of Dantean images, mingled together in a nightmarish combination, where one can feel suggestions from different areas of Malebolge, the very part of the *Commedia* to which Sanguineti had dedicated his first important study on Dante:

Ci sono otto persone, invece, nella fila in alto. Sembrano tutti dei preti, a guardarli. Hanno dei vestiti speciali addosso, a strisce. Hanno dei mantelli sulle spalle, dei cappucci in testa. Uno dei preti, che è il quinto della sua fila, da sinistra, è un papa. Poi, a fare la fila di mezzo, ci sono sette persone, così, in tutto. Ma una coppia di animali, che sono animali un po' strani, veramente, sta rodendo i tronco dell'albero, lì con i denti. Poi c'è uno scheletro. Sta in piedi, vicino all'albero, con le gambe incrociate che camminano, con un arco e una freccia, con i buchi degli occhi che sorridono, con la mascella rotta.

*Giuoco*, pp. 29 -30

The scattered elements of this apparently accurate description of a dream, lead back to different cantos of the *Commedia*, and in particular to the hypocrites of *Inf. XXIII* 58-67:

Là giù trovammo una gente dipinta  
 che giva intorno assai con lenti passi,  
 piangendo e nel sembiante stanca e vinta.  
 Elli avean cappe con cappucci bassi  
 dinanzi a li occhi, fatte de la taglia  
 che in Clugnì per li monaci fassi.  
 Di fuor dorate son, sì ch'elli abbaglia;  
 ma dentro tutte piombo, e gravi tanto,  
 che Federigo le mettea di paglia.  
 O in eterno faticoso manto!

It is much more uncertain whether the animals that are gnawing the tree, and the subsequent image of the skeleton might be a recombination of the beastly rushing of the dogs in  
*Inf.* XIII 124-139:

Di retro a loro era la selva piena  
di nere cagne, bramose e correnti  
come veltri ch'uscisser di catena.

In quel che s'appiattò miser li denti,  
e quel dilaceraro a brano a brano;  
poi sen portar quelle membra dolenti.

and of Ugolino's ferocious obsession in *Inf.* XXXIII 76-78:

Quand'ebbe detto ciò, con li occhi torti  
riprese 'l teschio misero co' denti,  
che furo a l'osso, come d'un can, forti.

The skeleton's broken jaw does create a memory short circuit and connects Sanguineti's station with *Inf.* XXVIII 94-96, where the traitor Pier da Medicina shows, describes and interprets the historical betrayal committed by Caesar's companion Curio:

Allor puose la mano a la mascella  
d'un suo compagno e la bocca li aperse,  
gridando: «Questi è desso, e non favella.

Several images coming from different loci of Dante's work constitute a background reference, and Dante's original has become an almost lost alphabet, a potential producer of meaning, which is being employed for the visual and dramatic impact of its elements. The modern text evokes and silences its own cultural depth, very much like the images on a pack of cards evoke a lost universe of kings, queens and knights destined to produce the apparent rationality of a game of cards. The opposite choice, the literary habit of quoting Dante for its own sake, in order to establish a parenthood both with the tradition and with the reader, is probably most alien to Sanguineti's intentions, as he tends to make it evident that both tradition and readership are questionable references. When the citation does come, it is inserted almost as an accidental lapsus, as if in Sanguineti's fictional universe, the nightmarish plots were occasionally traversed by sudden fragments of a lost universe. This is what happens in chapter XII, where the narrator's journey is presented through an almost literal Dantean citation:

Andiamo così, *di ponte in ponte*, ridendo un po' tra di noi, insieme, guardandoci la ragazza che nuota. (Emphases mine)

*Giuoco*, p. 31

The source is once more Malebolge, that is the first lines of *Inf. XXI*

*Così di ponte in ponte*, altro parlando  
che la mia comedia cantar non cura,  
venimmo; (emphases mine)

The modern game master conjures for the reader not only the reappearance of lines, situations, lexical units: Sanguineti's text contains and mimics the structure of many of the dialogues of the *Commedia*, and, in an added employment of irony, the way used by school teachers to simplify the contents of the most complex parts of Dante's texts. In chapter XXIX, the narrator is asked by a woman, whom he cannot see, to answer several questions about his identity. The two communicate using the Morse alphabet:

Le domande che mi fa lei, lì a me, sono le seguenti: I) Sei morto davvero? II) Dove sei, tu, adesso? III) Che cosa fai? IV) Mi hai mai fatto le corna, tu, da vivo, e se sì, eventualmente, con chi? V) Ci sono delle donne laggiù, cioè lì dentro, dove ci stai tu, insomma? A ogni domanda io rispondo in fretta, con poche parole, con i punti e con le linee.

*Giuoco*, pp. 65-66

In some cases the Dantean source is subverted, transformed and revisited, through a progressive dramatisation. The procedure seems to be at the origin of the work that will lead to the realisation of *La commedia dell'Inferno*. In chapter XXXI of *Il giuoco dell'oca*, the Dantean three headed Lucifer appears after the passage through the infernal hole, and becomes the mask for a modern, enigmatic, disquieting but certainly less powerful, spectacled man:

Per la scena dell'uomo con gli occhiali, qui, dentro il pozzo, nella casa XXXI, ci sono i due pannelli. Nel pannello superiore c'è il parallelepipedo. E' messo in verticale, è sospeso a tre funi. L'uomo

con gli occhiali è messo lì a destra, lì del parallelepipedo, con tutte le sue teste, come in uno stemma. Le teste sono la testa rossa, la testa bianca, la testa nera.

*Giuoco*, pp. 69-70

Dante's paradise is even more clearly subject to ironical adaptation and parody: situations and references range from a 'Primo cielo' sustained by tiny human beings and by the narrator, who is located on a very physical (and possibly very unsteady) stairway:

Due altri omini, lì giù, si tengono su, con le braccia, lì da terra, il primo cielo. Io sono un omino bianco morto. Ma sono lì giù, a sinistra, lontano dal cimitero del carcere. Mi tengo su, con le braccia, lì da terra, lì dall'orto botanico, il primo cielo. Sto sopra una scaletta bianca di bambù, lì da terra, solo solo.

*Giuoco*, p.152

Images of a paradise subject to a sort of humiliation or at least parody are to be found in the subsequent chapter LXXII, where the scene reminds us of the immense scenario of Dante's 'empireo'. Yet, the whole setting has become a theatre, Beatrice is possibly a child who is reciting in Latin (and makes occasional mistakes), and the words she utters are taken from old books, open at random, and read with an American accent:

Adesso succede già un'altra cosa, però. C'è una bambina, su in galleria, lì in mezzo al pubblico della galleria, che diventa tutta luminosa, come ci può rendere luminosi, noi, certe volte, in mezzo a certi alberi, un raggio lunghissimo del sole. Il raggio scende giù, dal soffitto del teatro. Irrompe giù tanto, nella profonda oscurità della sala. Il raggio di quel sole le fa brillare, alla bambina, come se fossero tutti d'oro, i suoi capelli tutti biondi. [...] recita anche, in latino, ma con un accento che è tutto americano, e mettendoci poi, qualche volta, anche qualche piccolo errore, qualche pagina un po' antica. Si sceglie la sua pagina, ogni volta, in un libro un po' antico, che si apre appunto così, la bambina, come un po' a caso. Ma la sua

voce, dunque, scende di lassù, dalla galleria. E' come un lampadario di cristallo che trema, in un teatro, con le gocce di cristallo che si urtano tutte, lì insieme, che si fanno la loro musica luminosa. Ma ha tutta una sua buona punta di acido, intanto, quella sua voce, anche, mentre raggiunge le bolle del sapone, lì in aria, come per farle scoppiare all'improvviso, mentre scivola sopra il raggio di quel sole, mentre si va a nascondere nel buio, giù, già, qui sotto. Adesso la bambina recita quella pagina, per esempio, che incomincia così, *Habitatio ista caeli*, e che va avanti.

*Giuoco*, pp. 153-154

But it is probably the very last of the 111 chapters that carries the most remarkable example of references to Dante's work. Sanguineti's text reads as follows:

E adesso che il porto si fa già vedere, un po' da lontano, adesso che mi calo già tutte le mie vele, un po', io mi sporgo anche tutto dal buttafuori di briglia, lì dalla grande botte, dalla grande barca, sopra quell'acqua che è in grande tempesta. Mi scrivo un nome, adesso, per questa grande nave dove ci navighiamo tutti insieme, con questo nome un po' lungo, che è IL DILETTEVOLE GIUOCO DELL'OCA. Poi ci scrivo ancora, un po' sotto, ma come un po' di lato, lì in mezzo, un'altra parola così, che è come un altro nome, lì per la grande nave. E' una parola che è

FINE.

*Giuoco*, p. 238

While the guiding metaphor is, traditionally, that of life as navigation, with human beings carried along in the same boat, Sanguineti employs the apparently threadbare cultural tool to produce a complex and yet somehow playful statement about literature in general and his own work in particular. The image of the approaching harbour and the action of the navigator aware of the conclusion of his journey derive both from *Convivio* and from the *Commedia*, as in both cases

Dante is dealing with the figure of Guido da Montefeltro. In *Convivio*, Guido, together with Lancelot, is an example of wisdom: he has fully employed his abilities in his youth and maturity, but, once aware of the approaching end of life, has conveniently abandoned the vanities of the world and has dedicated himself to the care of his soul:

O miseri e vili che con le vele alte correte a questo porto, e là ove dovereste riposare, per lo imperio del vento rompete, e perdete voi medesimi là dove tanto camminato avete! Certo lo cavaliere Lancelotto non volse entrare con le vele alte, né lo nobilissimo nostro latino Guido montefeltrano. Bene questi nobili calaro le vele de le mondane operazioni, che ne la loro lunga etade a religione si rendero, ogni mondano diletto e opera disponendo.<sup>115</sup>

It is well known how the treatment of Guido changes dramatically from the *Convivio* to the *Commedia*, yet practically the same elements (harbour, sails, old age, religion...) – and the same lexical components – are introduced in Guido's autobiography in *Inf.* XXVII 79-83:

Quando mi vidi giunto in quella parte  
di mia etade ove ciascun dovrebbe  
calar le vele e raccoglier le sarte,  
ciò che pria mi piacēa, allor m'increbbe,  
e pentuto e confesso mi rendei;

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<sup>115</sup> *Convivio* IV, xxviii, 8

In the *Commedia*, Guido is a sinner who, like Ulysses, has failed to perceive the limits and the purposes of human rationality: he is condemned for his wrong assumption that the pope could give him the privilege of committing a sin and obtaining forgiveness at the same time (*Inf.* XXVII 108-9: ‘Padre, da che tu mi lavi/di quel peccato ov’io mo cader deggio’). The bold misuse and abuse of technical intelligence has lead Guido to a hell where he is condemned to a condition of absolute mistake. His reply to Dante’s inquiry about his identity is based, once more, on a wrong assumption:

«S’i’ credesse che mia risposta fosse  
 a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
 questa fiamma staria sanza più scosse;  
 ma però che già mai di questo fondo  
 non tornò vivo alcun, s’i’ odo il vero,  
 sanza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.

*Inf. XXVII 61-66*

Sanguineti employs this dense and complex knot in an evidently privileged position, that is at the end of his *Giuoco dell’oca*, and therefore apparently guarantees to his own novel a sort of dignified promotion. Yet, the way in which this promotion is achieved makes it obvious that the modern hero is only trying to escape from the frame and the cage of dignified discourse:

E adesso che il porto si fa già vedere, un po' da lontano, adesso che mi calo già tutte le mie vele,  
un po', io mi sporgo anche tutto dal buttafuori di briglia, lì dalla grande botte, dalla grande barra, sopra  
quell'acqua che è in grande tempesta.

Sanguineti's narrator, not unlike Eliot's Prufrock, is not a hero, nor is he meant to be: on the contrary, he is consistently doing his best to make every narration become a parody, and every reference to a culturally sanctioned source appear a gullible game. And so, in fact, the novel finishes, as the parody of a narration, its shipwreck including the basic tools of traditional representation (the ship, the journey, the meaningful names, the sails, the tempest), and the result is an ironical and final mock purification-conclusion (Fine). The game of narration is related to the game of dramatic representation: Sanguineti's novels tend to be consistently immersed in a theatrical tension, which is focused on the bare facts and their visual impact. In *Il giuoco dell'oca* the very use of the present tense accomplishes the task of providing a dramatic grid for the narration, while in *Capriccio italiano* characters, dialogues and events are deprived of that background of causality, which traditionally constructs the plot of a novel.

Sanguineti's first important theoretical work on Dante, *Interpretazione di Malebolge*<sup>116</sup>, shows how deeply and surprisingly interconnected criticism and narration are in Sanguineti's creative manipulation of literature: by looking into Sanguineti's critical, poetic, and dramatic summary of his creative attitude to Dante, that is his *Commedia dell'Inferno*, one discovers that the fundamental thread of Sanguineti's critical enterprise is the narrative dimension of the

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<sup>116</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, *Interpretazione di Malebolge* (Firenze: Olschki, 1961).

*Commedia*. If one goes back to Sanguineti's statements in *Interpretazione di Malebolge*, the critical assumption from which Sanguineti moves is (not unlike most of the Italian scholars of the same time) from Croce's reading of the poem:

non voleva vedere, il Croce, che quella “verità” secondo cui la poesia dantesca ha da essere trattata, deve nascere a contatto del testo, anziché essere, (come il Croce intendeva poi eseguire, ed eseguì) sul testo meramente verificata. (p. XVI)

ciò che il Croce rifiuta, in vista appunto della sua lettura critica, è l'orizzonte narrativo della poesia dantesca. (p. XVII)

The leading critical assumption is based on the concept of the *Commedia* as a theological novel:

La poesia dantesca, infine, nel suo manifestarsi, si presenta entro il cerchio di un orizzonte narrativo, e si manifesta precisamente, se vogliamo conservare la metafora, come “romanzo”. (p. XVIII)

While consciously and consistently depriving his own experimental novels of a traditional narrative structure, Sanguineti detects that very structure where it had long been neglected or perhaps never recognised. Perceiving, and making the narrative intention of the *Commedia* available to the critical discourse, not only enlightens a number of episodes and justifies the ways of Dante in his poem, but also renders the very concept of narration a much more complex critical term. Once again, the focus is on the ideological orientation of the cultural code. Dante's belonging to his cultural context is not a standard critical statement, it becomes the key to decode

and convincingly restate obscured and misread lines and locate them within a consistent cultural horizon. So it happens with parts of Malebolge, which had been (and still are) read as episodic, emotional, or rhapsodic singularities: Sanguineti introduces the concepts of ‘penal landscape’:

E con la nozione di paesaggio penale confessiamo intanto il termine essenziale del nostro esercizio interpretativo. (p. 2)

and of ‘morally oriented narration’:

nella sua nitida compagine chiusa, Malebolge si manifesta, originariamente, come luogo morale. Così, l’evidenza spaziale manifestandosi come evidenza di architettura etica, la cifra, che altrimenti non interviene, alfine deve emergere, cifra di architettura morale: “e ha distinto in dieci valli il fondo”. (p. 5)

Sanguineti produces a series of critical instruments whereby the whole *Commedia* – let alone Malebolge – is made to show its complex ideological consistence and coherence. Once faced with the capital problem of Dante’s Ulysses, Sanguineti’s critical proposal becomes particularly convincing:

Il problema della reducibilità o meno del canto di Ulisse alla atmosfera di Malebolge è problema vano per la ragione (di paradossale semplicità, nella sua apparenza, ma non per questo meno autentica) che non esiste, nella realtà poetica dell’*Inferno* dantesco, una determinata, specifica atmosfera di Malebolge. Esiste, questa sì, una articolazione narrativa, di cui il canto è indispensabile sezione, esiste un orizzonte di favola, l’orizzonte, appunto, della favola infernale, nella sua totalità, cui l’episodio di Ulisse

appartiene, non solubile veramente, ed è quella esplorazione del negativo, come a noi piace precisamente dire, che regola, con quella invenzione itinerale che le è propria, il romanzo della prima cantica, nella sua interezza espressiva unitariamente orientata. (p. 249)

The narrative thread of the *Commedia*, the penal landscape of its *Inferno*, and, most of all, the morally oriented code according to which the ‘favola’ should be read, constitute the powerful critical key which makes it possible to readjust and relocate misused statements and definitions, as, for instance, the presence of ‘comic’ instances in Dante’s Hell. A subtle example is Sanguineti’s interpretation of the linguistically puzzling final line of *Inf. XX*,

Si mi parlava, e andavamo introcque.

The Canto, dedicated to wizards and fortune tellers condemned to a reversal of vision and a bodily inversion of forms, which rephrase their own mortal illusion of seeing, forecasting and changing the future, includes Virgil’s digression on the origin of Mantua, his native town: the texture of the canto is therefore elevated and dignified, supposedly distant from vulgar characterisations. Yet the canto ends with a word (*introcque*) that Dante himself, in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, had defined as unfit for a language meant to be used outside its mere municipal limits.<sup>117</sup> It is therefore at least intriguing that the very word already sanctioned for its intrinsic municipal and vulgar characteristics should be employed within a context involving classical sources, Virgil’s voice, and literary explanations. Sanguineti provides a commentary,

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<sup>117</sup> “Et quoniam Tusci pre aliis in hac hebrietate baccantur, dignum utileque videtur municipalia vulgaria Tuscanorum sigillatim in aliquo depompare: Locuntur Florentini et dicunt: *Manichiamo, introcque che noi non facciamo altro.*” *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, I, xiii, 2.

which, besides supporting the consistency of Dante's choice, introduces and opens the whole question of the concept of what is 'comic' in Dante's *Commedia*:

non un comico sentire detta a Dante la conclusione della pagina in esame, non un comico sentire congiunge questa alla pagina seguente, ma un degradato immaginare, torniamo a dire, un sentimento di precisa caduta morale.<sup>118</sup>

And then, in the concluding considerations on the cantos dedicated to the 'barattieri':

'comico' dunque come degradato, senza vera complicità e senza sorriso, materia di esplorazione, momento del negativo, da affrontarsi, nelle operazioni poetiche, secondo le leggi di sempre, per opera del poeta medesimo: le categorie, le possibili risorse di una tradizione precisa, assunte, finalmente, come strumento del gesto espressivo e della sua interna legge etica; attraverso il 'comico' dantesco è precisamente tutta una zona del negativo che si denuncia e che si confessa nella sua irrimediabile degradazione. (p. 122)

When Sanguineti comments on the final line of *Inf.* XXI ('ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta') and explains the actual coherence between the concrete degradation of the devilish attitudes and the apparently dignified propositions of the subsequent canto XXII, 1-12:

Io vidi già cavalier muover campo,

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<sup>118</sup> Sanguineti, *Interpretazione di Malebolge*, p. 94.

e cominciare stormo e far lor mostra,  
e talvolta partir per loro scampo;  
coridor vidi per la terra vostra,  
o Aretini, e vidi gir gualdane,  
fedir torneamenti e correr giostra;  
quando con trombe, e quando con campane,  
con tamburi e con cenni di castella,  
e con cose nostrali e con istrane;  
né già con sì diversa cennamella  
cavalier vidi muover né pedoni,  
né nave a segno di terra o di stella.

the critic makes use of the occasion for calling back the voice of one among his most often quoted Dantean authorities, Benvenuto da Imola:

Non intendiamo tracciare qui le linee di una storia della questione che, a rigore, dovrebbe risalire tanto addietro da toccare, e sarebbe buon cominciamento, l'antico Benvenuto: la cui voce, a voler dire il vero, a questo riguardo, è stata assai poco ascoltata, e ingiustamente; poiché quando egli scrive, poniamo, 'miror si autor, quantumcumque abstractus, non ridebat quando ista pingebat cum mente, sive quando scribebat cum penna', offre pur sempre una bella e cauta proposta esegetica, e nella sua cautela, davvero indegna di essere troppo leggermente respinta. (p. 121)

Sanguineti's *Interpretazione di Malebolge* is an almost word-by-word commentary on the section of Dante's *Inferno* dedicated to the complex architecture of fraud and its punishment. The essay ends with a statement on the narrative and ethical coherence of Dante's journey:

La legge che guida questo ampio e vario tratto della favola è la stessa che governa lo svolgimento totale della regione del negativo: gli accenti di degradazione che qui abbiamo segnati, in metamorfiche misure, si estendono ai rimanenti cerchi dell'*Inferno*; le vibrazioni dello stile dantesco, l'evidenza crudele delle figurazioni, l'abile giuoco che guida le più diverse figure ai costanti ritmi narrativi di un esito moralizzato, vige nel regno della frode come negli altri regni del negativo. (p. 358)

It is the very concept of 'explorative journey' that enables the critic to detect the intrinsic ethical drive in the narrative disposition of the text: what Sanguineti calls the 'favola' is an oriented narration, conceived, articulated and disposed so that all episodes and single fragments lead to the perception of accumulation, and to the realisation of a negative universe: a complete and finite medieval nightmare planned in order to make all its parts concur to the functionality of the whole:

Nel concetto di *esplorazione itinerale* si cala finalmente, quella che per noi è la legge più profonda della poesia di Dante, la sua articolazione narrativa: i suoi accenti espressivi si sono dimostrati al tutto condizionati a codesta prospettiva di favola, a quella 'funzionalità', leggevamo ora in Contini, che per noi è la narratività stessa di codesta poesia, con la sua immanente carica etica, in perfetta identità di

‘Infernus litteralis’ e di ‘Infernus moralis’ [...] la frantumazione narrativa, così controllata nelle sue risoluzioni costruttive, che caratterizza l’*Inferno*, nel suo perpetuo frangersi in zone concluse, è la forma immanente della esplorazione dantesca, è la norma di continua accumulazione delle presenze negative che è, in Dante, il modo interno della manifestazione del negativo medesimo: frantumazione, se mai altra, funzionale, e sulla quale poggia. (p. 358)

The realisation of *Commedia dell’Inferno* in 1989 could be seen as a project analogous to the script of *Laborintus II* in 1965. In both cases Sanguineti employs his knowledge and his interpretation of Dante in order to produce a concrete artistic performance: the libretto for Berio’s musical composition and the theatrical piece for Federico Tiezzi belong to the same theoretical direction, that is the demonstration that a critical hypothesis can take the form of an artistic achievement. In his introduction to Sanguineti’s *Commedia dell’Inferno*,<sup>119</sup> Federico Tiezzi, the director of the theatrical realisation, tells about the preparation of the script and the critical issues that led to the performance. Tiezzi speaks of the contiguity he feels between Sanguineti’s poetry and the project of adapting Dante for the theatre:

Sanguineti sa orientare il linguaggio: sa concentrarlo e guidarlo come *esperienza verbale*, come esperienza storica. La sua poesia possiede un *quid di infernalità*: un io narrante, disintegrato, cerca nella selva oscura delle parole (e forse trova, attraverso la narrazione, attraverso il racconto) un suo catastrofico ordine, o salvezza. Nel caos deflagrante del plurilinguismo, nella bable dell’afasia, il procedere (quasi per analisi freudiana) dell’io rende flagrante (identificandosi, l’io, il soggetto, con l’esperienza verbale in atto), liricamente, l’attività di questa esperienza. Riconducendo le parole a un ordine, a un cosmo.

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<sup>119</sup> Sanguineti, *Commedia dell’Inferno*, pp. 5-14.

Insomma, se la poesia di Sanguineti scoppia come esperienza verbale (attraverso sonorità, citazioni e intenzioni in altre lingue, parole “alte” e termini “bassi”), essa si ricompone come riflessione sul racconto interiore. Il verso, spezzato, frantumato dall’attività dell’esperienza e ricomposto dalla riflessione che il poeta compie sulla stessa esperienza (nel suo farsi), rende la poesia di Sanguineti pronta per la *phoné* dell’attore: un canto.<sup>120</sup>

But what Sanguineti has in mind is a surprise even for his collaborator: the adaptation will proceed from the elimination and the reduction of Dante’s most famous lines. It is the same process adopted for *Laborintus II*. Here, in Tiezzi’s words what is emphasised is the rhythmical, musical and eventually theatrical dimension of the creative selection:

Così, ad esempio, il verso di Francesca (V, 136) “la bocca mi bacìò tutto tremante”, sarebbe vissuto, nel teatro, senza il *tutto*, sostituito da una pausa ritmica dell’attore. Il celebre endecasillabo avrebbe risuonato attivamente: lo spettatore – ascoltatore sarebbe stato scosso da quella pausa più che dalla presenza della parola: il verso sarebbe stato (attraverso il cuneo di quella assenza) straniato, messo a nudo. Il suo significato si sarebbe allontanato: il significante ritmico sarebbe venuto in primo piano.<sup>121</sup>

Through the void, the absence, the silence of expectations, a more precise revitalisation of the cultural monument is achieved. The voice of the past is no longer taken for granted, but, instead, it is fully exploited in those very forms which habit and tradition had slowly made unreadable and unreachable.

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<sup>120</sup> Federico Tiezzi, ‘Introduzione’ a Edoardo Sanguineti, *La commedia dell’Inferno*, p. 5

<sup>121</sup> Tiezzi, p.10.

Sanguineti's *Commedia dell'Inferno* is composed of two *acts*, as he calls them: the very first scene is a prologue to the whole project and the overall design is a well-balanced architecture made of two parts, the first including the introduction and nine scenes from the first sixteen cantos of the *Commedia*, and the second comprising the dramatisation of the cantos of Malebolge, and Cocito. A very Dantean order indeed: 1 + 9 + 9. The *primo tempo* of the script presents an empty circus where the three wild beasts of *Inf.* I are reduced to huge corpses contained in three cages: again an expression of the controversial nature of Dante's symbols, when adapted and translated into a modern context:

pista vuota sul fondo, coperta di sabbia: un circo attrezzato, nei modi consueti; tre gabbie, con le tre fiere impagliate, gigantesche; le pareti, ai lati della pista a fossa, sono provviste di una scala laterale a chiocciola, variamente intrecciata e incrociata, a cui si accede da vani interni, collocati a diversa altezza, chiusi da saracinesche, da cui potranno apparire i personaggi.<sup>122</sup>

The following scenes evolve along a coherent line of treatment of the Dantean source, which is constantly subject to a process of ironical solidification. A form of reading, which appears as the most suitable accomplishment of the critical conclusions reached in *Interpretazione di Malebolge*. The already noticed evaluation of the *comico dantesco* ('comico' dunque come degradato, senza vera complicità e senza sorriso, materia di esplorazione, momento del negativo') emerges as concrete dramatic practice in Sanguineti's own realisation of *Malebolge*:

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<sup>122</sup> Sanguineti, *Commedia dell'Inferno*, p. 19.

i Malebranche;

una piscina, grande, sul fondo; liquido nero, in apparenza ribollente (bolle che si gonfiano, in superficie, e si spaccano, con caratteristico rumore), e fumo che si solleva, sopra la superficie, qua e là, manichini bianchi che galleggiano, rappresentando i dannati (deve essere evidente, tuttavia, che si tratta di manichini da vetrina, nudi); (p. 55)

The concept of *paesaggio penale* results fully realised in the stage directions for the scene dedicated to *Inf. XXX*, the canto that shows the punishment for sinful falsifications:

Un ospedale, o piuttosto un lazzaretto, su giacigli vari, lettini, barelle, mucchi di paglia, tra strumenti medici arcaici e moderni, variamente mescolati, un grande numero di dannati, come ricoverati, che gemono e urlano (un tono da ricovero psichiatrico degradato, una “fossa dei serpenti”.) (p. 74)

In the final scene Dante and Virgil, virtually absent since the third scene of the first act, eventually appear again, but only to escape, using Lucifer's body, which is being reduced to a monstrous machine:

Lucifero;

dal fondo oscuro, adesso, prima invisibile, sempre più evidente progressivamente, avanza una gigantesca macchina, una vera macchina infernale [...]

il mostro meccanico, a mano a mano, rivela aspetti antropomorfici, che con i suoi movimenti in avanti, e con i suoi interni spostamenti (leve, stantuffi, catene, ecc.), si definiscono sempre meglio, con l'aiuto di fanali, lampade che si accendono qua e là: pare un busto di gigante, con la testa a tre facce [...]

rientrano in scena Dante e Virgilio, come a principio, e scendono sul fondo [...]

Virgilio e Dante scalano la macchina, appigliandosi alle varie sporgenze. [...]

Dante e Virgilio, scalata la macchina, giunti in cima, scompaiono alla vista del pubblico, come introducendosi negli occhi del mostro meccanico. (p. 84)

The whole performance is staged as in a circus, and the first characters to appear on the scene are two showmen, who will expound the subject matter and give background information on Dante's life and works. The idea of a degraded setting (a second-class circus) for the representation of the *Commedia*, a work that over the centuries has acquired the status of a canonical classic, is both traditional and paradoxical. Parody is often the first evidence of a canonization, but this particular parody, in which Dante's *Inferno* is staged as a vaudeville improvisation, aims both at the text and at the history of its reception. The actual words that will be used are from Boccaccio's *Esposizioni*,<sup>123</sup> but the dignified, culturally guaranteed position of the source is powerfully lowered and subjected to irony and detachment:

i due presentatori appaiono come imbonitori o clowns, irrompendo come in pista, a bandire lo spettacolo; parlano con grandi gesti, molto velocemente, talvolta rubandosi la battuta, interrompendosi,

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<sup>123</sup> See *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*, (Accessus: 4-7), in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccia* ed. by Giorgio Padoan, (Milano: Mondadori, 1965).

sovrapponendo le voci; tra quanto dicono e la recitazione, da comici da circo, vi deve essere piena dissociazione; anche i loro abiti, i volti colorati vivacemente, devono corrispondere a una situazione circense.<sup>124</sup>

The first scene therefore provides a general context for Dante and his work and induces a controversial, somehow altered attitude to the representation. The second scene, where Dante eventually appears but does not utter a word, makes use of Benvenuto da Imola's Latin commentary, which is mechanically reproduced by loudspeakers, as if to emphasise the timeless nature of a lost cultural context:

Le voci degli altoparlanti recitano in maniera uniforme e inespressiva, come se si trattasse di preghiere; intonazione tipicamente chiesastica; (p. 23)

It is only at the end of this scene that the first lines of the *Commedia* eventually resound, as if to match, or frame, the silent arrival of Dante. The whole plan seems to echo the *Commedia*'s delayed beginning, as the third scene of Sanguineti's adaptation contains and emphasises the difficulty of the movement: the 'selva oscura' is in the first words pronounced by Sanguineti's Dante, but the actual scene presents a bridge 'sospeso sul vuoto': the bridge and the emptiness on which it is suspended act as the visual metaphor of a journey that is announced as both necessary and impossible. The technique employed here is that of selection and fragmentation: the dialogue between Dante and Virgil is a nervous, swift, and hurried exchange

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<sup>124</sup> Sanguineti, *La commedia dell'Inferno*, p. 19.

of questions, doubts, possible solutions, and is accompanied in the background by the loudspeakers that somehow paradoxically explain, in the Latin of Benvenuto, what should be known about the three beasts, and why Virgil has been chosen to accompany Dante. The loudspeakers, here as well as in the rest of the script, become the actual voice of the narrator: distanced, de-personalised, deriving the nature of their sound from a mechanical rather than an emotional drive. From the third scene onward, Dante and Virgil disappear, and the words they pronounce as characters of the poem are lent either to new characters: showmen and showgirls that will eventually appear in the course of the performance or to other characters of the *Commedia* whose lines are twisted, altered, and transformed in order to contain lines originally uttered by Dante and Virgil. The real entrance into hell is marked by the contemporary presence, in the fourth scene, of the three major guardians of Dante's *Inferno*: they appear and speak together: Charon, Minos, and Pluto, while in the background the loudspeakers pronounce the words which have eventually become almost a proverbial slogan for any meaningful and fearful passage, one of the most often remembered of Dante's tercets, which is however subtly and meaningfully changed in order to underline the loss of hope, rather than the godly nature of the established judgement:

per me

per me si va nella città dolente,

per me si ve nell'eterno dolore,

per me si va tra la perduta gente:

lasciate,

lasciate ogni speranza, voi che intrate!

From the fifth to the ninth scene, the script chooses to isolate particularly famous figures and memorable situations of Dante's Hell: Paolo and Francesca (scene five), Ciacco (scene six), Farinata and Cavalcante (scene seven), Pier delle Vigne (scene eight), (Brunetto and Capaneo (scene nine).

The passage from 'Alto' to 'Basso *Inferno*', is marked, here as well as in the *Commedia*, by Gerione's paradoxical 'downwards' flight. In Sanguineti's adaptation, however, Gerione speaks through the English lines of Ezra Pound about usury: the same lines which had been used for *Laborintus II*. The operation is surprisingly comparable to the choice of inserting, within the scene dedicated to Paolo and Francesca, part of a poem by Jacopo da Lentini, lines from a sonnet of the *Vita nuova*, fragments from Andrea Cappellano's *De Amore*, and excerpts from Chrétien de Troyes . The medieval sources for *Inferno* V, and the modernist lines for *Inferno* XVI, constitute the surrounding cultural noise, which locates and reveals to the modern eye both the nature of Paolo and Francesca's tragedy and the overcoming, timeless quality of Gerione as the embodiment of fraud. In the episode of Paolo and Francesca, the loudspeakers – once more – support and emphasise the story of a passion, which moves from literary sources, but eventually reveals itself as one of the most complex challenges and developments within Dante's own poetry: a dramatic rejection and reaction, which take the form of a highly 'misreadable' episode.

As Sanguineti had stated in the conclusion of *Il realismo di Dante*, the critical operation should make it possible to read Dante's characters within (and not without, or in spite of) their

moral location in Dante's *Inferno*. It is an operation that detects and foregrounds the ideological nature of apparently neutral criticism:

La riprova è nella storia della critica [...]. Ora si pensi un poco, infatti, alla grande critica romantico-borghese, e si veda questa Francesca lussuriosa, questo Ulisse frodolento, trasformarsi rispettivamente (che sarebbe cosa appena credibile, se non fosse quotidianamente insegnata in tutti i licei) nella ‘prima donna del mondo moderno’ – che è, alla lettera, la famosa definizione desanctisiana – e nell’eroe magnanimo della conoscenza. [...] Staccati dall’ormai frantumato e disperso polittico infernale, trasformati, e anzi travestiti in clamorosi indizi del celebrato e presunto contrasto interiore (‘zwei Seelen in meiner Brust’) del Dante faustianamente diviso tra cielo e terra, tra teologia e passione [...], Francesca e Ulisse capovolgono il segno che Dante ha loro posto in fronte: l’angelo dell’estetica cancella i loro P incancellabili. [...] Chi rinunci a simile consumata mitologia avrà la ventura di riconoscere, una volta per tutte, in Ulisse, il doppio, in negativo, di Dante medesimo [...] e riconoscerà del pari, in Francesca, una Bovary del Duecento, che sogna i baci di Lancillotto, e fruisce, in tragica riduzione, degli abbracciamenti del cognato. [...] Ove Dante dimostra, a tutte lettere, come finiscano le angelicate del suo amico Cavalcanti, e ricostruisce l’albero genealogico, dall’ultima radice sino ai più maturi frutti, dell’erotismo medievale: dalla sorgente cortese alla foce borghese.<sup>125</sup>

The second part of Sanguineti's *Commedia dell'Inferno* is a descent into Dante's ‘Basso *Inferno*'. What changes most dramatically in the penal landscape is an increasing intensification of a purposeful degradation, which affects not only the choice of lines, but, even more, the physical perception both of the theatrical space and of the bodies of the characters. The icon that

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<sup>125</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, *Il realismo di Dante* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1966), pp. 287-88.

summarises and anticipates the whole drama is the picture of Brueghel's Tower of Babel, turned upside down, which, however, slowly transforms itself into a catalogue of infernal images:

Malebolge: sopra un grande schermo si proietta la Torre di Babele di Brueghel, rovesciata; attraverso dissolvenze incrociate, come in una lenta metamorfosi altre immagini della struttura infernale, ricavate da opere pittoriche (compresi gli schemi dell' "imbuto" infernale dantesco, nei manuali scolastici). (p. 50)

The nine scenes which follow constitute the passage from the icons of hell to the conclusive collapse of the machinery: Lucifer, of course, but one is tempted to perceive it as the solid metaphor of a narrative machinery finally doomed to silence:

La macchina, a questo punto, prende a decomporsi, a rompersi, a disfarsi sempre più rapidamente, in tanti pezzi: le sue luci, che sono ormai le sole che illuminano la scena, saltano un po' alla volta, e si spengono fino al buio completo: nell'istante in cui tutto è immerso nelle tenebre, gli altoparlanti tacciono di colpo. (p. 85)

Sanguineti's selection of the episodes is itself a journey, that is a dramatic re-reading and a critical analysis of Dante's poem: the script bends the source to surprising self – revelations. The show includes a descriptive scene in which a TV quiz show atmosphere produces a visual and theatrical balance to the image of Brueghel's Tower of Babel: Benvenuto's Latin commentary, lines dedicated to the physical disposition of Malebolge and Virgil's explanation of

the moral issues leading to the hierarchy of sins – pronounced by the actors (a showman and a showgirl, whose voices overlap each other) and by loudspeakers. The next scene is dedicated to the corrupted popes: again a TV atmosphere: a conjuror utters the words originally pronounced by Dante in his dialogue with Pope Nicholas III, in the purposeful mistake which makes it possible to proceed to the condemnation of Pope Boniface VIII before his death. Glass coffins contain the bodies of the popes, buried upside down, as the *Commedia* said. The reproduction of the whole ‘barattieri’ episode, where the boiling pitch is now contained in a swimming pool and the devils are given scuba diving outfits and guns with which they torment the dummies that represent the condemned sinners. The famous names of the devils are translated into physical evidence.

Alichino ha una maschera a vivaci colori, arlecchinesca appunto; Calcabrina una maschera che pare un passamontagna; Cagnazzo una maschera rossa a muso di cane; Barbariccia una maschera vistosamente barbuta; Libicocco una maschera primitiva africana; Draghignazzo una orientale; Ciriatto una testa di maiale con zanne; Graffiacane una testa di gatto; Farfarello una maschera carnevalesca; Rubicante macchiata di rosso. (p. 57)

While this scene emphasises the idea of the joyless game, according to that concept of ‘comico’ which had been illustrated in Sanguineti’s analysis of Malebolge, the following scene reproduces the metamorphoses of the thieves: the stage directions transform the original lines into actual movements and visual effects. Canto XXVI and XXVII, are combined together, so that Ulysses and Guido da Montefeltro, ghosts contained in red sheets, become an almost

embarrassingly naive presence, while their lines are among the few left intact, in spite of the fact that their voices are made to sound like those of cartoon comics. As the narration approaches its conclusion, the scenes are more and more affected by the obsession of physical disease: the sinners guilty of having caused divisions and schisms are a crowd of handicapped bodies and those guilty of different forms of falsification are put into what is supposed to appear as a degraded psychiatric hospice. It becomes almost a natural narrative development, in a sense, that Ugolino's dramatic soliloquy should take place in a morgue and that the last of the sinners to appear, Frate Alberigo, should be a zombie. The performance takes the final form of a horror show, while the already quoted final scene accomplishes the darkness and the silence, which stand for an actual endgame.

The stage directions locate and determine the dramatic direction of Sanguineti's operation. The theatrical space becomes an underlying provocative assumption on the attitude to be insinuated, stimulated and induced in the spectators. The allusions to a disturbing attitude to Dante's creative universe include the metaphor of the circus, the world of pop media - television in particular – but also cinema, pop music, discos, ghastly swimming pools (the ‘bogliente pece’ of *Malebolge*), hospitals and cemeteries, a complex machinery and plenty of loudspeakers. The whole operation is a statement on the pervading nature of the Dantean inheritance, a background cultural noise, which Sanguineti emphasises in order to make it the focus of his dramatic revitalisation.

Once Sanguineti's ‘oriented dramatisation’ of the *Commedia* has produced its visual impact, the actual choice of characters, the selection of texts, and the subtle alterations of the

original narrative thread, tend to appear as natural consequences of the primal decision. As Sanguineti himself says:

Il centro di questa Commedia, infatti, non riposa, propriamente, per me, nella selezione e nel montaggio, che pure decidono di necessità della ‘materia prima’ verbale, ma in quella politica dell’immagine che è nelle proposte esecutive per un Dante fatto visibile e praticabile, in termini che, fedeli alle radici delle sue invenzioni, le rendano immediatamente agibili agli attori, trasparenti agli spettatori attuali, mirando a un’evidenza quotidiana e concreta. [...]

Il tutto, finalmente, può anche riassumersi in una formula quasi epigrammatica, per cui un Dante ‘in travestimento’ è il contrario di un Dante ‘in costume’. (p. 88)

The critic-writer’s intention is clear: the conscious, controlled, oriented ‘misinterpretation’ of the text is in full opposition to a supposedly ‘authentic’ reading of a literary monument, because the monument itself is at the same time the result, the container, and the initiator of complex cultural fluxes. Sanguineti foregrounds the fluxes, the normally hidden relationships, which are either ignored or taken for granted, and produces both a text and its possible contexts, that is both a ‘materia prima verbale’ and the modality according to which this ‘verbal matter’ ought to be perceived.

Curiously enough one is tempted to compare Levi’s appropriation of Dante with Sanguineti’s: in Levi the citations were mnemonic statements, probably automatic (or at least so they are meant to sound) and certainly controversial references to a whole cultural world. The almost involuntary nature of the citations, the (perhaps) actual misquotations, the appearance of

casualness, hide and display a cultural identity that struggles to be perceived. In Sanguineti, instead, the alteration of the Dantean source is hyper-controlled; it is a critical game, which presupposes vision, selection, and dramatic effect.

## 5. BECKETT'S ABANDONED PURGATORY

The Dante that Sanguineti makes explicit and shows is a conglomeration of complex layers of cultural complicity: this embedded cultural conglomeration is just what Beckett inglobes and reduces. While Sanguineti's Dante is quoted and framed within a cultural context and the history of its sedimentation, Beckett's Dante appears unframed and is made to sound as if in a void. Dante, both for Sanguineti and for Beckett, is part of the background cultural noise, but while for the Italian writer the intention is to show and tell the story of the sedimentation, for Beckett the cultural context is silenced, rather than made to resound. For Beckett, the absolute nature of human hopelessness leads to a particularly ironical and subtle inclusion of Dante, chosen through some of his less popular figures and passages (Belacqua, Sordello, *Paradiso* II, scattered and unexpected citations from different parts of the *Commedia*), often almost unperceivable and never made to resound, but rather to whisper in a sort of hyper-controlled vacuum. On the other hand, however, the reader is expected to hear an echo (a reverberation, in fact), which presupposes the existence of a Dantean code and a sort of meta-cultural Dantean horizon. The code and the horizon, with their established respectability, are being focussed, parodied, and eventually given a present, often infinitely tragic, meaning. Beckett's characters are all somehow connected to a primigenial Belacqua, the epitome of helpless, comic, tragic, paradoxical immobility and yet only the name (albeit unequivocal) seems to establish the Dantean connection. There is a falsetto voice in both Sanguineti and Beckett, when they refer to Dante, but while Sanguineti's discourse is aimed at learning about the past and teaching its

complexity in order to change the future, Beckett's Dantisms are steadfastly meant to show the useless and unavoidable load of experience.

As previously mentioned, in Beckett the Dantean reference should be 'recognised' rather than 'seen', and the effect of the very recognition is a further descent into the perception of its uselessness. For both Sanguineti and Beckett, Dante, instead of being the reference for a religious, cultural or political establishment, becomes a disturbing question mark over the reliability of cultural traditions. Dante's philosophical construction appears in fact deeply - and almost symmetrically - alien to Beckett's world, but, at the same time, in Beckett's works Dante and his *Commedia* constitute a powerful horizon of reference.

Dante's *Commedia* is a journey moving from a state of error to a condition of salvation and bliss through subsequent stages of an upward movement. By the end of the journey knowledge will be perceived not only as a form of participation in the Divine, but also as a positive and necessary task for the human mind. Beckett's plays, stories and novels are obsessively centred on the impossibility of movement, and on the absolute negation of the very idea of a fabula-journey focussed on (self) knowledge. Yet, for Beckett, knowledge is not simply denied: rather, it is refused and overcome, in a sort of negative theology, which eventually leads to a very Beckettian peace, where salvation and bliss are totally foreign elements:

For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker.<sup>126</sup>

Beckett's works may be perceived as modern forms of medieval *exempla* and readers are often captured by the temptation of reading them as such: it is difficult not to fall into the oxymoric condition of the 'incurious seeker' and to experience *Waiting for Godot* without feeling the need of associating every detail, character, and clue with a definite meaning. Beckett's fictional world produces an intense and defeated desire for meaning: Beckett's tree, in the two acts of *Waiting for Godot*, is an aggregation of potentially obvious, but never disclosed sense; Dante's trees in *Purgatorio* XXII and XXIV appear more as complex answers than questions: they are both allegorical and real, organic material of the whole fabula. Yet it would be difficult to find a more consistently and innovatively Dantean than Beckett in his *Texts for Nothing*, which, in Eric Griffiths's eyes, is 'one of the most faithful renderings of Dante into English':<sup>127</sup>

The graveyard, yes, it's there I'd return, this evening it's there, borne by my words, if I could get out of here, that is to say if I could say, there's a way out there, there's a way out somewhere, to know exactly where would be a mere matter of time, and patience, and sequency of thought, and felicity of expression. But the body, to get there with, where's the body? It's a minor point, a minor point. And I have no doubts, I'd get there somehow, to the way out, sooner or later, if I could say, there's a way out there,

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<sup>126</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1951). English tr. by Samuel Beckett and Patrick Bowles, (Paris: Merlin/Olympia, 1954). Quoted from Seaver, Richard W., *A Samuel Beckett Reader. I can't go on, I'll go on*, (New York: Grove Press, 1991), p. 291.

<sup>127</sup> Griffiths, Eric and Matthew Reynolds, eds, *Dante in English* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p. xxx.

there's a way out somewhere, the rest would come, the other words, sooner or later, and the power to get there, and the way to get there, and pass out, and see the beauties of the skies, and see the stars again.<sup>128</sup>

Each single element of the passage presupposes a Dantean texture: the graveyard is Beckett's theoretical point of departure ('If I could get out of here') and the land of the dead is the structural theme of the whole *Commedia*, while the reference to the autobiographical and literary nature of the account expressed by 'borne by my words' reminds the reader of *Inf.* I 7-8: 'ma per trattar del ben ch'i vi trovai / dirò...'. The escape from hell ('and see the stars again'), the purgatorial ascent, the nature of a future account ('a mere matter of time, and patience, and sequency of thought, and felicity of expression') are all there, together with the central question of the physical nature of the journey, an issue that recurs in the *Commedia* as a narrative precondition and a constant theme in dialogues, developments and considerations. ('But the body, to get there with, where's the body? It's a minor point, a minor point'). Beckett exploits the theme, the plot, the narrative impact, and the entire supporting system of the *Commedia* in the form of anxiety and of the apparent dismissal of its importance. Beckett's 'getting there' surprisingly and ironically conjures the idea that nothing of Dante's journey can be replicated, and yet it is still within the horizon of the modern writer. More than a cultural background, Dante's presence in Beckett is a pervasive form of anxiety, an unavoidable burden that cannot be removed and is part of the obstacles that prevent us from seeing things as they actually are.

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<sup>128</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, in *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995) pp. 100-154 (pp. 139-40).

When, in one of his first important critical essays, *Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce*<sup>129</sup>, Beckett compares Dante's linguistic innovations to Joyce's, much of what is being said about Joyce applies, in a negative form, to Beckett himself. One of the points that Beckett mentions is Joyce's search for a linguistic system that guarantees a deep consistency between form and content, and the reference that Beckett makes is to the wealth of Joyce's language, which is compared to Dante's:

The language is drunk. The very words are tilted and effervescent. How can we qualify this general aesthetic vigilance without which we cannot hope to snare the sense which is for ever rising to the surface of the form and becoming the form itself? St. Augustine puts us on the track of a word with his “*intendere*”, Dante has “*Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore,*” and “*Voi che, intendendo, il terzo ciel movete*” (sic);<sup>130</sup>

The readiness to explore existent language(s) and even invent a new form in order to accomplish a new vitality of the written word, are evident aspects of what Beckett indicates as innovations both in Dante and in Joyce:

in 1300 none but an inter-regional phenomenon could have spoken the language of the Divine *Commedia*. We are inclined to forget that Dante's literary public was Latin, that the form of his Poem was to be judged by Latin eyes and ears, by a Latin Esthetic intolerant of innovation, and which could hardly

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<sup>129</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce*, from *James Joyce. Finnegans Wake: A Symposium*, originally published as *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination Of Work In Progress*, (Paris: Sylvia Beach, 1929). Quoted from Seaver, p. 118.

<sup>130</sup> *Dante... Bruno*, Seaver, p. 122.

fail to be irritated by the substitution of “*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*” with its “barbarous” directness for the suave elegance of: “*Ultima regna canam, fluido contermina mundo,*” just as English eyes and ears prefer: “Smoking his favourite pipe in the sacred presence of ladies” to: “Rauking his flavourite turfco in the smukking precincts of lydias”.<sup>131</sup>

Beckett’s observations on the surprising analogies between a medieval poet and a twentieth-century novelist bear evidence of a form of innovation that he recognised and prized in Joyce, but steadfastly and progressively expunged from his own work, as if the theme of his production was a conscious effort at keeping away from the fallacious vitality of direct mimesis. Beckett’s characters are made to move, speak, and react as if they were in an experimental void. And yet, on a closer observation, it is his characters, rather than Joyce’s, those who make us perceive daily life and its conversations in all their grotesque inadequacy. Beckett is fully aware of a possible wealth of narrative mimesis, but makes a double move, which consists in focussing on the essence of the exchanges (or of their attempts) and then showing the inconsistency of the acts. His characters or narrators utter sentences that show evidence of a pre-existing cultural background, but meanwhile their words imply the degradation of any possibility of actual intellectual exchange. Beckett often shows the extraneousness, and the ridiculous inadequacy of literary references (and Dante is one of the primal elements) and occasionally focuses on Dante with the open intent to redefine the infectious role of literature.

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<sup>131</sup> *Dante... Bruno*, Seaver, p. 122.

'Dante and the Lobster', the first of the stories in the collection *More Pricks than Kicks*<sup>132</sup>, is certainly the most evident, widely studied and quoted evidence of the Beckett – Dante relationship. The series of stories is in fact almost a novel itself, whose protagonist, Belacqua Shuah, subsequently moves from studies, loves, marriages, friendships to an accidental death. The portrait and the parody of a tragic failure, *More Pricks than Kicks* is still quite distant from Beckett's mature plays and does not employ the much more experimental and innovative choices of his later works. It is, however, an astonishing first act, and some interesting instances of his purposeful parody of socialised culture can be found in all the stories of the collection.

From one of the conversations in 'A Wet Night', the fourth story of the collection:

'Do I know Ravenna!' exclaimed the Parabimbi. 'Sure I know Ravenna. A sweet and noble city.'

'You know of course' said the Man of Law 'that Dante died there.'

'Right' said the Parabimbi, 'so he did.'

'You know of course' said the Professor 'that his tomb is in the Piazza Byron. I did his epitaph in the eye into blank heroics.'

'You knew of course' said the paleographer 'that under Belisarius...'

'My dear' said the Parabimbi to the Bedlam, 'how well it goes. What a happy party and how at home they all seem. I declare' she declared 'I envy you your flair for making people feel at their ease.'<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks. Stories* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1934). Quoted from Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks. Stories*, (New York: Grove Press, 1972)

<sup>133</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 67.

And the same party (a hilarious performance of snobbery that one cannot help but associate with Joyce's parodies), the Gael, one of the guests, expresses his opinion on the sexual behaviour of a previously mentioned woman and of women in general:

'Like hell they do' groaned the Gael, *ricordandosi del tempo felice*.<sup>134</sup>

The obsession with the cultural and literary background is perhaps one of the thematic elements of the entire collection. While the figure of Belacqua is already a perfectly adequate and consistent instance of Beckett's void, the situations, characters, voices that surround Belacqua affect and blur the final image. Even the language, with all its Joycean wealth of experimentalism, seems to suggest the desire of eliminating whatever is not essential. Yet, at the same time, it lingers with the non-essential. In the story 'Love and Lethe', the reference to *Hamlet* sounds as a self-apology:

'I thought of bringing the gramophone' he said 'and Ravel's *Pavane*. Then – '

'Then you thought again' said Ruby. She had a most irritating habit of interrupting.

'Oh yes' said Belacqua, 'the usual pale cast.'

Notice the literary man.<sup>135</sup>

Beckett's references to Dante (with one important exception: the already mentioned story 'Dante and the Lobster') do not constitute a designed plan, nor do they appear in the texts

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<sup>134</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 69.

<sup>135</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 95.

according to a recognisable pattern. They come to the surface as natural elements of the narrative – and this is especially revealing of a long, intense familiarity of Beckett with the *Commedia*.<sup>136</sup>

‘What a Misfortune’ is the story of Belacqua’s wedding. His future mother-in-law makes some considerations on how the ceremony ought to be performed and knows that her suggestions are not being taken into consideration:

‘However’ she added ‘it is not my wedding.’

The ironical tone conveyed to this concession provoked Thelma to side with her mother for once. At no time indeed was this an easy matter, Mrs bboggs being almost as non-partisan as Pope Celestine the fifth. Dante would probably have disliked her on this account.<sup>137</sup>

In the same story, the unexpected tranquillity of the protagonist before his wedding is compared to his restlessness on other occasions and the situation is associated with an episode of *Purgatorio*:

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<sup>136</sup> On Dante’s presence in Beckett’s manuscripts: Daniela Caselli, ‘The Promise of Dante in Beckett’s Manuscripts’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, June 2006, vol. 16, n. 1, pp. 237-57 and for Beckett’s lifelong faithfulness to Dante: Hugh Haughton, ‘Purgatory Regained? Dante and Late Beckett’, in Nick Havely, ed., *Dante’s Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney* (London-New York: MacMillan – St. Martin’s Press 1988), pp. 140-164.

<sup>137</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 126.

<sup>137</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks* p. 67.

Much liquor in secret the previous evening may have contributed to this torpor, but scarcely if at all, for many and many a time when footless, and simply because the forces in his mind would not resolve, he had tossed and turned like the Florence of Sordello, and found all postures painful.<sup>138</sup>

The ready availability of Dante's text to Beckett's memory suggests a curious form of implied complicity, whereby the source is perfectly consonant with the language that is being used. In doing so, Beckett seems to employ the same process, which Sanguineti will use in his theatre-parody of *Inferno*.

In the final story 'Draff', when Belacqua's funeral has to be organised, the names of the clerk from the funeral home is, hilariously, Malacoda – one of the devils of Malebolge:

Up came his card. Mr Malacoda. Most respectfully desirous to measure. A sob, instead of bursting, withered. The Smeraldina whimpered that she was sorry but she could not admit this Mr Malacoda, she could not have the Master measured.<sup>139</sup>

And later in the same story, not only is Malacoda referred to as 'demon', but is presented in his full professional capacity:

That night the weather so mended as to be more than merely clement for the ceremony. Malacoda and Co. turned up bright and early with their six cylinder hearse, black as Ulysses's cruiser. The demon, quite unable to control his impatience to cover, could only manage a quick flirt with Mary Ann.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 136.

<sup>139</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 178.

When Belacqua's friend Hairy tells the driver how to proceed to the cemetery, the reader is (un)necessarily informed that the name of the driver is Scarmiglione, that is another devil of Malebolge:

Hairy scampered out into the sunlight and the balmy breeze, free of the house that was suddenly jerry-built mausoleum, with a message from his sweet ward to the driver whose name was Scarmiglione, a strongly worded message exhorting him to temper full speed with due caution. 'Let her out' said Hairy in his pretentious jargon 'to the irreducible coefficient of safety.' Scarmiglione met his request with a look of petrified courtesy. On these trips he deferred to the speed-controlling washer of his own mind and conscience, and to none other.<sup>141</sup>

But it is the first story of the collection, 'Dante and the Lobster' that really sets the mood for the entire collection and anticipates the most innovative and characteristic aspects of Beckett's fictional world. This story is a mine of Dantean references and a network of connections that highlight the pervasive and controversial presence of Dante in this story as well as in the rest of Beckett's works. The first reference is the enigmatic connection of the title: as if Beckett had actually chosen to suggest something that cannot be reasonably suggested: obviously nothing whatsoever can justify the connection between Dante and a lobster, yet by the end of the story it will be clear that the lobster is associated with the stubborn, painful and even obtuse persistence of life, while Dante is linked with the aspiration to knowledge, improvement and discovery of

<sup>140</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 184.

<sup>141</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 185.

meaning. As the text makes clear within the very first lines, the protagonist's name is not destined to be explained. Beckett evidently chose to leave it to the reader to decide how much should be known about the reference. Belacqua - the protagonist of 'Dante and the Lobster' - is in fact surprisingly consistent with Dante's Belacqua.

Belacqua appears in *Purgatorio* IV when Dante has just been lectured by Virgil on the peculiar characteristics of the mountain (Purgatory) they need to climb – its relative position to the Sun and therefore the new geography and astronomy that has to be understood in order to complete the journey toward salvation. Virgil's explanation shows how Purgatory is physically (and morally) located on the 'opposite side' of the world of the living. This is the reason why Dante has seen the sun rise from an unexpected horizon (*Purg.* IV 68-75). The explanation arrives when the two poets are taking a moment's rest, after the demanding climb toward the actual entrance to Purgatory. Dante has realised that the sun does not appear to move upward from the right (as it would, in our hemisphere), but from the left (*Purg.* IV 52-57). The same zeal that has led Dante to climb the hard mountain of Purgatory makes him proclaim his apprehension of this new knowledge. Acquisition and recognition of knowledge are steps in Dante's journey of salvation. It is therefore consistent with the whole design of the *Commedia* that Dante should take the opportunity for displaying how the newly acquired information fits within the comprehension of the world (*Purg.* IV 76-84). The journey however is long and difficult, and moves through an unknown territory: Dante wants to be told more about the path they are following and Virgil famously explains how the difficulty of the beginning will progressively give way to a more and more rapid and easy progression as they approach the destination. Dante's question is immediately answered by Virgil's encouraging reply (*Purg.* IV 85-96). Dante has successfully

learned an essential feature of the world he is journeying, Virgil is telling him that more has to be achieved, but that achievement itself will become easier as one proceeds, and that zeal and trust in human values will make it possible to reach the end of the task, i.e. salvation.

The entrance of Belacqua is narrated at this point as a progressively delayed surprise, which makes it particularly effective and dramatic: the reader is first confronted with a voice, then with a group of sinners, and only eventually with one particular character:

E com' ellì ebbe sua parola detta,

una voce di presso sonò: «Forse

che di sedere in pria avrai distretta!»:

Al suon di lei ciascun di noi si torse,

e vedemmo a mancina un gran petrone,

del qual né io né ei prima s'accorse.

Là ci traemmo; e ivi eran persone

che si stavano a l'ombra dietro al sasso

come l'uom per negghienza a star si pone.

E un di lor, che mi sembiava lasso,

sedeva e abbracciava le ginocchia,

tenendo 'l viso tra esse basso.

Belacqua is the embodiment of the exact opposite perspective that has made Dante arrive at the same point of the journey: Dante's movement and zeal are, programmatically and purposefully, in full and open contrast with Belacqua's sloth and immobility. The words that follow subsequently present Dante's remarks addressed to Virgil,

«O dolce signor mio», diss' io, «adocchia  
colui che mostra sé più negligente  
che se pigrizia fosse sua serocchia».

*Purg.* IV 109-111

then Belacqua's reaction and ironical response,

Allor si volse a noi e puose mente,  
movendo 'l viso pur su per la coscia,  
e disse: «Or va tu su, che se' valente!».

*Purg.* IV 112-114

Dante's recognition is immediately accompanied by Belacqua's repetition and rephrasing of the geographical, astronomical (and structurally fundamental) knowledge that had marked Dante's sense of achievement at the beginning of the episode:

Conobbi allor chi era, e quella angoscia  
che m'avacciava un poco ancor la lena,  
non m'impedi l'andare a lui; e poscia  
ch'a lui fu' giunto, alzò la testa a pena,  
dicendo: «Hai ben veduto come 'l sole  
da l'omero sinistro il carro mena?».

*Purg.* IV 115-120

It is at this point that for the first and only time in the *Commedia* Dante actually laughs (a little, at least). It is a laugh of recognition, of acceptance, of change of perspective. Once the recognition has taken place, Dante finally asks his newly recovered friend about the reason why he is apparently pursuing sloth, the very same sinful attitude that caused his punishment in Purgatory:

Li atti suoi pigri e le corte parole  
Mosser le labbra mie un poco a riso;  
poi cominciai: «Belacqua, a me non dole  
di te omai; ma dimmi: perché assiso  
quiritto se'? attendi tu iscorta,

o pur lo modo usato t'ha ripriso?»

*Purg.* IV 121-126

Belacqua's reply is unexpectedly long, accurate and deals with the core of the problem: the need of fully meeting the purgatorial requirements in order to proceed in the journey of salvation.

Ed elli: «O frate, andar in sù che porta?

ché non mi lascerebbe ire a' martiri

l'angel di Dio che siede in su la porta.

Prima convien che tanto il ciel m'aggiri

di fuor da essa, quanto fece in vita,

per ch'io 'ndugiai al fine i buon sospiri,

se orazione in prima non m'aita

che surga sù di cuor che in grazia viva;

l'altra che val, che 'n ciel non è udita?».

*Purg.* IV 127-135

Dante's *Purgatorio* is not what the modern world generally understands as 'purgatory': a state of mind, an indefinite condition of hopelessness. It is, in the fullest of meanings, the very opposite. In Dante the strictly logical structure of the mountain where the sinners are engaged in

their purifying ascent is not indefinite; the key concepts of expiation and redemption are shaping features of the narration; and the purgatorial journey is an ordered succession of stages, an almost rhythmical sequence of purged vices, guardian angels, days, nights, and revealing dreams.<sup>142</sup>

Dante's Belacqua has learnt, in his own journey for salvation, that his sloth needs to be purged with an equally strong effort in the opposite direction. In spite of his desire and disposition to move upward, he has to accept an immobility that is now finally perceived with faith and endured as necessary sufferance and pain. The astronomical explanation of the reason why the sun appears in a different position in Purgatory than it did on Earth is not merely scientific knowledge: it shows that Dante, Virgil and Belacqua (and the readers that accompany them) are literally at the opposite side of the world of the living. Just as the sun moves from the left and not from the right, so the sin committed on Earth has to be compensated with an opposite disposition on the purgatorial mountain.

Immobility, absence of any possible design for escaping hopelessness, sloth are most certainly some of the distinguishing features that contribute to the recognisable and enduring pattern of Beckett's characters. Beckett's tramps find it physically difficult to move, their bodies being a burden and an obstacle (eventually they will even end up in bins, or only the face, or a part of the face, will be visible). Yet at the time of *More Pricks than Kicks*, the protagonist is still – at the beginning – a youthful, promising, well meaning student, albeit suffering from bad feet:

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<sup>142</sup> For a general description of Dante's Purgatory: Marcello Aurigemma, 'Purgatorio' in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, Vol. IV, pp. 745-50, which includes an essential bibliography. Among the many studies that deal with the characteristics of the notion of Purgatory, especially in literary texts: Jacques Le Goff, *La nascita del Purgatorio*, translation by Elena De Angelis (Torino: Einaudi, 1982), in particular the last chapter 'Il trionfo poetico: la Divina Commedia' and Cesare Segre, *Fuori del mondo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1990), in particular Chapter 3: 'Viaggi e visioni d'oltremondo sino alla Commedia di Dante'.

Belacqua had a spavined gait, his feet were in ruins, he suffered with them almost continuously. Even in the night they took no rest, or next to none.<sup>143</sup>

He has set himself a series of tasks, at least for the day: after studying the second Canto of *Paradiso*,

Three large obligations presented themselves. First lunch, then the lobster, then the Italian lesson,<sup>144</sup>.

A sort of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, this story shows how deeply Joyce must have impressed young Beckett. ‘Dante and the Lobster’ begins with a detailed, careful and funny description of how Belacqua Shuah approaches one of the most difficult points of the *Commedia*. Belacqua’s approach to the ‘canti in the moon’ is hilariously and realistically described:

It was morning and Belacqua was stuck in the first of the canti in the moon. He was so bogged that he could move neither backward nor forward. Blissful Beatrice was there, Dante also, and she explained the spots of the moon to him. [...] She had it from God, therefore he could rely on its being accurate in every particular. [...] But part two, the demonstration, was so dense that Belacqua could not make head or

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<sup>143</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 15.

<sup>144</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 10.

tail of it. The disproof, the reproof, that was patent. But then came the proof, a rapid shorthand of the real facts, and Belacqua was bogged indeed. Bored also, impatient to go on to Piccarda.<sup>145</sup>

In Beckett's story, the question of knowledge, its acquisition and its uses, are once more at the core of the discourse. Belacqua Shuah struggles with knowledge (in spite of a literary origin that ought to prevent him from any involvement with mistaken presumptions). Somehow a new Dante, he definitely wants to understand the matter of the second canto, in order to proceed, perhaps not toward salvation, but most certainly to the bliss and beauty of the third canto (Piccarda). What he does, however, is very ironically and characteristically Joyce-Beckett-like: the realistic details, with which his approach to second Canto of *Paradiso* had been described, remain the guiding line for the preparation of lunch, with the occasional intermission of a paragraph that explicitly points back to the thoughts occasioned by Dante's canto II of *Paradiso*:

For the tiller of the field the thing was simple, he had it from his mother. The spots were Cain with his truss of thorns, dispossessed, cursed from the earth, fugitive and vagabond.<sup>146</sup>

Once the lunch episode is over, the protagonist goes shopping for the lobster and is told by the fishmonger that it is 'lepping fresh'. It is at this point of the story, Belacqua mentions a few literary preferences:

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<sup>145</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 10.

<sup>146</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 12.

[...] he would prefer to postpone the *Cinque Maggio* to another occasion. Manzoni was an old woman, Napoleon was another.<sup>147</sup>

And his high consideration for his Italian teacher:

His Professoressa was so charming and remarkable. Signorina Adriana Ottolenghi! He did not believe it possible for a woman to be more intelligent or better informed than the little Ottolenghi.<sup>148</sup>

The Italian teacher is seen by Belacqua as Dante's privileged interpreter, a sort of classroom Beatrice who can explain the 'difficult points' of the text:

There subsided as much of the Ottolenghi as might be expected to of the person of a lady of a certain age who had found being young and beautiful and pure more of a bore than anything else.<sup>149</sup>

The conversation between Belacqua and the Italian teacher marks a development of the search for knowledge with which the story had started. In the course of the lesson both Belacqua and the teacher propose questions, provisional answers, possible suggestions and further questions: an ironical re-enacting of Beatrice's lecture at the beginning of the story. The

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<sup>147</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 16.

<sup>148</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 16.

<sup>149</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 18.

progression begins to touch more and more clearly, and painfully, the hidden point of contact between literature and life.

What had been a totally intellectual adventure, with the promise of an even more intellectual reward, is slowly becoming a hard confrontation with questions that cannot be answered. The teacher proposes to ‘make up Dante’s rare movements of compassion in Hell’, Belacqua relies on his personal knowledge of the poem and immediately proposes a citation, which he defines as a pun, and to which Ottolenghi replies with silence and even with the suggestion that it might be wiser not to translate the terrible line (the one, in fact, most obviously alien to the theme proposed by the teacher!):

Belacqua, dissembling his great pleasure, laid open the moon enigma.

‘Yes’ she said ‘I know the passage. It is a famous teaser. Off-hand I cannot tell you, but I will look it up when I get home.’

The sweet creature! She would look it up in her big Dante when she got home. What a woman!

‘It occurred to me’ she said ‘apropos of I don’t know what, that you might do worse than make up Dante’s rare movements of compassion in Hell. That used to be’ her past tenses were always sorrowful ‘a favourite question.’

He assumed an expression of profundity.

‘In that connexion’ he said ‘I recall one superb pun anyway:

‘*qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta...*’’

She said nothing.

'Is it not a great phrase?' he gushed.

She said nothing.

'Now' he said like a fool 'I wonder how you could translate that?'

Still she said nothing. Then:

'Do you think' she murmured 'it is absolutely necessary to translate it?'<sup>150</sup>

The exchange, that purposefully sounds totally alien to the texture of the story, is interrupted by a commotion in the next room: the cat has found the box with the lobster. The question uttered by Ottolenghi is therefore suspended, but will find a modern, unsatisfactory, and open answer by the end of the story, as Belacqua – and the reader – will be induced to see the scary connection between Dante's Hell, this life of ours, and the destiny of the lobster. 'Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together?' Belacqua asks himself as he walks towards his aunt's, still unaware that the lobster he is carrying is alive. In the final, shocking paragraphs (gradually becoming shorter and shorter), the lobster absorbs on itself the load of universal desperation and uselessness: it is the lobster (not Dante) that tells us about the essence of life, its pain, its meaninglessness:

In the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. [...] Now it was going alive into scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath.

[...]

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<sup>150</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, pp. 18-19.

She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.

Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death. God help us all.

It is not.<sup>151</sup>

The final sentence is perhaps an anticipation of the whole of Beckett's production: it has to do with the rational realisation of the meaninglessness of any cultural or literary consolation. It is the essential, negative, and yet creative, statement on 'where we are' as we look at the core of things. On the other hand, Beckett's Belacqua, besides having very much in common with young Beckett himself, reminds the reader of an attitude towards knowledge that has much to do with Dante's journey, but is, in fact, its very denial. When Dante is lectured by Virgil on the geographical and astronomical characteristics of Purgatory (a difficult step in order to achieve the knowledge necessary to proceed further), his attitude and response are of humble and eventually enthusiastic acceptance. Dante's Belacqua shows that knowledge alone is not sufficient to proceed, but is patiently waiting for the fulfilment and the accomplishment of a divine design. In Dante, what is actually needed does not depend only on human knowledge or desire, but on a higher system of justice. In Beckett, instead, Belacqua Shuah loses his battle for knowledge: sloth itself, that in Dante's *Purgatorio* had been purged through a complex form of compensation, becomes the only reasonable condition of life. Beckett's world is the evident opposite of Dante's universe, where movement, direction and transformation justify the narration. The first story in *More Pricks than Kicks* is in fact the defining story of the collection: the subsequent events that

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<sup>151</sup> *More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 22.

eventually lead to Belacqua's death and funeral seem to be an illustration of what had already been achieved in 'Dante and the Lobster'.

The tramps, the misfits, the unable to move: Beckett's characters progressively assume a coherent design that marks them apart from other modern anti-myths and the Belacqua root seems to belong to them all. Their most striking feature is the farcical, even hilarious aspect of their acts and attitudes. Murphy, the first character in an actual novel, rather than a series of stories, as had been the case with Belacqua Shuah, appears and acts in a way which is perfectly consistent with his forerunner's: tied to a rocking chair, conscious and afraid of an impending and unavoidable change that he is trying to oppose. His appearance is marked by an attempt at immobility and by an astronomic indication that appear very much like a rephrasing of Dante's indications at the turning points of the *Commedia*, where, especially in *Purgatorio*, the passage from one stage to the next is often marked by complex astronomical signals<sup>152</sup>:

He sat naked in his rocking chair of undressed teak, guaranteed not to crack, warp, shrink, corrode, or creak at night. It was his own, it never left him. The corner in which he sat was curtained off from the sun, the poor old sun in the Virgin again for the billionth time.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> See, for example: *Purg.* I 19-30 (the arrival in the land of the saved); *Purg.* II 1-9 (the first steps on the shore of the mountain); *Purg.* IV 61-87 (the already mentioned description of the position of Purgatory, which will lead to Belacqua's reaction); *Purg.* IX 1-6 (the moment in which Dante finally enters – while dreaming – the actual Purgatory; *Purg.* XIX 1-5 (the dream that shows the vanity of earthly passions); *Purg.* XXV 1-3 (the ascent to the seventh cornice of Purgatory); *Purg.* 1-5 (the arrival at the final part of Purgatory).

<sup>153</sup> Quoted from: Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Picador, 1973), p. 5.

The third chapter of the novel begins with another sentence that sets the mocking, ironical, and very characteristic tone of Beckett's narratives:

The moon, by striking coincidence full at perigee, was 29,000 miles nearer the earth than it had been for four years. Exceptional tides were expected. The Port of London Authority was calm.<sup>154</sup>

In that beginning, as well as in several points of the novel<sup>155</sup>, Beckett presents and plays with the theme of irrationality (horoscopes and astronomy are constant presences in his prose) with the firm gaze of the rational observer who cannot help but provide evidence of the inlaid irrationality of the world and of human behaviour. Later in the course of the novel, the whole of Chapter Six is dedicated to 'Murphy's mind':

*Amor intellectualis quo Murphy se ipsum amat*

It is most unfortunate, but the point of this story has been reached where a justification of the expression 'Murphy's mind' has to be attempted.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> *Murphy*, p. 19.

<sup>155</sup> See, for instance, the episode in which Celia, Murphy's lover, brings him a letter containing his horoscope: 'Why the black envelope,' she said, 'and the different coloured letters?' 'Because Mercury,' said Murphy, 'god of thieves, planet *par excellence* and mine, has no fixed colour.' He spread out the sheet folded in sixteen. 'And because this is blackmail.' *Murphy*, p. 22.

<sup>156</sup> *Murphy*, p. 63.

The chapter describes the innermost mechanisms of the protagonist's mind, and the reference to Belacqua explicitly returns:

As he lapsed in body he felt himself coming alive in mind, set free to move among its treasures. The body has its stock, the mind its treasures. There were three zones, light, half light, dark, each with its speciality. [...] In the second were the forms without parallel. Here the pleasure was contemplation. This system had no other mode in which to be out of joint and therefore did not need to be put right in this. Here was the Belacqua bliss and others less precise.<sup>157</sup>

As Beckett proceeds in his search for essentiality, Dante fades in terms of direct reference, and emerges as an intellectual, and virtual, counterpart. In the course of Watt, for example, the protagonist (whose name is itself an implicit unresolved question) moves in a space that the reader progressively recognises as a lunatic asylum. Watt is shown in a position that is remarkably similar to that of Belacqua:

But the feeling of weakness, which he had been expecting for some time, was such, that he yielded to it, and settled himself on the edge of the path, with his hat pushed back, and his bags beside him, and his knees drawn up, and his arms on his knees, and his head on his arms.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Murphy*, p. 65.

<sup>158</sup> Quoted from Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, (London: John Calder, 1998), p. 31.

And immediately after this implied citation, the astronomical reference is once more presented and mocked:

But this was a position that Watt, after a short time, found himself unable to sustain, and one of the reasons for that was perhaps this, that he felt the moon pouring its now whitening rays upon him, as though he were not there. For if there were two things that Watt disliked, one was the moon, and the other was the sun. (*Watt*, p. 31)

None of the references that made Dante's journey a viable enterprise are available for the modern Belacquas. Being, moving, finding a path have all become impossible achievements. Watt can perhaps linger, but his 'diritta via' is irredeemably 'smarrita' and certainly out of sight:

And what is this coming that was not our coming and this being that is not our being and this going that will not be our going but the coming and being and going in purposelessness? (*Watt*, p. 57)

Implicit references to Dante's positions can be found within a context of open denial of the Dantean source. In *Watt*, a passage about the search for happiness echoes both a famous passage from *Convivio* and one from *Purgatorio*. In the fourth part of *Convivio*, Dante had observed that:

[...]vedemo li parvuli massimamente desiderare un pomo; e poi, più procedendo, desiderare uno augellino; e poi, più oltre, desiderare bel vestimento; e poi lo cavallo; e poi una donna; e poi ricchezza non

grande, e poi grande, e poi più. E questo incontra perché in nulla di queste cose trova quella che va cercando, e credela trovare più oltre.<sup>159</sup>

While at the very centre of the *Commedia*, his concern for the source of human inability to find happiness was uttered by Marco Lombardo in *Purgatorio* XVI 88-93:

l'anima semplicetta che sa nulla,  
 salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,  
 volontier torna a ciò che la trastulla.  
  
 Di picciol bene in pria sente sapore;  
  
 quivi s'inganna, e dietro ad esso corre,  
 se guida o fren non torce suo amore.

Beckett dissolves the reference in a drumming prose, where the process of finding, losing, seeking, wanting, desiring, all circle around the unacceptable (but unavoidable) reality: felicity depends on the lack of the object one desires:

As when a man, having found at last what he sought, a woman, for example, or a friend, loses it, or realizes what it is. And yet it is useless not to seek, not to want, for when you cease to seek you start to find, and when you cease to want, then life begins to ram her fish and chips down your gullet until you

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<sup>159</sup> *Convivio*, IV 12, 6.

puke [...] The glutton cast-away, the drunkard in the desert, the lecher in prison, they are the happy ones. To hunger, thirst, lust, every day afresh and every day in vain, after the old prog, the old booze, the old whores, that's the nearest we'll ever get to felicity, the new porch and the very latest garden. (*Watt*, p. 43)

The counterpart of Watt, the unreachable lord of the house (or asylum) where the narrative takes place, is Knott. An association with a surrogate godlike figure (an anticipation of Godot, perhaps) becomes available: Knott turns out to sound very much like NOT or KNOT: a negation or a problem. And a passage from a later point of the novel, presenting Mr. Knott's unavailability to Watt, seems to suggest a cross reference with the medieval problem of the vision of God.

Watt did not know whether he was glad or sorry that he did not see Mr. Knott more often. In one sense he was sorry, and in another glad. And the sense in which he was sorry was this, that he wished to see Mr. Knott face to face, and the sense in which he was glad was this, that he feared to do so. Yes indeed, in so far as he wished, in so far as he feared, to see Mr. Knott face to face, his wish made him sorry, his fear glad, that he saw him so seldom, and at such a great distance as a rule, and so fugitively, and so often sideways on, and even from behind. (*Watt*, p. 145)

Seeing God 'face to face' is the final prize and achievement of a Christian soul, and constitutes the purpose and the achievement of the *Commedia*. In Beckett, the relationship Watt - Knott is presented as a down-to-earth, practical question on whether seeing or not seeing Knott should make Watt less or more happy. The possibility to perceive the Knott-Watt relationship as a modern edition of the Dantean search for knowledge and happiness makes the whole passage

acquire the quality of a comic and tragic mocking of any trust in positive searches. Yet, the Dantean perspective is hardly perceivable, as it keeps acting in the negative: a programmatic denial, which can perhaps be best exemplified by Watt's sense of 'perfect vision':

The problem of vision, as far as Watt was concerned, admitted of only one solution: the eye open in the dark. (*Watt*, p. 241)

Nothing could be more consistent with Beckett's world and more diametrically opposite to Dante's identification of knowledge, vision and happiness.<sup>160</sup>

The question could turn to the point whether it is acceptable to follow and mark a path of relationships between Dante and Beckett, once Beckett himself seems to have been so actively engaged in suppressing it. A concealed path is especially interesting when so many traces are still available. At the end of *Watt*, in a section called 'ADDENDA'<sup>161</sup>, Beckett lists a series of 'narrative materials' that have not been used in the text, but are defined as 'precious and illuminating' and 'should be carefully studied'. The note also says that 'only fatigue and disgust prevented [...] incorporation'. Among the fragments, without a word of explanation, or a suggestion for a link with any particular passage in the text, part of a line from *Inferno*: 'parole

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<sup>160</sup> For the characterisation of the theme of happiness (beatitudine / felicidade) in connection with knowledge and vision, cfr. Etienne Gilson, *Dante e la filosofia*, translation by Sergio Cristaldi, (Milano: Jaca Book, 1987) and Maria Corti, *La felicità mentale*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1983). Also for the frequency and the overlapping of meaning of 'vedere' and 'conoscere' in the *Commedia*, *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, 'Felicità' (vol. II, p. 832) and 'Vedere' (vol. V, pp. 894-6) and Giorgio Siebzehner-Vivanti, *Dizionario della Divina Commedia* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1965) pp. 879-880.

<sup>161</sup> *Watt*, p. 247.

non ci appulcro', that is, words should not be spent in beautifying the object of the poet's observation. The citation is from *Inf.* VII 60: in that context Dante's contempt toward those guilty of avarice was being expressed through Virgil's words. There does not seem to be a direct connection between *Watt* and this particular line, while instead it does appear that the citation could easily be a stylistic caption to the whole of Beckett's production and especially to his steadfast determination to keep away from any form of inessentiality. In this sense, Dante is neither concealed nor rejected: the Dantean source is presented, and the meaning (if one considers the line without its context) is perfectly consistent with Beckett's works, but the whole attitude toward Dante and quoting Dante is one that goes even beyond parody. It is, one would say, a total inversion of meaning: no journey is possible, no wisdom is obtainable, no report on what happened is reliable, and yet all failed and ridiculous attempts are still toward movement, knowledge and communication.

Beckett constantly speaks of inevitable and impossible journeys performed by disfigured anti-heroes and described in a language that avoids inessential beautification: in this, Dante's Italian must have been a source of stylistic inspiration in the very sense that one can perceive from the citation mentioned above. When, however, one starts taking into consideration the various questions connected with the most characteristic and typical of Beckett's themes: immobility, silence, and (lack of) memory, one realizes that the relation with Dante is more and more definable in terms of implicit and intense intellectual opposition. It also seems that, after a stage in which Dante is openly quoted and implicitly questioned ('Dante and the Lobster', and the essay 'Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce'), Beckett progressively moves toward a fictional world where the confrontation is fought within Beckett's own territory and Dante is involved as an indirect cultural reference, rather than as a definable counterpart.

In *Molloy* (1955), the protagonist writes from his mother's room an account of events that he vaguely remembers, including, among a number of various happenings and characters, being rescued by a Miss Lousse, crawling through a forest, being found by the detective Moran, and returning to his mother's room. While in Beckett's text, memory is questioned and purposes are flouted, the narrative of Dante's *Commedia* is based on memory and its moral purpose is explicit: 'per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai, / dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte' (*Inf.* I 8-9). Molloy, instead, wants to write an account of 'final acts':

What I'd like now is to speak of the things that are left, say my good-byes, finish dying.<sup>162</sup>

He does not find a guide and a master – companion, but sees undistinguished human beings moving towards each other:

So I saw A and C going slowly towards each other, unconscious of what they were doing. (*Molloy*, p. 214)

The creatures seen by Molloy appear as if they belonged to a *Commedia* seen from the outside:

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<sup>162</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, (Paris: Edition de Minuit, 1951). English translation by Samuel Beckett and Patrick Bowles, (Paris: Merlin/Olympia, 1954). Quoted from Seaver, p. 212.

Yes, they did not pass each other by, but halted, face to face, as in the country, of an evening, on a deserted road, two wayfaring strangers will, without there being anything extraordinary about it. But they knew each other perhaps. (*Molloy*, p. 215)

The mental landscape is in fact immediately and explicitly shown as directly deriving from the *Commedia*, and, once more, from the key figure of Belacqua:

He gazed around as if to engrave the landmarks on his memory and must have seen the rock in the shadow of which I crouched like Belacqua, or Sordello, I forget. (*Molloy*, p. 216)

The familiar association with Belacqua (and/or Sordello) is inserted as a self-mocking pretence of not remembering which Dantean character ought to be mentioned. The game of self-parody is especially interesting, since the attitude of Sordello in *Purgatorio* is in fact quite different from that of Belacqua. Sordello's movements are slow and dignified

o anima lombarda,  
come ti stavi altera e disdegnosa  
e nel mover de li occhi onesta e tarda!

*Purg.* VI 61-63

By matching Belacqua and Sordello, Beckett seems to imply, once more, a new appropriation of the literary source and, at the same time, its parody and apparent devaluation.

The Dantean parody, which is often present in Beckett's works, and is particularly effective in *More Pricks than Kicks*, acts at subtle levels and has corrosive effects in several points of *Molloy*. The narrator's journey, the discovery of his own name, even the astronomic references seem to play with an understated Dantean memory. A feature that has been noted also when dealing with Sanguineti's relationship with the *Commedia*, Dante's name is mentioned for the first and only time at the moment of the encounter with Beatrice, and through Beatrice's voice. Molloy, questioned by a police officer, suddenly remembers his own name and cries it aloud, unable to say if it is also his mother's name:

And suddenly I remembered my name, Molloy. (*Molloy*, p. 234)

Lost in a forest, Molloy does not know about right or wrong ways:

For I did not know if it was the right road. All roads were right for me, a wrong road was an event for me. (*Molloy*, p. 245)

And it seems sufficient to realise, as a consolation, that the path does not lead into a circle:

And if I did not go in a rigorously straight line, with my system of going in a circle, at least I did not go in a circle, and that was something. And by going on doing this, day after day, and night after night, I looked forward to getting out of the forest, some day. (*Molloy*, p. 320)

But perhaps the most revealing instance in a line of constant and implicit flouting of the source is in the astronomic reference to the narrator's birth. Molloy, like Dante, is born under the sign of Gemini. Dante mentions this biographical fact in *Par. XXII*, to mark the moment in which his journey leads him from Saturn to the superior Heaven of Stars. The moment is solemn and meaningful: as his mortal life began as the sun was in the sign of Gemini, his entrance in the higher heaven takes place under the same positive influence in *Par. XXII* 110-117:

[...] io vidi 'l segno  
che segue il Tauro e fui dentro da esso.  
  
O gloriose stelle, o lume pregno  
di gran virtù, dal quale io riconosco  
tutto, qual che si sia, il mio ingegno,  
con voi nasceva, e s'ascondeva vosco  
quelli ch'è padre d'ogne mortal vita,  
quand'io senti' di prima l'aere tosco.

Molloy's journey starts at that very time point of the year, and it seems that, although no direct reference to Dante is being made, an open opposition to Dante's text is perceivable and resounds as a strong mocking note:

I here declare without further ado to have begun in the second or third week of June, at the moment that is to say most painful of all when all over what is called our hemisphere the sun is at its pitilessmost and the arctic radiance comes pissing on our midnights. (*Molloy*, p. 226)

Later in the narrative, a series of Dantean themes is made to coexist within the design of a parody that touches the role of women figures throughout the *Commedia*, the *Convivio* and the *Vita Nuova*, the poetics of ‘saluto’, the philosophical and metaphorical meaning of the circle, of the forest and of light.

And if had met any lady friends, if I had had any lady friends, I would have been powerless to salute them correctly. But there was always present to my mind, which was still working, if laboriously, the need to turn, to keep on turning, and every three or four jerks I altered course, which permitted me to describe, if not a circle, at least a great polygon, perfection is not of this world, and to hope I was going forward in a straight line, in spite of everything, day and night, towards my mother. And true enough the day came when the forest ended and I saw the light, the light of the plain, exactly as I had foreseen. But I had not seen it from afar, trembling beyond the harsh trunks, as I had foreseen, but suddenly I was in it, I opened my eyes and saw I had arrived. And the reason for that was probably this, that for some time past I had not opened my eyes, or seldom. (*Molloy*, p. 327)

This form of negative appropriation of the Dantean source, mingles together different themes, yet the reader perceives that Dante is part of a deeply felt, and progressively overcome, cultural precedent. No longer a definite counterpart, nor a linguistic presence, Dante will appear in Beckett’s mature works as an occasional reference, or as a situational source. Just as Joyce needed to be confronted, assimilated, dissimulated and eventually (apparently) forgotten, Dante’s direct

presence becomes less and less linguistically perceivable. Yet the images remain: the bins from which Beckett's characters cannot escape necessarily remind the reader of Farinata and Cavalcante's sepulchre.

In this sense, the whole structure of the disturbing prison-like universe of *The Lost Ones*<sup>163</sup>, a work which presents itself as a story and develops as a dense description of a hellish reality, evoke both Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso*, besides suggesting itself as a modern, desperate *Purgatory*. *The Lost Ones* is about an indefinite and disturbingly concrete world:

Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one. Vast enough for search to be in vain. Narrow enough for flight to be in vain. Inside a flattened cylinder fifty meters round and eighteen high for the sake of harmony. The light. Its dimness. Its yellowness. (*The Lost Ones*, p. 7)

In Dante, the search belongs to the pilgrim-observer, not to the observed. In Beckett the characters have become bodies, their attempts at moving, searching, escaping is described throughout the narration in detailed physical terms, and their individuality is forever lost. Hell, then. Yet, the insistence on the number of bodies involved in the movement, the repeated reference to 'harmony' (and to the lack of it) as well as the description of the light, constantly shown, in the course of *The Lost Ones* in relationship to its *yellowness*, makes one think of a sort of hellish paradise.

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<sup>163</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Le Dépeupleur* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1971). Translated by the author into English and first published in Great Britain by Calder & Boyars, London, 1972 as *The Lost Ones*. Quoted from *The Lost Ones* (New York: Grove Press, 1972).

In the line ‘nel giallo de la rosa sempiterna’ (*Par.* XXX 124), the reader is told about the loving movement of angels towards the saved and blessed, which generates a harmonious and constant exchange of bliss. Beckett seems to have all this in mind, when he says that all the attempts at moving within the cylinder are provided by half broken ladders:

The ladders. These are the only objects. They are single without exception and vary greatly in size. The shortest measure not less than six metres. Some are fitted with a sliding extension. They are propped against the wall without regard to harmony. (*The Lost Ones*, p. 9)

Dante’s *Commedia* is openly referred to when the bodies are described in relation to their posture and inclination to search and movement:

Seen from a certain angle these bodies are of four kinds. [...] Fourthly those who do not search or non-searchers sitting for the most part against the wall in the attitude, which wrung from Dante one of his rare wan smiles. (*The Lost Ones*, p. 14)

Belacqua returns: ‘the attitude’ obliquely indicated is a reference to *Purg.* IV 106-8 and 121-3, but this time his name is not even mentioned. This approach to Dante’s texts as if they were part of a necessary cultural landscape and at the same time as targets of unforgiving irony, is consistent with one more indirect citation from the *Commedia* a few paragraphs later. The idea that there might in fact be a way out of the cylinder is felt either as the belief that there is a secret passage from one of the tunnels or as the dream that there is an opening in the hub of the ceiling:

One school swears by a secret passage branching from one of the tunnels and leading in the words of the poet to nature's sanctuaries. The other dreams of a trapdoor hidden in the hub of the ceiling giving access to a flue at the end of which the sun and other stars would still be shining. (*The Lost Ones*, p. 18)

The final lines of *The Lost Ones* describe the 'unthinkable' end of all these impossible journeys:

So on infinitely until towards the unthinkable end if this notion is maintained a last body of all by feeble fits and starts is searching still. (*The Lost Ones*, p. 60)

There he opens then his eyes this last of all if a man and some time later threads his way to that first among the vanquished so often taken for a guide. (*The Lost Ones*, p. 62)

All signs have acquired a subversive value that touches and involves the relation between the modern text and its antecedent, and – much more disturbingly – extends its influence onto the core of the medieval antecedent. Beckett's texts increasingly induce a much more critical reading of their implied source. The whole *Commedia* (not just single situations or characters) becomes a target: in the end there are no modern guides, as those taken as such are nothing but 'first among the vanquished'. Nothing could be more distant from Dante's conception of guiding figures that safely lead the voyager in his pilgrimage. In his open distrust in any attempt at proposing a meaning for human existence, Beckett involves those 'lost ones' that literature and culture have apparently kept alive. From the early perception of the distance of culture from existence (as expressed in 'Dante and the Lobster') to the explicit awareness of the total meaninglessness of existence (here, in *The Lost Ones*) Dante has become a progressively less mentioned presence.

Yet, the recognition of his cultural vicinity is essential and becomes a definite clue to perceive the desperate condition of Beckett's characters.

While Primo Levi questions and provokes Dante's texts as if his ethical quest for an answer could involve the whole literary tradition and Sanguineti reconfigures Dante's works within his own, making them live again in the form of fragmented cultural tools, Beckett presents and somehow 'executes' Dante through a constant use of direct and indirect references and quotations, but stating at the same time the importance of the source and his necessity to disown it. Beckett's Purgatory is indeed an abandoned land, where neither vision nor knowledge are possible, and yet the writer shows how the strength of the pain, the absolute consistency of the research, the absence of any form of self indulgence lead to a new perception of the Dantean journey, as if only through Beckett the modern reader could perceive what is now, in fact, lost forever.

## 6. HEANEY'S JOURNEY INTO DANTE

Talking about it isn't good enough,  
 But quoting from it at least demonstrates  
 The virtue of an art that knows its mind.

From: *Squarings*, xxxvii

Seamus Heaney's relatively late encounter with Dante does not immediately appear consistent with the modern poet's primary roots of inspiration. Yet, once the encounter has taken place, Dante keeps operating within the horizon of Heaney's poetical world. It is a complex knot, and it eventually shows that Dante has not only become a strong cultural reference, but has also developed into a linguistic, concrete, and constantly available tool, even in spite of the evident distance between the two poets' language, culture and approach to literature.

Remarkably, the creative dimension of Dante's influence on Heaney is even more stimulating than it had appeared in the writers so far taken into consideration: it works not only in spite, but sometimes, quite surprisingly, because of that very distance; it combines and mingles two worlds, yet it never suppresses or diminishes the individuality of either poet. As a tentative and certainly not exhaustive guideline, I would like to list the works by Heaney that, in a chronological order, show his progressive involvement with Dante and his poetry.

*Field Work* (1979) – The poem ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ and the translation of the Ugolino episode from the *Commedia*;

Translation of the first four cantos of the *Commedia* (1982-83);

*Station Island* (1984) – The whole composition is a complex homage to Dante and an elaboration of Dantean themes;

Essay *Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet* (1985);

*Seeing Things* (1991) - The influence is more subtle and pervasive, but quite explicit in entire sections or poems, such as ‘The Journey Back’ and ‘The Biretta’;

*The Spirit Level* (1996) – The reference to Dante becomes even subtler and yet decisively part of the global mood of the composition;

*Electric Light* (2001) – The few Dantean references show a surprising directness and availability of the source, in particular in the poem ‘The Gaeltacht’, modelled on Dante’s *Guido i' vorrei*.

Although there is no trace of Dante in Heaney’s early poetical production, the Irish poet’s deep concern, ever since his first works, with the nature and purpose of poetry makes his position naturally receptive to the consideration that other poetical experiences can be productive sources of inspiration and comparison. As Ronald de Rooy points out, since the 1970s Dante’s is a constant presence in Heaney’s works, but its first concrete evidence is in the collection *Field Work*, published in 1979.<sup>164</sup> Back in 1972, the tragic and dramatic facts later known as Bloody Sunday were the cause of Heaney’s decision to move from Northern Ireland to the Irish

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<sup>164</sup> Ronald de Rooy, ‘Dante e la Divina Commedia nell’opera poetica di Seamus Heaney’, *Rassegna Europea di Letteratura Italiana*, (Firenze: Franco Cesati, 16/2000) pp. 51-79.

Republic. De Rooy suggests that it would not be inappropriate to compare this voluntary exile of Heaney's from his home country to Dante's forced exile from Florence.<sup>165</sup> The very essence of exile, as distance, re-actualisation and reorientation, the whole idea of one's lost and ever-present belonging not only to a place (in all its concrete and physical aspects), but also, of one's perspective towards a network of affective, personal and political references, is an extremely modern issue. Exile is also one of the most characterising aspects of Dante's poetry in the *Commedia*, where the religious dimension of the pilgrimage is one of the leading threads.

It is in *Station Island*<sup>166</sup> that Heaney makes use of a Dantean setting (the journey-pilgrimage), of a Dantean narrative dynamic (the encounter with the dead) and of a subtler – but not less fundamentally Dantean preoccupation, that is the role of poetry and its relationship with historical responsibility. Yet, if *Station Island* is the core of Heaney's confrontation with Dante, the development of his relationship with the Italian, medieval, Catholic poet comprises a vast territory where translations, citations, elaboration have a peculiar role. In a sense, translation - in its many possible meanings - might in fact be the key word for Dante's presence in Heaney's world. Translation for Seamus Heaney should be considered as transcultural movement, where influence is practised somehow beforehand, when the still unknown text is given a preconditioned trust, a remark suggested by Maria Cristina Fumagalli, in her *The Flight of the Vernacular*, a detailed study entirely dedicated to Dante's influence on Derek Walcott's and Seamus Heaney's poetry and their relationship with Dante.<sup>167</sup> Heaney's first approach to the *Commedia* is one of 'trust in the meaningfulness of the source-text'. But also, besides the

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<sup>165</sup> de Rooy, p. 5.

<sup>166</sup> *Station Island*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

<sup>167</sup> Fumagalli, Maria Cristina, *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 272.

obvious, almost disturbing, distance between the two cultural worlds, it is an appeal to the controversial nature of its meaningfulness. Once the modern poet has approached the text through Dorothy Sayers's translation, as we are told by Heaney himself,<sup>168</sup> the medieval, foreign text starts returning unexpected effects both at the level of re-appropriation in a series of translations from Dante and at the level of creative re-production of the Dantean source in Heaney's own poetry.

Among the writers so far taken into consideration, Heaney is the only one who has also produced translations of Dante's texts. He is, in addition, the only one who would actually 'need' a translation, as Beckett's knowledge of Italian permitted him to quote freely and directly from the original. Beckett deals with the absolute extraneousness of Dante's works, and yet the tragic and desperate distance of his characters from Dante's universe is never focussed as a linguistic issue. It is as if Belacqua, Murphy, Molloy, or the various narrators, were themselves built as Dantean counterparts: their voices are somehow echoes that question the acceptability of their sources. For Heaney, translation - instead - builds a gradual relationship with Dante's texts. While for Levi and Sanguineti the confrontation with Dante takes place at a moral and cultural level, as the Italian writers deal with the diachronical and cultural question of re-employing Dante within their works, Heaney fully shows how the passage from one language to another can successfully imply the passage from one culture to another, and can, therefore,

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<sup>168</sup> Fumagalli, p. 260: 'Heaney does not speak Italian. Thus, at least initially, he acquainted himself with Dante's *Commedia* only through various English translations. Dorothy Sayers's version – or, as he says her 'very rickety' rhyming and poetry, of which Heaney declares, in his letter to me, that he enjoyed its 'almost improvisational speed' – is the first translation of Dante he ever read. In fact, the first time Dante is quoted in Heaney's works – in the *Field Work* poem 'The Strand at Lough Beg', an elegy for his cousin, victim of a sectarian killing – is by means of a quotation from Dante's *Purgatorio* in Sayers's translation.'

include the switch from Dante's historical horizon to that of contemporary Ireland. Heaney's translations/reverberations of various fragments of the *Commedia* constantly show both a desire for clarification and a distinct and open deviation from the original. The deviation is often so clearly in tune with Heaney's poetry that it develops into a definite thematic flux, so that the same reference can be located in different poems.

When Heaney discusses Dante's presence in modern poetry in *Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet*,<sup>169</sup> he very interestingly does so by presenting two 'model relationships' with the Italian medieval poet, and this happens before he deals with his own relationship with Dante. The two case studies are Eliot and Mandelstam and they seem to stand for a cultural (Eliot's) and a linguistic (Mandelstam's) form of approach to a source of poetic influence. It seems especially appropriate to point out one aspect noticed by Michael Cavanagh:

It is Dante through Eliot who gives Heaney the idea – an idea altogether compatible with Heaney's *pius* nature – that predecessors are to be seen not as rivals, but as enabling forbears.<sup>170</sup>

The attitude constantly at work in Heaney seems to be a form of creative and emotional confrontation: a rather dialectic interpretation of the relationship defined by Bloom as 'envy'. Heaney's 'Envies and Identifications', points exactly in this direction. If a Dantean image can be

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<sup>169</sup> Heaney, Seamus, 'Envies and Identifications. Dante and the Modern Poet', in *Irish University Review* 15.1. 1985. Quoted from Hawkins, Peter S. and Rachel Jacoff, eds, *The Poets' Dante* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux. 2001) pp. 239-258.

<sup>170</sup> Cavanagh, Michael, 'Walking into the Light, Dante and Seamus Heaney's Second Life', *The South Carolina Review*, Clemson University Digital Press, Vol. 32, n.1, 1999, pp. 119-131.

used to define a critical issue, just as the physical representation of the sin of Envy (IN-VIDIA), in *Purgatorio* is the painful, unnatural, privation of sight (and therefore of knowledge), in the same and opposite way, seeing and recognising one's predecessors is the blissful prerogative of the modern poet, so that vision and understanding are enhanced by tradition.

As Ronald de Rooy points out, translating, for Heaney, is a privileged and beloved way to approach foreign classical authors. As soon as he starts his acquaintance with Dante, he translates, besides the first cantos of *Inferno*, also the Ugolino episode: almost a cornerstone of Heaney's polyvalent embracing of Dante's poetry. That very translation will become the final part of the collection *Field Work*. What differentiates Heaney's from the many renditions of canto XXXIII in its extended fortunes within the Anglo-Saxon tradition,<sup>171</sup> is the privileged position given to the ethical and political dimension of the episode. In Heaney's translation the focus is on the relationship with the drama of betrayal, and the image of Ugolino and Roger is reduced and transformed into a totally inhuman, vegetable knot. In this case, an utterly unexpected exploitation of the original becomes a revealing instance of one of the most disturbing and yet most productive urges in Heaney's poetry: the troubling and never completely achieved sense of one's actual loyalty.

The conclusion of *Inferno* XXXII gives us the first appearance of Count Ugolino, who will introduce himself, his victim and the story of his death, which will be fully narrated in the following canto. Heaney's translation does not alter the rhythm of the Italian, but often openly

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<sup>171</sup> 'the Ugolino episode has been translated into English more times than any other Dantean passage (Paolo and Francesca run a poor second'). Wallace, David, 'Dante in English' in Jacoff, Rachel, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 237-258, (p. 237).

deviates from the original. What is especially interesting about these very frequent creative alterations is that they do not seem to be caused by any specific, linguistic or technical obstacles, but instead by a poetic surge, determined but no longer constrained by the original. It is enlightening to compare the Italian original to Heaney's version, and have a closer look at the many apparently unnecessary deviations (here marked in emphases):

Noi eravam partiti già da ello,  
 ch'io vidi due ghiacciati in una buca,  
 sì che l'un capo a l'altro era cappello:

We had already left him. *I walked the ice*  
 And saw two *soldered* in a frozen hole  
 On top of other, one's *skull* capping the  
 [other's,

e come 'l pan per fame si manduca,  
 così 'l sovran li denti a l'altro pose  
 là 've 'l cervel s'aggiugne con la nuca:

Gnawing at him where the neck and head  
*Are grafted to the sweet fruit of the brain,*  
*Like a famine victim* at a loaf of bread

non altrimenti Tidëo si rose

le tempie a Menalippo per disdegno,  
che quei faceva il teschio e l'altre cose.

*So the berserk Tydeus gnashed and fed  
Upon the severed head of Menalippus  
As if it were some spattered carnal melon.*

«O tu che mostri per sì bestial segno  
odio sovra colui che tu ti mangi,  
dimmi 'l perché», diss'io, «per tal convegno,  
  
che se tu a ragion di lui ti piangi,  
sappiendo chi voi siete e la sua pecca,  
nel mondo suso ancora io te ne cangi  
  
se quella con ch'io parlo non si secca».

‘You,’ I shouted, ‘you on top, what hate  
Makes you so ravenous and insatiable?  
What keeps you so monstrously at rut?’

*Is there any story I can tell  
For you, in the world above, against him?  
If my tongue by then's not withered in my  
[throat*

I will report the truth and clear your name.<sup>172</sup>

It seems rather evident that here Heaney is in fact engulfing the Dantean text and projecting it within his own world: the passage from ‘capo’ to ‘skull’, the insertion of similes and metaphors such as ‘sweet fruit of the brain’ and ‘like a famine victim’, the transformation of ‘diss’ io’ into ‘I shouted’ are all instances of a consistent process whereby the concrete, physical and even disturbing aspects of the narration are foregrounded and privileged. The most striking addition produced by Heaney is certainly the image of the ‘berserk’ Tydeus and the line ‘As if it were some spattered carnal melon’, which is perhaps a development of the (untranslated) ‘bestial segno’ of the original, and is an evident instance of Heaney’s creative manipulation of the source. What is perhaps the most characterising feature of the Ugolino episode, its fierce physicality, is enhanced and purposefully exploited. The rephrasing of Dante’s proposal to Ugolino, which concludes Canto XXXII and produces the dramatic move to Canto XXXIII, is coherent with this stylistic procedure, as it preserves and yet reduces the poignant and strong image of the withered tongue (‘se quella con ch’io parlo non si secca’ becomes ‘If my tongue by then’s not withered in my throat’), but it also introduces several new features: a direct question (where in the original there was a proposal); a specific reference to a ‘story’ (indirectly referred to by Dante); the promise to ‘clear’ Ugolino’s name (an aspect that has perhaps more to do with the fortunes of the text throughout the centuries, rather than with Dante’s intentions). What emerges is an emotional relationship with Dante’s text and an interpretative decision, which illuminates both the original and its translation: the modern poet has not just read the text, he has

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<sup>172</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Ugolino’, in *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 61-64 (p. 61).

reflected and projected quite a few modern concerns into the ancient poem. Yet Heaney's translation has not betrayed the original: although the modern poet seems to be particularly concerned with the idea of producing a more straightforward and visually perceivable translation, it is in Dante that he finds these characteristics and he proceeds by foregrounding them.

The process continues in the following Canto, with significant recurrences in the lexical choices as well as in the directness of the rendition. In this case, besides observing the persistence of what I have called instances of creative manipulation (marked in emphases), I would like to take a closer look at the process whereby the original tends to be made more effortlessly accessible to the modern reader. Examples of this attitude (underlined in the text) are to be found in the passage from 'cominciò' to 'said', in the syntactical transformation of the tercet 'Ma se le mie parole esser dien seme/ che frutti infamia al traditor ch'io rodo,/ parlare e lagrimar vedrai insieme' into the much more direct 'I would sow/ My words like curses – that they might increase/ And multiply upon the head I gnaw.' One might also observe that in this case, Heaney, the poet of Irish farmlands, has bent Dante's original metaphor of words as seeds to his own 'natural' attitude of perceiving poetry as a form of 'digging and sowing'. Heaney's inclination toward directness and simplification can be detected in the line 'I know you come from Florence by your accent', which overshadows the sinner's desperate impotence and lack of certainties ('ma fiorentino/ mi sembri veramente quand'io t'odo' – where not only the meaning of 'veramente' could be 'although' rather than 'truly', but also the introduction of the sentence through the adversative 'ma' and the time clause 'quand'io t'odo' reduce the span and the reliability of the actual recognition).

It also seems worth noticing that Heaney's translation in a sense 'presupposes' the existence of the source (or better: it presupposes the existence of previous translations and therefore or previous fortunes of the text): the name of Count Ugolino is first introduced in the English text through an enjambment that mimes the same sparkle of surprise and recognition that is present in the Italian original, but while Dante had introduced the name through the relatively neutral formula 'Tu dei saper', Heaney strengthens the allocution and produces an anticipation of recognition: 'You should know my name' sounds as if addressed to the modern readers rather than to the characters of the poem:

La bocca sollevò dal fiero pasto  
 quel peccator, forbendola a' capelli  
 del capo ch'elli avea di retro guasto.

That sinner eased his mouth up off his meal  
*To answer me*, and wiped it with the hair  
*Left growing* on his victim's ravaged *skull*

Poi cominciò: «Tu vuo' ch'io rinnovelli  
 disperato dolor che 'l cor mi preme  
 già pur pensando, pria ch'io ne favelli.

Then said, 'Even before I speak  
*The thought of having to relive all that*  
*Desperate time* makes my heart sick;

Ma se le mie parole esser dien seme  
 che frutti infamia al traditor ch'i' rodo,

parlare e lagrimar vedrai insieme.

Yet *while* I weep to say them, I would sow  
My words like curses - that they might  
[increase]  
And multiply upon the head I gnaw.

Io non so chi tu se' né per che modo  
 venuto se' qua giù; ma fiorentino  
 mi sembri veramente quand'io t'odo.

I know you come from Florence by your  
[accent]  
 But I have no idea who you are  
 Nor how you managed your descent.

Tu dei saper ch'i' fui conte Ugolino,  
 e questi è l'arcivescovo Ruggieri:  
 or ti dirò perché i son tal vicino.

Che per l'effetto de' suo' mai pensieri,  
 fidandomi di lui, io fossi preso  
 e poscia morto, dir non è mestieri;

Still, you should know my name, for I was  
[Count]  
Ugolino, this was Archbishop Roger,

*And why I act the jockey to his mount  
 Is surely common knowledge; how my good  
 [faith  
 Was easy prey to his malignancy,  
 How I was taken, held, and put to death.*

però quel che non puoi avere inteso,  
 cioè come la morte mia fu cruda,  
 udirai, e saprai s'e' m'ha offeso.

But you must hear something you cannot  
 [know  
*If you're to judge him – the cruelty  
 Of my death at his hands. So listen now.*<sup>173</sup>

The attempt to translate Dante is not only a technical step in Heaney's poetry, it is also a way to reorient and reconstruct Dante's perception. It is the 'local intensity' of the *Commedia* that fascinates Heaney (all the places, names, episodes, which would not be remembered had they not been part of the Italian medieval poem), and therefore the sounds of the language that move that intensity are themselves crucial (as Mandelstam admiringly observed). 'One of Heaney's most sustained beliefs is that poets are not only choosing language, they are, in a perfectly literal sense, also being chosen by, and determined by language', writes Bernard

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<sup>173</sup> *Field Work*, 'Ugolino', pp. 61-62.

O'Donoghue in his contribution on *Dante's Modern Afterlife*.<sup>174</sup> Quoting Heaney's remarks ('I like to remember that Dante was very much a man of a particular place, that his great poem is full of intimate placings and place-names, and that as he moves round the murky confines of hell, often heard rather than seen by his damned friends and enemies, he is recognised by his local speech or so recognises them') means focussing on the irreducible, physical and overwhelming power of words. A language that is also, and especially, made of evocative sounds, poses irresolvable questions to the poet-translator, who will in fact translate-interpret the famous lines of *Inferno* XXXIII 79-80

Ahi Pisa, vituperio de le genti  
del bel paese là dove 'l sì suona

into an extremely evocative and creative rendition, which is obviously and creatively a deviation from the original:

Pisa! Pisa, your sounds are like a hiss  
Sizzling in your country's grassy language.<sup>175</sup>

In his essay on Dante, written the year *Station Island* was published, Heaney says that the *Commedia* inspired him to 'explore the typical strains which the consciousness labours under in this country. The main tension is between two contradictory commands: to be faithful to the

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<sup>174</sup> O'Donoghue, Bernard, 'Dante's Versatility and Seamus Heaney' Modernism', in Havely, pp. 242-57.

<sup>175</sup> *Field Work*, 'Ugolino', p. 63.

collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self<sup>176</sup>. Therefore, while on one hand it is clear that Dante represents a role model for his deep rooted ties with his own historical experience and his unquestionable sense of individualism, on the other hand Heaney perceives Dante as a possible technical model in terms of poetic diction. Following Mandelstam's notations on the powerful dynamics of sounds that animate the *Commedia*, Heaney, commenting on the first lines of the poem, makes some surprising comments on the adjective 'smarrita' and focuses on Eliot's reduction and re-creation of a Dante deprived of his 'local intensity':

To listen to Eliot, one would almost be led to forget that Dante's great literary contribution was to write in the vernacular [...]

'Smarrita.' *The Concise Cambridge Italian Dictionary* gives 'smarrire, to mislay; to lose; to mislead; to bewilder', yet each of these English equivalents strikes me as less particular, less urgently local than the Italian word, which has all the force of dirt hitting a windscreen. Eliot underplays the swarming, mobbish element in the Italian, which can be just as '*selvaggia e aspra e forte*' as the dark wood itself. (*Envies and Identifications*, p. 248)

Two attitudes are at work: one, represented by Pound and Eliot, shows how modern poets interpret Dante as the voice of an entire age, the other, represented by Mandelstam, suggests that what one should look for is the concrete sound of poetry, in 'the dark wood of the larynx'<sup>177</sup>:

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<sup>176</sup> *Envies and Identifications*, p. 256.

<sup>177</sup> *Envies and Identifications*, p. 255.

They [Eliot and Pound] came to Dante early, as students; as young men, they studied him in an academic context; they wore his poem like a magic garment to protect themselves from the contagion of parochial English and American culture; and finally they canonized him as the aquiline patron of international modernism.

What Mandelstam does, on the other hand, is to bring him from the pantheon back to the palate; he makes our mouth water to read him. (*Envies and Identifications*, p. 254)

The tragic vicissitudes that led to Mandelstam's exile are reported by Heaney as an explanation of what led the Russian poet to his personal vision of Dante:

Mandelstam found a guide and authority for himself also, but a guide who wears no official badge, enforces no party line, does not write paraphrases of Aquinas or commentaries on the classical authors. His Dante is a voluble Shakespearean figure, a woodcutter singing at his work in the dark wood of the larynx. (*Envies and Identifications* p. 255)

At the end of his passionate surmise of what Dante meant to Eliot and to Mandelstam, Heaney apparently says rather little about what Dante means to himself: 'I hesitate, in this mighty context, to get personal', he writes, and he does indeed limit his presence to a few introductory remarks and a quotation from the section of *Station Island* where the pilgrim leaves and the shade of Joyce gives him some final advice:

‘Your obligation  
is not discharged by any common rite.

What you must do must be done on your own  
 so get back in harness. The main thing is to write  
 for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust  
 that imagines its haven like your hands at night

dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.

You are fasted now, light-headed, dangerous.  
 Take off from there. And don't be so earnest,

let others wear the sackcloth and the ashes.

Let go, let fly, forget.

You've listened long enough. Now strike your note. (*Envies and Identifications*, p. 257)

'Striking his note' is most certainly an appropriate description of what Heaney does in his own appropriation of Dante, and in spite of a detectable reticence in the description of his 'Journey into Dante', the stages and the characteristics of the journey are mentioned by the poet himself, when he describes the setting and the themes of Station Island:

It comes from a sequence of poems set on Station Island in Lough Derg, a *Purgatorio* in itself, the site of a three day pilgrimage involving a dark night and a bright morning, a departure from the world and a return to it. I would not have dared to go to Lough Derg for the poem's setting had I not become entranced a few years ago with the *Divine Comedy* in translation, to the extent that I was emboldened to make my own version of the Ugolino episode from the *Inferno* and to translate (though not to publish) the first four cantos. With Dante's example, however, I was encouraged to make an advantage of what could

otherwise be regarded as a disadvantage, namely, that other writers had been to Lough Derg before me – William Carleton, Sean O’Faolain, Patrick Kavanagh, Denis Devlin, to mention only the English language forerunners. But then I thought that Carleton could be a sort of Tyrone Virgil and Kavanagh a latter-day County Monaghan Cavalcanti, and although that is not how things turned out, it gave me the impulse to get started. (*Envies and Identifications*, p. 256)

Heaney’s main concern is not looking for a reestablishment of the source within the new language and culture. Rather, his feeding on the foreign text in order to produce a new stage in his own poetry becomes a conscious, open and deliberate form of homage to the source itself. This would explain why he does not in fact need to know the foreign language in depth, nor is he aiming at an accurate rendering of the original, as the purpose is a revitalisation both of the lines being translated and of the modern text, which, from those lines, acquires new accents and values. Yet, it has been noted, once the modern poet actually engages himself in translating what Mandelstam described as ‘dada-like’ expressionism, his versions can become surprisingly (and perhaps disappointingly) austere, writes Michael Cavanagh:

The few cantos Heaney has translated contain several felicities, but the overall effect is that of a poet trying to avoid the local, the colorful, the babbling, and the textual dense, in favour of intelligibility and dignity.<sup>178</sup>.

Heaney’s translation is, in fact, substantially faithful to the original, and the occasional deviations or alterations seem to be consistent with the tendencies already noted about Cantos

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<sup>178</sup> Cavanagh, p. 127.

XXXII and XXXIII. A limited exemplification (from *Inferno* II) illustrates the point: Heaney copes with the complex enjambment structure of the first tercet by keeping the rhyme structure and part of the enjambments, and although the second tercet does not receive the lifting, dramatic energy of the original (e io sol uno/ m'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra), it successfully deals with two major problems: the translation of the actual meaning of 'pietate' (and in this case Heaney's classical studies must have helped), which is especially relevant in connection with the figure of the 'pio Enea' (that is, the man who complies with his moral duty, in spite of the pain and sorrows he is destined to cause) as opposed to the 'empio Ulisse' (the epitome of limitless self assertion). Heaney's appropriate (but not obvious) choice illustrates the centrality of a theme, which is not only crucial within Dante's poem, but also in Heaney's poetical concerns (emphases added, as previously, to signal creative deviations from the original):

Daylight was going and the umber air  
*soothing* every creature on the earth,  
 freeing them from their labours everywhere:

I alone was girding myself to face  
 the ordeal of the journey and *my duty*  
 which *literal memory* will now retrace.<sup>179</sup>

Lo giorno se n'andava, e l'aere bruno

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<sup>179</sup> Seamus Heaney, Translation of *Inferno* Canto 2, in Havely, pp. 261-64.

toglieva li animai che sono in terra  
da le fatiche loro; e io sol uno

m'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra  
sì del cammino e sì de la pietate,  
che ritrarrà la mente che non erra.

In some cases the translation is predestined to become part (or is already part) of Heaney's own poetry: the translation of *Inferno* II moves rather smoothly and conceals a few interpretative decisions, but its most interesting aspect is that five lines will become part of the poem 'The Journey Back' in *Seeing Things*<sup>180</sup> and almost two entire tercets will appear again in Section VI of *Station Island*, totally de-rooted from their original collocation and given an unexpected ironical re-contextualisation.:

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<sup>180</sup> 'The Journey Back' in *Seeing Things* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1991), p. 9:

Larkin's shade surprised me. He quoted Dante:

'Daylight was going and the umber air  
Soothing every creature on the earth,  
Freeing them from their labours everywhere.'

*I alone was girding myself to face  
The ordeal of my journey and my duty*  
And not a thing had changed, as rush-hour buses

Bore the drained and laden through the city.

Lines 127-32 of *Inferno* II, which deal with the poet's recovered self confidence after Virgil's exhortation, read as follows:

Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo  
 chinati e chiusi, poi che 'l sol li 'mbianca,  
 si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo,  
  
 tal mi fec'io di mia virtude stanca  
 e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse

The same lines are not simply translated, they are in fact transposed and functionally adapted into a context that is ironically and movingly alien to the original: the emotions of the adolescent who longs for and finally reaches sexual pleasure:

Haunting the granaries of words like *breasts*,  
 As if I knelt for years at a keyhole  
 Mad for it, and all that ever opened  
 Was the breathed-on grille of a confessional  
 Until the night I saw her honey-skinned  
 Shoulder-blades and the wheatlands of her back  
 Through the wide keyhole of her keyhole dress  
 And a window facing the deep south of luck

Opened and I inhaled the land of kindness.

As little flowers that were all bowed and shut  
 By the night chills rise on their stems and open  
*As soon as they have felt the touch of sunlight,*  
*So I revived in my own wilting powers*  
*And my heart flushed, like somebody set free.*

Translated, given, under the oak tree.

The ironical and unexpectedly vital relationship with the original leads to poems such as ‘An Afterwards’ in *Field Work*, where that very translation of the Ugolino episode is the obvious source. Bernard O’Donoghue mentions this poem as a situation where:

Dante is used – as he is by no other follower that I know of – for comic effect in the self-mocking *Field Work* poem ‘An Afterwards’ in which the poet’s widow visits him in the ninth circle (a grim location in the depths with Ugolino), where she would place all the poets for ‘backbiting’.<sup>181</sup>

The statement referring to Dante’s never having been used for comic effect is in fact quite questionable. All the authors taken into consideration in this research tend, in fact, to redesign their own Dante also in comic terms: a troubling relationship with Dante seems to lead to an ironically oriented approach, with non occasional comic overtones. Heaney’s text ‘backbites’ Heaney himself, both as a poet and as Dante’s translator, together with all the poets,

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<sup>181</sup> O’Donoghue, p. 244.

and perhaps all the pretences of poetry to define its own power. The poem begins with an unexplained ‘she’, referring to the poet’s wife’s journey to hell:

She would plunge all poets in the *ninth circle*  
*And fix them, tooth in skull, tonguing for brain;*  
 For backbiting in life she’d make their hell  
 A rabid egotistical daisy-chain.

Unyelding, spurred, ambitious, unblundered,  
 Lockjawed, mantrapped, each a fastened badger  
 Jockeying for position, hasped and mounted  
*Like Ugolino and Archbishop Roger.*

And when she’d make her circuit of the ice,  
*Aided and abetted by Virgil’s wife,*

I would cry out, ‘My sweet, who is the life  
  
 Most dedicated and exemplary?’  
 And she: ‘I have closed my widowed ears  
 To the sulphurous news of poets and poetry.  
 Why could you not have, oftener, in our years

Unclenched, and come down laughing from your room  
 And walked the twilight with me and your children –

Like that one evening of elder bloom  
 And hay, when the wild roses were fading?'

And (as some maker gaffs me in the neck)  
 'You weren't the worst. You aspired to a kind,  
 Indifferent, faults-on-both-sides tact.  
 You left us first, and then those books, behind.'<sup>182</sup>

(emphases mine):

In this case, I emphasised the parts where the direct references to Dante's text are most evident. The Dantean reference is obviously focussed on cantos XXXII and XXXIII. While the first part of the poem is constructed through Dantean images (the first two quatrains and the tercet), the final part (three quatrains) gives voice to the poet's wife, and at that point the only, and much more indirect, Dantean reference is limited to a sentence between brackets ('as some maker gaffs me in the neck'). One more curious detail is that the poet's voice is quoted and inserted between the only tercet and the following quatrain and it creates the quasi-Dantean terza rima assonance of the tercet. The Dantean background of the rest of the poem is strongly reduced, which is itself an explicit (and perhaps not too ironical) reproach to the pretences of poets. As the poet imagines himself dead and looked at by his own wife, he drops the first building principle of the *Commedia*: its being an actual, physical journey, through which the poet-pilgrim finds out about everybody else's destiny in the afterworld.

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<sup>182</sup> 'An Afterwards' in *Field Work*, p. 44.

Reading what poets have left us is, however, a possible escape from the damnation of repeating the past horrors. This becomes quite clear in Heaney's choice of guiding figures both within his poems (Clareton, Kavanagh and Joyce in *Station Island*) and, at a more general level, in his perspective on poetry, where references to poets are widespread: Dante among the classics is not alone. The *Aeneid* and *Beowulf*, as far as translations are concerned, are vital sources of inspiration. When Heaney wants to show what Dante means to him, he starts from the analysis of what Dante meant to Eliot and Mandelstam. The recurrent idea of a teacher-guide emerges with great clarity in the fifth canto of *Station Island*, where the three figures Heaney felt as his own guides (Barney Murphy, Michael McLaverty and the poet Michael Kavanagh) appear in the poem, and the first, Barney Murphy, is introduced through a non-obvious Dantean reference :

An old man's hands, like soft paws rowing forward  
groped for and warded off the air ahead<sup>183</sup>

De Rooy makes an interesting association between Heaney's lines and two quite opposite moments in Dante's *Inferno*: the arrival of the angel who effortlessly opens the gates of the city of Dis, and the beginning of Gerione's flight<sup>184</sup>. While in fact one point ('warded off the air ahead') reminds one of *Inferno* IX 82 ('dal volto rimovea quell'aere grasso') and deals with the intangible and superior quality of the angel's actions in spite of all the opposition moved by the evil city, the latter image ('like soft paws rowing forward') reminds us of *Inferno* XVII 105 ('e con le branche l'aere a sé raccolse'), that is part of the description of the entrance into the lower

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<sup>183</sup> 'Station Island' V, in *Station Island*, p. 72.

<sup>184</sup> de Rooy, p. 67.

part of hell, where even the act of flying is turned upside down from its natural function: Dante and Virgil must fly ‘down’ to enter Malebolge, the world of betrayal. It seems especially revealing that the ‘messo celeste’ of canto IX and the wonderfully horrible Gerione of canto XVII are both conjured when Heaney introduces his teacher-master figures. Something is both monstrous and inspiring in the very idea that it is the past that leads the way to all transformations, and yet the same past might become an overwhelming obstacle: the contrast between the two images is coherent with Heaney’s double responsibility to a collective historical experience and ‘to the recognition of the emerging self’.

This leads us back to the Joyce episode in Section XII of *Station Island*, which tends to be quoted for its first part (with the ‘Now strike your note’ command) rather than for its actual conclusion, where the Dantean source appears metabolised in various aspects: the oxymorric appeal, ‘Old father, mother’s son’, which reminds one of Bernardo’s prayer to the Virgin in *Par. XXXIII*; the reference to ‘the revelation/ set among my stars’; the insistence on the necessity of using the ‘new vernacular’ in the line ‘The English language/ belongs to us’; the definition of Heaney’s present stage as ‘your peasant pilgrimage’, but most of all in the final lines, where Joyce’s departure (‘As he moved off quickly/ the downpour loosed its screens round his straight walk.’) reminds us of Brunetto as well as of Cacciaguida (and one could perhaps add also Arnaut Daniel of *Purgatorio* XXVII 148: ‘poi s’ascose nel fuoco che li affina’), and in fact a number of ‘departing figures’ are suggested to the memory of a reader of the *Commedia*:

‘Old father, mother’s son,

there is a moment in Stephen’s diary

for April the thirteenth, a revelation

set among my stars – that one entry

has been a sort of password in my ears,

the collect of a new epiphany,

the Feast of the Holy Tundish.’ ‘Who cares.’

he jeered, ‘any more? The English language

belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires,

a waste of time for somebody your age.

That subject people stuff in a cod’s game,

infantile, like your peasant pilgrimage.

You lose more of yourself than you redeem

doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.

When they make the circle wide, it’s time to swim

out on your own and fill the element

with signatures on your own frequency

echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

ever-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.'

The shower broke in a cloudburst, the tarmac

fumed and sizzled. As he moved off quickly

the downpour loosed its screens round his straight walk.

The controversial and vital point here is that while Joyce-Dante seems to be giving the modern poet an apparently straightforward task: 'follow your path, strike your note', the task implies a critical acknowledgement of history (the Irish-British relationship), tradition (the forgotten presence of the Gaelic language), and literature as they have in fact developed. Dante, in this context, becomes a key issue: the fortunes of Dante in English tend to build a contradictory tension for an Irish (and catholic) poet who is trying to 'far parte per sé stesso' and 'strike his own note'. As David Wallace remarked about Joyce, and quoting from Joyce:

His Jesuit educators (like their counterparts in Italy) employed the *Commedia* to enforce Catholic orthodoxy, 'the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus invented and patented in all countries by Dante Alighieri'<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Wallace, p. 252.

Heaney's firm and yet troubled relationship with his own Irish roots would not lead him to accept Dante and his poem as a received form of glorification of Catholicism. Quite the opposite in fact: Heaney's Dante is first an overwhelming poetical presence and then, in the course of all his subsequent poetical works, more and more a curiously flexible model. Michael Cavanagh remarks that

For Heaney, the impediment to a full acceptance of Dante is his occasional unadulterated didacticism and dogmatism, which Heaney associates in his own life and times with the worst kind of writing-to-order: poetry as ideology. Heaney's strategy for dealing with this uncomfortable aspect of the *Commedia* is to make it an inessential property of the work, or to make it a property read into his work by his commentators, particularly Eliot, who according to Heaney reconstructs Dante's work as an undergirding for his conservative Anglicanism.<sup>186</sup>

The core of the collection *Station Island* is perhaps the core of Heaney's Dantism. Interestingly enough, and in spite of the many attempts at focussing on instances of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* (which do in fact operate in the text), the poems of *Station Island* conjure a modern *Purgatorio*, obviously alien and contradictory to Dante's: Heaney's perspective does not include the idea that the souls' journey leads to salvation, nor that the voices, the reproaches and the commands the pilgrim receives should be given the special status and privileged awareness they have in Dante's poem. The modern pilgrim often hears his own voice and conscience filtered through more or less unexpected points of view, different and subsequent stages of his troubled

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<sup>186</sup> Cavanagh, p. 127.

journey is search of ‘his own note’. Dead poets and victims of sectarian violence are the protagonists of *Station Island* and Dante’s Manfred, arguably one of the most memorable and characteristically purgatorial of his creations, is evidently echoed in Heaney’s tercets:

I had come to the edge of the water,  
soothed by just looking, idling over it  
as if it were a clear barometer

or a mirror, when his reflection  
did not appear but I sensed a presence  
entering into my concentration

on not being concentrated as he spoke  
my name. And though I was reluctant  
I turned to meet his face and the shock

Is still in me at what I saw. His brow  
Was blown open above the eye and the blood  
Had dried on his neck and cheek. ‘Easy now’<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> ‘Station Island’, VII, in *Station Island*, p. 77.

Yet Manfred is not the only Dantean character echoed in Heaney's text: the suspension of the line of recognition of *Purg.* III 106-108:

Io mi volsi ver' lui e guardail fiso:  
biondo era e bello e di gentile aspetto,  
ma l'un de' cigli un colpo avea diviso

that is clearly present in Heaney's section VII of *Station Island*, and can be joined to at least two more Dantean episodes: Dante's uncertainties in *Paradiso* III 17-21 on whether he is seeing spirits or reflections:

per ch'io dentro a l'error contrario corsi  
a quel ch'accese amor tra l'omo e 'l fonte.  
  
Sùbito sì, com'io di lor m'accorsi,  
quelle stimando specchiati sembianti,  
per veder di cui fosser, li occhi torsi.

And, also, Dante's reaction at the sound of his own name in *Purgatorio* XXX 62:

Quando mi volsi al suon del nome mio,

Dante's presence in *Station Island* is clearly moving beyond the stage of citation, and is becoming a vital and organic element of Heaney's horizon. More than a potential source of inspiration, Dante is already a metabolised resource at the level of poetical realisation. Heaney's preoccupation with the complex issues of authentic loyalty echoes in his free adaptation and translation of Dante within his own poetry.

The theme of violence as well as that of betrayal and loyalty, so crucial in the Strathern-Manfred episode, had been anticipated in a previous poem of *Station Island*, 'Sandstone Keepsake', with the infernal images of Phlegethon, the river of blood where tyrants guilty of political violence are punished. The poem beautifully conjures Heaney's very own theme of the object-token, which contains and solidifies history, human sorrows, ideologies and conflicts (as in the *Bog poems*), and the Dantean reference to a long past sectarian violence:

It is a kind of chalky russet

Solidified gourd, sedimentary

And so reliably dense and bricky

I often clasp and throw it from hand to hand.

It was ruddier, with an underwater

Hint of contusion, when I lifted,  
 wading a shingle beach on Inishowen.  
 Across the estuary light after light

Came on silently round the perimeter  
 Of the camp. A stone from Phlegethon,  
 Bloodied on the bed of hell's hot river?  
 Evening frost and the salt water

Made my hand smoke, as if I'd plucked the heart  
 That damned Guy de Montfort to the boiling flood –  
 But not really, though I remembered  
 His victim's heart in its casket, long venerated.<sup>188</sup>

Looking for what might get lost, preserving the evidence of half forgotten stories, keeping track of history without accepting it as destiny: these seem among the threads of Heaney's poetry. In some cases the path beautifully overlaps with the memory of Dante and it makes the reader somehow anticipate a Dantean reverberation: in 'The Loaning', in the same collection, the first stanza, especially through the line 'I was in the limbo of lost words', conjures the expectation for a Dantean echo:

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<sup>188</sup> *Station Island*, p. 20.

As I went down the loaning  
 the wind shifting in the hedge was like  
 an old one's whistling speech. And I knew  
 I was in the limbo of lost words.<sup>189</sup>

And in fact the conclusion of the poem fulfils the expectation and develops the Dantean theme of words 'stolen' from living – but already hardly human – shapes:

When you are tired or terrified  
 your voice slips back into its old first place  
 and makes the sound your shades make there...  
 When Dante snapped a twig in the bleeding wood  
 a voice sighed out of blood that bubbled up  
 like sap at the end of green sticks on a fire.<sup>190</sup>

The memory of *Inferno* XIII is especially consistent with the dramatic and painful choice of the poet who is asked to decide, take part, re-present his words as part of a political vision. Heaney's refusal to become an instrument, to 'give voice to' (instead of 'being his own voice')

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<sup>189</sup> *Station Island*, p. 51.

<sup>190</sup> *Station Island*, p. 52.

is implicitly, but quite clearly expressed through what he said about Mandelstam's approach to Dante. Yet, the truly disquieting process whereby the poet achieves his sense of uniqueness is portrayed through the Dantean device of having characters denounce the poet's position: the result is an increase of the dramatic potential and, at the same time, a complex palinode of the poet's previous assumptions: in section VIII of *Station Island*, the death of Heaney's cousin, that is the same episode referred to in 'The Strand at Lough Beg' is shown according to a renewed perspective: that of the unforgiving victim. In the last lines of the poem 'The Strand at Lough Beg' (which includes a quote from *Purg.* I 100-3 'Questa isoletta intorno ad imo ad imo,/ là giù cola dove la batte l'onda,/ porta di giunchi sovra 'l molle limo', in Dorothy Sayers's translation: 'All round this little island, on the strand/ Far down below there, where the breakers strive,/ Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand'<sup>191</sup>), Heaney lends his voice to that of his accusers and leaves the trial formally open and emotionally unresolved:

'You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact.

You confused evasion and artistic tact.

The Protestant who shot me through the head

I accuse directly, but indirectly, you

Who now atone perhaps upon this bed

For the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew

The lovely blinds of *Purgatorio*

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<sup>191</sup> 'The Strand at Lough Beg', *Field Work*, p. 17

And saccharined my death with morning dew.<sup>192</sup>

As his acquaintance with Dante proceeds and deepens, Heaney develops an instinctive directness of relationship with the source, which leads to an ironical attitude toward the lines of the *Commedia* or of other Dantean texts, which are often inserted or alluded to.

The tendency to an ironical reuse of Dante is a common feature of the authors analysed in my work: for Beckett it is a matter of implicit and extremely complex denial; for Sanguineti irony is a way to avoid the risk of museum-like falsification; for Levi irony often enhances and apparently overcomes the hopelessness of experience: through the reference to Dante's *Commedia*, in his case seen as the most unquestionable of poetical monuments, the writer finds the words to speak about the unspeakable. Levi, as has been noted, reuses Dante even when the necessity of the reference is not evident. In Levi's poem 'Un altro lunedì'<sup>193</sup>, mentioned in the second chapter of the present work, the setting and the reference are surprisingly similar to the already quoted poem 'The Journey Back' in *Seeing Things*:

Larkin's shade surprised me. He quoted Dante

*'Daylight was going and the umber air*

*Soothing every creature on the earth,*

*Freeing them from their labours everywhere.*

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<sup>192</sup> *Station Island*, p. 83.

<sup>193</sup> *Opere*, II, p. 528.

*I alone was girding myself to face*

*The ordeal of my journey and my duty*

And not a thing had changed, as rush-hour buses

Bore the drained and laden through the city.

I might have been a wise king setting out

Under the Christmas lights – except that

It felt more like the forewarned journey back

Into the heartland of the ordinary.

Still my old self. Ready to knock one back.

A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry.'

Both Heaney and Levi find in Dante the words and the perspective that can ironically reshape the present. For Levi it is the rush hour at the railway station of Turin, decoded through a multiple Dantean spectrum (*Inferno*, *Paradiso*, Minos, who 'orribilmente ringhia', and the final quotation from *Vita nuova*). For Heaney it is his own translation of *Inferno* II pronounced by a totally unexpected Larkin, perhaps the least Dantean of poets (as the line suggests: 'Larkin surprised me'). Dante has become a readily available tool in Heaney's cultural and poetical memory, a situation that constitutes one of the common characteristics of the four authors I have

analysed in my work. A very similar approach is detectable in the poem ‘The Biretta’, from *Seeing Things*. Here the shape, the meanings and the associations originated by the priest’s hat emerge from childhood’s memories and develop into a series of images that culminate in the stanza:

Sanctuaries. Marble. Kneeling boards. Vocation.

Some it made look squashed, some clean and tall.

It was antique as armour in a hall

And put the wind up me and my generation.<sup>194</sup>

The journey toward the concrete reality beyond the symbol of the *biretta* (that is: beyond the hierarchy and the power it implies) begins with the image of the *biretta* transformed into a paper boat, and floating like the boat of the first lines of *Purgatorio*:

Now I turn it upside down and it is a boat –

A paper boat, or the one that wafts into

The first lines of the *Purgatorio*

As poetry lifts its eyes and clears its throat.

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<sup>194</sup> ‘The Biretta’, *Seeing Things*, pp. 28-29.

Even the easiest of Dantean references becomes a structural backbone in the poem ‘The Schoolbag’, where the passage of experiences from one poet to the other is exemplified by the old schoolbag carried by the young poet and handed to the older one (the poem is ‘in memoriam John Hewitt’), in the awareness that both will somehow eternally linger in an ideal ‘mezzo del cammin’:

My handsewn leather schoolbag. Forty years.

Poet, you were *nel mezzo del cammin*

When I shouldered it, half-full of blue-lined jotters,

And saw the classroom charts, the displayed bean,

The wallmap with its spray of shipping lanes

Describing arcs across the blue North Channel...

And in the middle of the road to school,

Ox-eye daisies and wild dandelions.

*Learning's easy carried!* The bag is light,

Scuffed and supple and unemptiable

As an itinerant school conjuror's hat.

So take it, for a word-hoard and a handsel,

As you step out trig and look back all at once

Like a child on his first morning leaving parents.<sup>195</sup>

In *Seeing Things* the most striking evidence of Heaney's completed journey into Dante's world is the readiness with which the references to Dante appear in the text and complete the images. In 'Crossings xxxvi', the first images are almost Beckettian, while the explicit reference to a 'scene from Dante' is to *Inferno* XXVI 25-30, and the whole description is based upon the association between the crossing of the Acheron and the attempt to escape from the immediate danger and violence experienced by the poet in his contemporary Ireland:

And yes, my friend, we too walked through a valley.

Once. In darkness. With all the streetlamps off.

As danger gathered and the march dispersed.

Scene from Dante, made more memorable

By one of his head-clearing similes –

Fireflies, say, since the policemen's torches

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<sup>195</sup> "The Schoolbag", in *Seeing Things*, p. 32.

Clustered and flicked and tempted us to trust

Their unpredictable, attractive light.

We were like herded shades who had to cross

And did cross, in a panic, to the car

Parked as we'd left it, that gave when we got in

Like Charon's boat under the faring poets.

Dante's poetry has been paraphrased and narrated (and of course translated) by modern poets. Yet, in Heaney, the source acquires an unexpected, sometimes disturbing, in some cases enlightening, and often revealing vitality. The perception of the density of words, handled both as physical sounds/signs and cultural items in the very first poems in *Death of a Naturalist* ('Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun [...] Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. I'll dig with it'), where the ancient metaphor of the pen as an instrument, both aggressive and peaceful (cultural, and agricultural), reminds one of one of the most ancient documents of the Italian language (the 'indovinello veronese'), and also of the lines from the *Commedia* where the act of writing is described with the intensity of a sudden revelation ('Né O sì tosto mai né I si scrisse' in *Inf. XXIV* 100). Heaney probably knew neither of these Italian texts when *Death of a Naturalist* was being written: but, as Michael Cavanagh remarks, sometimes we have the impression that 'Heaney was Dantean before he knew he

was'<sup>196</sup>. A poem such as 'Limbo', from the collection *Wintering out* (1972) shows a clear instance of this 'pre-Dantean Dantism': 'Now limbo will be/ A cold glitter of souls/ Through some far briny zone'. Heaney's poetry is, since its beginning, especially sensitive to such themes as self-analysis and political-historical relevance, where the dominating role is that of the perception of the relationship between past and present as a troubled and perhaps never totally solved question on the coexistence of languages, cultures, traditions. Stratification is the pattern that can put together the images of the bog poems and the Dantean lines of *Station Island*. As the poet-narrator is told by the Irish poet Carleton, the first poet-guide in *Station Island*:

We are earthworms of the earth, and all that  
 Has gone through us is what will be our trace.'  
 He turned on his heel when he was saying this  
  
 And headed up the road at the same hard pace.

These lines have been read as a reference to the conclusion of *Inferno* XV and to the departure of Brunetto, which does not seem altogether convincing: as Cavanagh says: 'Brunetto is simultaneously one of life's losers, naked and scrambling to catch up with his wretched companions, and one of its winners, gathering in the green cloth at Verona.' Heaney must have remembered Eliot's tribute to the last lines of XV: nothing better illustrates, Eliot says, the quality of surprise than the way in which Dante 'dismisses the damned master whom he loves

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<sup>196</sup> Cavanagh, p. 128.

and respects'.<sup>197</sup> As already noted, a typical relationship towards one's forerunners is seeing them as guides implicitly overtaken, yet still mysteriously victorious. It is a narrative method especially useful in Heaney (and certainly a most Dantean one), a method whereby one's vision is multiplied, while the narrator-poet character remains central and on the foreground. In this particular case, however, the relationship with Brunetto seems to work rather at a semantic level than at a linguistic one: the lines that do in fact come to the reader's mind are those referring to the conclusion of the dialogue with Mohammed in *Inferno* XXVIII 61-63, at least as far as the actual visual impact of the description is concerned:

Poi che l'un piè per girsene sospese,

Mäometto mi disse esta parola;

indi a partirsi in terra lo distese.

The remark made by Fumagalli, that not only *Purgatorio* is active in Heaney's Dantean horizon, but *Inferno* and *Paradiso* are also part of the whole inspiration (she calls *Station Island* 'a miniature version of the *Commedia*'<sup>198</sup>) is widely shared<sup>199</sup>. I would like to suggest that

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<sup>197</sup> Cavanagh, p. 121.

<sup>198</sup> Fumagalli, p. 106.

<sup>199</sup> Both Fumagalli and de Rooy look for clues of lines of progressive ascension and inclusion of Dante's three realms either within single texts or across Heaney's whole production. See Fumagalli, cit. p. 135: 'In spite of the similarities between *Station Island* and Dante's *Purgatorio* and despite the fact that all the critics have so far considered Heaney's poem to be his personal version of Dante's second *cantica*, the direct point of reference of 'Station Island' is more frequently Dante's *Inferno* than his *Purgatorio*' and p. 143: 'In Section XII, then, with Joyce/Cacciaguida we are in *Paradiso*, the entrance to which had been anticipated by the allusion to the eternal fountain [...] Moreover, Heaney's address to Joyce ('Old father, mother's son') recalls St. Bernard's prayer to the Virgin Mary at the beginning of the last canto of *Paradiso*: 'Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio.[...]Dante's

looking for instances of progressive ascension, or for a structured adaptation of a Dantean pattern within Heaney's works, might be misleading and, after all, not necessary: it seems to me that Heaney chooses, becomes fascinated, inspired and involved by Dante's text and the point of contact between the two worlds is much more a full and free translation (in all the depths of its meaning) than an adaptation of the ancient model to present needs.

Two potential directions seem to be available to Heaney's Dantism: the reverberation, and therefore the amplification of the source (an episode, as for Count Ugolino, or of an image, such as the 'little flowers' of *Inferno* II), or the insertion of the source within a context intrinsically alien to the Dantean suggestion. In the 2001 collection *Electric Light* both tendencies are at work. The ice of Cocito is evoked within 'Audenesque'<sup>200</sup>, a poem dedicated to the memory of Joseph Brodsky:

Ice of Archangelic strength,  
 Ice of this hard two-faced month  
 Ice like Dante's in deep hell  
 Makes your heart a frozen well.

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*Commedia* as a whole, therefore, is to be considered the textual model for Heaney's pilgrimage to Station Island.', and de Rooy cit. p.52: ' si evidenza nell'opera di Heaney a partire da *Field Work* un filone significativo che si modella sulla struttura tripartita della *Commedia*. Ci concentreremo su tre libri poetici di Heaney che seguono globalmente il percorso ascendente della *Divina Commedia*, cioè *Field Work*, *Station Island*, e *Seeing Things*.'

<sup>200</sup> Heaney, Seamus, *Electric Light*, (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001) p. 77.

The poem is interwoven with explicit and implicit homage to poets and their creations, as it is clear from the first stanza:

Joseph yes, you know the beat.  
 Wystan Auden's metric feet  
 Marched to it, unstressed and stressed,  
 Laying William Yeats to rest.

And in fact the whole collection resounds with remembered names and places: homage to the illuminating power of poetry. In this perspective it becomes even more meaningful that, just as the poem dedicated to Brodsky was modelled according to 'Auden's metric feet', so a poem dedicated to Heaney's own youth, his friends, and the Gaelic language should be modelled on Dante's 'Guido i'vorrei'. In Heaney's 'The Gaeltacht', Dante's sonnet reverberates and is not only quoted, but enacted again: almost a form of free and extended translation:

I wish, *mon vieux*, that you and Barlo and I  
 Were back in Rosguill, on the Atlantic Drive,  
 And that it was again nineteen sixty  
 And Barlo was alive  
  
 And Paddy Joe and Chips Rafferty and Dicky  
 Were talking Irish, for I believe

In that case Aoibheann Marren and Margaret Conway

And M. and M. and Deidre Morton and Niamh

Would be there as well. And it would be great too

If we could see ourselves, if the people we are now

Could hear what we were saying, and if this sonnet

In imitation of Dante's, where he's set free

In a boat with Lapo and Guido, with their friends in it,

Could be the wildtrack of our gabble above the sea.<sup>201</sup>

The journey into Dante has lead to a full re-adaptation of the ancient text into the modern poet's experience and sensibility is. The 'Gaeltacht', the area where the Irish language is spoken, is honoured through the English language, the Dantean 'e quivi ragionar sempre d'amore' becomes 'we were talking Irish' and the structure of the sonnet frames the poet's memory, the cultural past (Dante's idealised circle of friends) and Heaney's personal past are connected and given a surprisingly common nature.

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<sup>201</sup> Heaney, Seamus, *Electric Light*, (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001)

## CONCLUSIONS

Bending and adapting the Dantean source—that is, both Dante's texts and his implied contexts—is part of the job of keeping Dante alive and since memory is made of cancellations, adaptations, conscious and unconscious ‘mistakes’ and ‘errors’, words trace the path that readers take or mistake: *errare* and *errore* have the same root, as we rediscover whenever we start re-reading the *Commedia*. Levi, Sanguineti, Beckett and Heaney are not simply influenced by Dante and his texts: their ‘Dantean reactions’ often foreground areas of their own work in a revealing and unexpected way.

Levi was an occasional writer of poetry and relied on the potential of narrative prose to express himself and his duty to remember; Sanguineti’s means of creative expression tend to be those of experimental poetry even when the chosen form is that of the novel. Both, in a different way, are also literary critics: Levi almost always insisting on his being a ‘common reader’, and asserting personal experience and reaction in order to define his role as a possible model for an indefinite public of fellow readers and, in fact, of fellow human beings; Sanguineti being a professional scholar of literature and apparently detaching his role and voice as a poet-as-writer from his role as a literary critic.

Primo Levi’s citations from the *Commedia* show a surprisingly troubled relationship with Dante’s text, a contradictory path of rejection and inclusion, which have certainly much to do with the nationalistic use of Dante during Italian Fascism. On the other hand, Sanguineti’s use of

Dante's texts within an avant-garde perspective has very much to do with the modern poet's experience as a leading Dante scholar, and therefore with the necessity of stripping away the layers of historically and ideologically conditioned readings, while at the same time incorporating those very layers within the modern text. Levi did not even include Dante among the writers chosen for his personal anthology (*La ricerca delle radici*): he stated that Dante did not need to be included, because he was, somehow, part of the inborn inheritance of every human being. Yet the Dante officially shared with the 'common reader' is, more often than not, rather a flat demonstration of the evil that school can do to a poet: an unsavoury presence, as dull and boring as textbooks can be. It is through the contact with the extreme experience of the Lager that the distant text becomes a real presence, a challenge and point of reference. On the other hand, Sanguineti as a critic of Dante operates in a way that is only apparently dissimilar from what can be seen in his poetry, and in particular where Sanguineti makes a conscious use of Dante's texts. A deep form of coherence is actually at work: the analytical attitude of the critic is quite coherent with Sanguineti's poetic works.

The non-Italian authors taken into consideration in my work are both Irish. The original intention was to look for instances of 'troubled' relationships with Dante, and to look for examples of creative manipulation of Dante both in Italy and in other cultures. For Beckett, the main issue seems to be connected with the theme of irony or even parody with which the Dantean reference is used in his works. Belacqua's posture appears to be not only a reflection of the very Beckettian attitudes of detachment, paralysis, isolation, but also a 'mise en abyme' of one of the most perplexing episodes in the *Commedia* – at least in its uniqueness – Dante's laugh at the moment of recognition. Parody itself is a key to a better understanding of the relationship

between Beckett and Dante, as if only through a non-innocent smile (and a non-innocent cancellation) literature might be given the chance to speak on behalf of human beings. The surprising paradox is the sometimes perfect reflection of Dante within a production that denies all of Dante's premises, conceptions and perspectives. In this case, the non-Italian (and certainly non-Catholic) perspective clearly shows that Dante cannot be a modern among the moderns, and yet Dante remains a fundamental point of orientation. For Heaney the possible paths include themes that are dominant in Dante criticism: exile, pilgrimage, and purification. In this perspective the relationship between Heaney the translator of Dante and Heaney the poet is particularly productive: the narrative impact of single episodes – and the semantic allusions they carry – (Ugolino, for example) are coherent instances of a wider attitude concerning the creative manipulation of tradition and culture. Key figures such as Virgil, Dante and other characters of the *Commedia*, such as Manfred or Brunetto, become part of a modern world whose inner logic (or lack of logic) acquires a direction, and a code, if not an explanation.

As the examples of Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney demonstrate, the Dantean effect achieves totally different results and moves from divergent premises, but in both cases the choice of Dante (or, for Beckett, the surface dismissal of Dante) is a culturally oriented project. The utterly Beckettian rendition of Dante challenges the source and shows it is unavoidable. Beckett has made it possible for the modern readers to perceive the distance between the *Commedia* and the present horizon. Modern readers are no longer presented with a mask, a staged performance or a re-presentation, but with the disquieting realisation that our world can (and does in fact) contain the dream of the past, but must make it alive through a severe and austere work of actual 'translation'.

With Seamus Heaney, one somehow returns to a less scholarly, more emotional and yet definitely ‘political’ relationship with Dante: Heaney’s Dante is a core of troubled cultural identifications, but in a quite different way than it had been for Primo Levi. While for Levi being Italian as well as Jewish meant approaching Dante through a tradition that challenged that peculiar double identity – and Levi’s Dante embodies in a literally ‘monumental’ way this peculiar form of extreme contradiction - for Seamus Heaney the recourse to Dante – which takes place progressively in the course of his career as a poet and does not intermingle with his earliest production – is an on-going achievement. Rather than being one more troubling component of Heaney’s Irish Catholicism, the medieval poet is a source of possible solutions: a poet guide, a truth teller, an implicit container of available traditions, Heaney’s Dante is an archipelago of suggestions as well as a revered monument.

The Dante component has indeed become, in these four writers of the twentieth-century, a complex catalyst: no longer a direct model, and certainly not a direct source, the words of the medieval Italian poet have found attentive reception in the words of the modern European writers and increased the rate of our cultural perception. Reverberations are difficult to measure, but it is thanks to their presence that cultural landscapes acquire colours, contrasts, and depths.

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