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978-0-521-04462-2 - Dante and Difference: Writing in the *Commedia*

Jeremy Tambling

Excerpt

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Introduction: Dante and difference

così quelle carole, differente-
mente danzando . . .

Why *difference*? A straightforward answer would be that my arguments in this book are focussed on those elements of Dante's *Commedia* that break down the formal schema of the poem, and that by their capacity to differ both from themselves and from other parts of the poem, effectively deconstruct the author's enterprise. 'Deconstruction', which is Derrida's term, is not destruction: it involves, rather, showing the limits of any conceptual thought, and showing that its basis lies in the concealment of something 'other' to it, which has been silently elided with it, in order to permit univocal, stable meaning to appear. Clearly, 'difference', because it is Derrida's term, entails a philosophical tradition; and in the book Derrida wrote, *Positions* (1972), which most nearly approaches Dante's model in the *Commedia* because it consists of imaginary dialogues with scholars, written up as though true, he refers to his indebtedness to Heidegger's earlier *Identity and difference*. He speaks there of 'the attention to what Heidegger calls the difference between Being and beings'¹ – in other words, of those moments in Heidegger where the impossibility of thinking in unitary terms about Being shows itself, and reveals difference, not unity, as primary. This insight, carried over into Derrida, articulates with Saussure's sense of a language as 'a system of differences without positive terms'. Saussure has been highly influential, of course, in literary criticism, and his work, which knocks against the stability of meaning that was associated with the nineteenth-century realist text, has led to a whole new valuation of literature where there is the illusion of single truths emerging from a text. It is time that medieval literature, which is profoundly different from either the realist mode, or from any sense of single meaning, was brought in, in all its difference and alterity from modern literature, to display a way of signifying that is not committed to monologism, or to establishing a narrowed set of hierarchical truths. My aim is to show this with Dante, the author for whom 'going signifying' – 'vo significando' – is the expression of his poetic.

Meaning, for Saussure, does not exist in any term within the signifying chain which makes up language: only in the non-identity of signifiers with each other is it possible to move forward, with the illusion of sense hanging in the air. But that meaning is premised on nothing more than the difference of one signifier from another. 'Difference' becomes an important way of holding

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to fissure as something basic, of marking the non-unified character of a concept. Writing it *differance*, Derrida's neologism, as is done in *Speech and phenomena*, keeps in play related significations. It suggests *differ* (the crucial aspect of things that sunders singleness, so that any concept turns out to be dual; and can only be rendered single by the repression of one of its aspects). It also invokes the verb 'defer', as though to suggest that what happens as a result of *differance* is that meaning is never present in the word, but always put off. There can never be a completeness, the reconciliation of a sign with its object, or even a sign with its signature. In my discussions of *Paradiso*, this seems central: the writing is provisional, offered as such. Derrida's word tries to undo the thought of a concept, by making a noun as verb-like as possible, as the -ance ending suggests; to think in conceptual terms is already to exclude otherness. Medieval literature is rich because that otherness is recognised: its very mode of existence so often makes the writer a *diaskenast*, glossing authorities, especially the Book itself, the Vulgate, itself something of a gloss, if only by translation, and this interpretative activity recognises plurality – there is no end of meaning – and opens up texts for new significances. Lastly, since Derrida's word with an *a* sounds the same as the word with an *e*, *differance* makes the punning point that any word itself cannot be thought of in a single mode: its significances spill over, and it is in writing, not speech, that these things are to be noticed. If only in the acrostics that mark *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, something of the palpability of the sign seems highly evident in Dante, as it is everywhere a subject for his earnest and changing thought.

Derrida's work has been applied in American deconstruction and criticism especially to Romantic criticism. Whereas such an influential work as M. H. Abrams' *Natural supernaturalism* stressed the movement towards unity of being within the Romantics' quest, so that the trajectory followed in their poetry was circular, back towards their origins, though these were at the end revealed in a more profound or more elevated state, these critics (Hartman, Paul de Man, Hillis Miller, associated with Yale deconstruction) were interested in doubleness revealed in the text, signs of its refusing unity, and affirming disparateness, and, above all, showing that where the text stressed singleness, or a system, its language undid that: refused that unitary sense, and presented the reader with the problematics of language. It is worth recalling the Romantics' interest in Dante's *Commedia*, first translated complete into English by 1814, and to think of the power of the image of the journey towards unity, with reunion with Beatrice, and a prior absorption of Virgil and rejection of him implied in his disappearance. The *Paradiso*-poet (central for Shelley) travels on single-mindedly towards God and provides inspiratory material for Romanticism. It would be an equal service that saw the *Commedia* in such effectively post-modernist terms, as unable to sustain a system and breaking down into the issues of writing. At that point we move from 'the end of the book' to 'the beginning of writing', to use Derrida's chapter-title that opens *Of Grammatology*. In Derrida, the 'book' is Hegel's system, which absorbs everything, difference and all, into its own synthesis – as, indeed,

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another inflection of Romanticism. My reading of Dante is in opposition to Romanticism, popularly conceived, and in particular the kind of reading that justifies the movement towards unity, so that it produces innumerable articles explaining, for instance, why Dante has to eliminate Virgil just when he does.

The ‘book’ Derrida invokes could stand as the symbol of life, reality, sewn up and bound together in organised form: indeed, early on in *Of Grammatology*, he refers to E. R. Curtius’ work on the ‘book’ image in medieval literature (in *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages*), as the emblem of reality understood and all sealed up: intelligible as coming all from the hand of God. In contrast, ‘writing’ removes that sense of a system and displaces the book, as all that there is; replacing the unity of the bound volume by excess and non-containability. There can be no complete unity; instead singularity and difference are stressed. Dante uses the book, but there is also writing: I wish to argue that the writing goes beyond the book, and refuses the idea of totality that is encouraged in the book-image.

To do that will necessitate ‘the death of the author’ as the privileged subject and arbiter of the ‘meaning’ of the text, and as Roland Barthes phrases it, it is itself a liberating idea, as is Barthes’s rationale for wishing to bring it about. ‘To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty), beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the “text” is “explained” – victory to the critic.’² We do not have to go far to find this kind of positivism in Dante criticism: it mars Singleton’s criticism, when he tries so hard to enter Dante’s medieval world without a sense of the impossibility of so doing. ‘The fiction of Singleton’s Commentary (on the whole *Commedia*) for the most part is that we too stand inside Dante’s world and require not so much mediation or persuasion . . . as instruction.’ The comment seems apt, as does the more wicked one of the Rev. Roger Tennant, in the *New Christian*: ‘Dorothy Sayers could write of “we who share Dante’s presuppositions”, but I wonder if she ever sat down to consider just how many of those presuppositions she really did share.’³ But then, too, the death of the author, for Barthes, entails ‘the birth of the reader’, who is awakened not to the ultimate signified of the text, the ‘meaning’, considered as immediate, not deferred, but to the text as *writing*, as signs. Dante’s meeting with Virgil draws from him the comment that he has searched his ‘volume’ with ‘lungo studio’ and ‘grande amore’: writing has, then, preceded Dante, and partially, at least, created him: he takes his place in the poem as someone moving in a world of writing that culminates with the other ‘volume’ in *Paradiso XXXIII* – God and the universe combined. He starts from writing, and ends with it, and as either poet or *personaggio*, fits into this overall, arching scheme. Everyone, as well as everything, becomes a sign:

Folco mi disse quella gente a cui
fu noto il nome mio; e questo cielo
di me s’imprenta, com’io fe’ di lui;

Para. IX. 94–6

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(Folquet I was called by those people to whom my name was known, and this heaven is stamped by me, as I was by it.)

Folquet is a shadow, a mark in the heaven of Venus (where the earth's shadow leaves its trace): by putting his impress on that sphere he becomes a glyph, a text himself, readable by all as opposed to those few who knew him on earth – his modesty, in contrast to lines 37–42, being stressed. James T. Chiampi's *Shadowy Prefaces: conversion and writing in the Divina Commedia* argues for a move from things in Dante being considered as signs towards, in *Paradiso*, an elucidation of those signs, to a fuller kind of reality: *signum to res*. I think this closure – Derrida's term, suggesting a limit is being fixed by the interpreter on the text, so that it may be assumed to reach a conclusion, and fulfil intentions – is resisted in the *Commedia's* strategy, with its heuristic art, 'going signifying' (*Purg.* XXIV. 54). Totalisation of meaning is compromised, it remains provisional, just as the whole status of the writing fully supports the undecidable character of the text's meaning – even its realistic status, for example, is thoroughly in question. 'Signifying' allows for a Derridean 'dissemination', which implies that hermeneutics now will pick up on the text's implications, rather than work through to some central point, thus even in the heaven of Venus (connected also with rhetoric, in the *Convivio*), there is the presence of the poet (Folquet) as a textual figure: a fitting analogical and for the writer of love poetry, itself rhetoric.

'Vo significando' crucially brings out provisionality of meaning in the sense that the poet sees himself in movement: not in one place, not standing still. He has not finished in the heaven of Venus: the reality he perceives with Folquet still has a sign character: a *res*, after all, can still point to something else besides itself. The implications of this push the text open, implying that it resists whatever total meaning the author may have wished for it, and disallows the absoluteness of a possible existential experience being recorded. The *Commedia* thus becomes fiction, an illusory reality, which, while it asserts its reality, does so in a manner suggesting that here is writing, and nothing necessarily beyond.

This may sound as though I am agreeing with recent post-Nardi trends in Dante criticism in Italy, which have accepted the authenticity of the Epistle to Can Grande, and stress the 'fictio poetica' aspect of the *Commedia* and its allegorical status, and deny any 'mirabile visione' aspect of Dante. Sapegno and Petrocchi have both been influential here; but if the controversy is by no means dead, and the authorship of the Epistle can be contended for either way, I would wish to use Barthes, and Foucault's very different stress in his essay 'What is an author', in *Language, counter-memory, practice*, to comment on the arguments. Foucault's work on the individual text being produced from a discourse, and indeed only possible within that, would suggest that it matters little who actually wrote the letter, whether Dante or a commentator of a few years later; the point is that the Epistle emanates from a mode of thought, and ideology, that allows for allegorical understanding, and

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that, indeed privileges it; for it would seem likely that the function of the Epistle, whoever wrote it, is to gain for the poem a high form of acceptability, and to do that by imposing a preferred reading upon it. How a text is taken depends on the conditions of the discourse in which both reader and author find themselves: if the fourteenth century opts to read allegorically, though not compelled into that form of understanding,⁴ that is a choice which imposes its own closure on the text; and the effort to validate Dante's authorship of the Epistle, and thus to give his sanction to a form of allegory, is a desire to perpetuate that closure, and to establish, or maintain, a hierarchy of ways of taking the poem, guaranteed by the author as authority. Despite weighty arguments by Hardie and Peter Dronke, the letter may still be, historically, Dante's, and I have sometimes referred to it as such, for short-hand, but I do not think that it is necessary to be bound by the terms for understanding set out in the Epistle. The insistence on allegorical reading, as in Singleton, or in some of Hollander, is at odds with my own on openness of signification, and I regard it as a desire to fix: to refuse to re-read, lest the text should be seen to differ from itself. Dante criticism invests strongly in a reading which sees, as an allegory, signifier corresponding to signified. The text cannot be read, I would argue, as though it could be approached in its medieval context, with a certain amount of historical understanding; which assumes that we can know the past (as something like the present, only with certain crucial shifts): the difference, the alterity of any past is denied, absorbed into the positivism of the present.

My approach is the opposite: understanding is positioned in history, so that the illusion of taking a work of art as first written involves an alienation of the knower from his or her own historicity. The hermeneutical tradition that involves Heidegger and Bultmann and Hans-Georg Gadamer in different manifestations insists that 'every time it will have to understand a text handed down to it in its own way, for it is subject to the whole of the tradition in which it has a material interest and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text as it addresses the interpreter does not just depend on the occasional factors which characterise the author and his original public. For it is also always co-determined by the historical situation of the interpreter and thus by the whole objective course of history . . . The meaning of a text surpasses its author not occasionally but always. Thus understanding is not a reproductive procedure but rather always a productive one . . . It suffices to say that one understands *differently when one understands at all.*'⁵ It may be that there is complacency involved in assuming that a literature of the past must be re-written in order to come to terms with the present, the act of interpretation being that re-writing, but still the hermeneutical tradition detects just as much complacency in those who think that literature of the past is accessible on its terms; and it is also true that this assumption must lead to eliding differences between ideologies, and the belief in some timeless human values that makes possible communication between past and present. But 'timeless values' ignores the conditions of history; and the way language,

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culture and ideology shape and produce values: it would be better to stress differences from Dante and discontinuities between his art and the twentieth century. Even Gadamer's sense of 'meaning' is metaphysical: the quotation assumes there is something there independent of interpretation, of the reader's activity: some presence, some being existent in the text; which recalls Gadamer's critical kinship to Heidegger. Derrida's stress, as also Foucault's, is on the way that thought needs to go on pushing at such traces of metaphysics, such contaminations that suggest that there can be a unitary sense to the text, which is isolatable from it.

What is needed is a reading of the poem that does not assume a fixed, marked out purpose, which is an analogous problem to Dante's, when he takes a poet dead for the past 1300 years, who wrote in Latin, not Italian, and revalues his work, not by simple critical reading, but by revision, re-writing. He initiates thus a sense that what is of the past, from the 'venticinque secoli' that have elapsed since time was measured (according to the medieval chronologers), and which Virgil, like the Christianity he preceded, bisects, must itself be re-written: the past cannot be accepted as a single univocal authority, to play tradition to his individual talent. That sense of working from writing to writing constructs history as a text: not a single thing, but plural, as a text is – as a weaving together of different strands. No passivity before the past as some authority is assumed: it goes signifying, like Dante's own method, in ways that can be modified, since itself it has no extraneous meaning. So, too, does the *Commedia* re-write itself as it goes on, and so does Dante's whole life, as expressed in art, become re-written time and again, as I intend to show.

Indeed, as suggested before, 'Dante' is a textual creation (and the narrator, we have seen, is aware of himself as such), not an author who works from his life and experience to his poem, but instead produced as a concept by the reader who must take each textual practice – for example, the *Monarchia*, with its thoroughly secular stress, and the puzzle over its date, the *Convivio* with its radical Aristotelianism, the *rime petrose*, the *Commedia* itself, the letters, and even possibly the sonnets that are put down to the name of Ser Durante – and try and create a consistent figure from them: when this consistent figure is obtained, he or she will then be able to control how the texts are to be read. Thus approaches to Dante – many of which I have learned much from – have conventionally wished to stress his consistency, his feeling his way towards a 'mature' position that once obtained is final: his Christianity. But that closure is dependent on the allowing in of the author, as a single being, who thus guarantees the status of each text: indeed, elevates each fragment of discourse into part of a discourse that must receive a certain status, as Foucault suggests. The author is cast into the mould of the Romantic, made purposive, unifying experience into a whole.

The issue of the Christianity of the *Commedia* is crucial. Giovanni del Virgilio and Boccaccio could both see Dante as 'theologus' (though Guido Vernani would hardly have agreed with that assessment, or with the idea that poetry could be theology), and the *Commedia* could, in the 1555 Venice

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edition, be labelled 'Divina'. But as all titles, like prefaces, are rationalisations, interpretations of contents rather than guides to what is read, so *Divina Commedia* seems an imposition on the text, a way of enacting a closure on it. The Trecento Humanists did not mean by 'theologian' that Dante had written an exclusively Christian poem: the title, based on a misapprehension of Aristotle, suggests that the poet is a theologian in revealing mystical truths (not mimetic but rather Neoplatonic), under the guise of poetry and allegorical form.⁶ It is Humanist, not Aquinian, thinking. And for the poem's Christianity, Kenelm Foster's book, *The two Dantes*, which with its title also influences mine, focusses the issues clearly. It is a study which recasts the Vico / De Sanctis / Croce splits in Dante between the poet and theologian, creator and receiver of a structure, in a new light. The split he sees is between Dante the pagan, and Dante the theologian. But entailed in Foster's thesis is the sense that the two ought to unify in some way, and all the fine work in earlier essays on 'the mind in love' has to do with the conviction that there is a single philosophical mind moving forward in search of a conclusion, which entitles Foster to speak of Dante as 'this great Christian' (p. 253). But how did Dante come to be thought of in this way, especially since Foster is so firm, both here and in his article on 'teologia' in the *Enciclopedia dantesca*, on the discrepancies of thought between the *Convivio* and the *Commedia*? Especially, too, since he is interested in signs of independence in Dante's thinking, which, even in the treatment of Limbo, suggests he finds room for an Aristotelianism, related to the pursuit of knowledge which would 'regard human life, properly speaking, as a life directed to ends attainable on earth, and to relegate to a life after death the whole possibility and process of man's divinisation', as he puts it in the compilation *The mind of Dante* (pp. 67–8). There are clear problems here, and if P. G. Ricci's dating of 1318 is accepted for the *Monarchia*, it is not enough to say that 'in the *Purgatorio*, Aristotelianism is integrated into Christianity, in the Dantesque Limbo it is not' (*The two Dantes*, p. 253) – as though Dante's deepening thoughts during the writing of the *Commedia* solved the problems posed by Virgil and Limbo: for *Monarchia* might also be seen as partly heterodox. Instinct in Foster's position is a desire to close on Christianity as the final *telos* of Dante's quest; to suggest that ultimately he comes home, and by the *Paradiso* has, like the Scholar Gypsy, 'one aim, one business, one desire'.

My reading jibs at this, since it pretends that desire is capable of being single in character: it excludes difference that must, for example, always make desire be a displacement for something else. It may be that the Islamic influences on Dante need more foregrounding as an aspect of the difference excluded:⁷ similarly, it is significant that much remarkable work on Dante in this century has come from Jewish scholars – Auerbach, Spitzer, Momigliano, for example. I feel, too, that calling Dante a Christian minimises the differences between whatever twentieth-century Christianity looks like, and the medieval possibility: for hermeneutics has its part to play there too, and it would be interesting to know what could bind the Trecento Christian and the

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twentieth-century one together. Difference seems allowed for even in the allegorising mode, when the Epistle to Can Grande speaks of the *Commedia* being ‘polysemous’ – ‘of more senses than one’. In the context, that has to do with fourfold allegory; but that is only a medieval way of registering the plurality of signification, not an exhaustive method for all time; and indeed, it restricts meaning, for it makes the latter three senses flow out of the literal sense, which is primary. But literality cannot be assumed: even language that is intended to describe the literal is itself interpretation.

To read the *Commedia* as I am suggesting will not result in the kind of pure subjectivism De Sanctis seems to have asked for, and that Montale seems to have been familiar with when ‘an important Italian philosopher advised [him] to concentrate on the text [of Dante] and ignore the gloss’.⁸ (Croce, with his split between the ‘lyric poetry’ and the ‘non poesia’ must have been behind that philosopher, if not he himself.) A subjectivist reading does no more than confirm the reader into methods of thought already familiar: when swathes of the poem can be put away, as with the Crocean approach, the principle of selection will prove self-confirming. Barthes, who wishes for the birth of the reader, does so hoping for the active and oppositional reader who will refuse the passivity implied in the ‘readerly’ text (as he calls it in *S/Z*), and will re-read, which will entail ‘not consumption, but play (that play which is the return of the different)’.⁹ The readerly text (identified mainly, in Barthes, with the classic realist novel), imposes the vision of the author upon the reader, makes the link between ‘author’ and ‘authority’: in the ‘writerly’ text, there is disconfirmation: of the author, by the writing, and of the reader, who faces the text as ‘the same and new’, and recognises in the excess of the text, in its difference, what has been excluded from thought, what shatters single-minded and unitary thinking. It is, again, the change from ‘book’ to ‘writing’.

I am interested in the status of the *Commedia* as writing, and in the textual practices that Dante is aware of, and engaging in: thus I wish to explore further the ‘polysemous’ nature of the text as an aspect of medieval poetics. Certainly Dante, regarded as an authority by Chaucer, for instance, does seem willing to present himself as an author, whether in the self-justifying stance of the *Convivio*, or the revelation of his name in *Purgatorio* XXX. 55, or in the addresses to the reader. There is a tension between different voices in the poem, nonetheless, which Mikhail Bakhtin has picked up on in his study of texts that attack univocal readings, and which he calls ‘novels’, in, of course, a different sense from the traditional use of that term. In Dante, he detects a tension between a vertical and a horizontal understanding; the first being the schema that Dante evokes, which go up and down three kingdoms of the dead; the second being the course of history that the poet is involved in. For Bakhtin, ‘the images and ideas that fill this vertical world are . . . filled with a powerful desire to escape this world, to set out along the historically productive horizontal . . . each image is full of historical potential and therefore strains with the whole of its being towards participation in a temporal-historical chronotype. But the artist’s powerful will condemns it to an eternal

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and immobile place on the extratemporal axis.¹⁰ The implications of this comment I start with in Chapter 1. With such a sense of difference at work, and bearing in mind Barthes's statements about re-reading, it is evident, I hope, why my reading of Dante will not go *cantica* by *cantica*: why it will resist the lure of narrative, and dodge from area to area. To work systematically through the poem would be to concede to the author's intention, to fail to re-read, and thus to accept the poet's order for doing things as indeed authoritative. As Barthes wittily says, 'those who fail to re-read are obliged to read the same story everywhere', and the point has its applicability in the need to take the text differently, to see where the author's intention allows for some repression of what is other to the vision and structure.

Yet the setting out of a 'readerly' text by Dante the poet is also qualified by some awarenesses of the need to be provisional. For example it happens that passages can be found from half way through each *cantica*, where there is a pause for review, which assumes the completeness of the particular enterprise described in that *cantica*:

Lascio lo fele, e vo per dolci pomi
promessi a me per lo verace duca;
ma infino al centro pria convien ch'ì tomi. *Inf.* XVI. 61–3

(I leave the bitterness and go for the sweet apples promised to me by my true guide: but first it is fitting that I fall to the centre of the universe.)

Ed elli a me: 'Quanto ragion qui vede
dir ti poss'io; da indi in là t'aspetta
pur a Beatrice, ch'è opra di fede.' *Purg.* XVIII. 46–8

(And he to me: What reason sees here, I can tell you: beyond that, wait only for Beatrice, for it is a work of faith.)

Ma nondimen, rimossa ogni menzogna,
tutta tua vision fa manifesta
e lascia pur grattar dov'è la rogna. *Para.* XVII. 127–9

(But nonetheless, remove every lie: make all your vision manifest, and let them scratch where the scab is.)

In my first example (to be exegetical for a moment), drawn from the words of Dante to the Florentines in *Inferno*, the sweet apples suggest some deep object of desire: Sapegno quotes from the *Rime* (no. 81, line 94) in comparison, where the sexual suggestion of what is beneath the woman's dress works poetically/allegorically to suggest one meaning displacing another. Virgil's words about the Earthly Paradise in *Purgatorio* XXVII. 115 are also relevant, though it is important that this blessedness too is transitional, to be displaced later in the poem's course. The rest of the infernal journey is relativised, set aside as of lesser importance, in contrast to this other quest, which takes in the whole of *Purgatorio*, and makes Dante, by implication, an unfallen Adam, since he can have what Adam fell for getting. The *terzina*, with the reference to Dante's own fall, seems to play on this point: and the word-play continues in

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the meeting with Adam, who is the ‘pomo’ produced mature: while in that same canto (*Para.* XXVI), the teeth of love will be spoken of, as though Dante were the apple, the reverse apple, as it were, to the one taken by Eve (cp. *Purg.* XXXIII. 61–3). To the ‘tre antichi fiorentini’ Dante can speak of the journey through the rest of hell as though it were as good as done: in thought he is elsewhere. ‘Lascio lo fele’ includes the infernal journey itself: desire for the sweet apples displaces the bitterness, and one *cantica* gives way to another.

In the second instance, the reference to Beatrice, mentioned again in line 73, firmly places Virgil and his knowledge within a context that already seems superseded: what Beatrice will tell Dante is not specified, but it opens up the whole of *Paradiso* as well as the close of *Purgatorio*, and enables a jumping forward of thought that again places the second half of *Purgatorio* in a more relative, less absolute light. That Virgil, not Dante, makes the ‘ragion’/‘fede’ distinction is important: not that Virgil has become Christianised, but that he can already, as it were, see the hollowness of what he has to say. To speak about ‘fede’ shows that, despite his inability to talk about it in formal terms, he is there already: he is over the limit of reason and into something else. His own speech then is not where he is, morally: he is beyond that, displaced into another region. Limbo itself dramatises that situation: the souls that without hope live in desire only bear out a Lacanian analysis of the condition of the self within the symbolic order of language: radically displaced, it is in the condition of desire for the Other: for where it is not, and what it is not. ‘It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak’, Lacan writes.¹¹ That breaks up the concept of unitary character indeed. But Dantean figures at their *telos*, like Virgil, are equally shadowy, not single egos, or cogitos. The historical Virgil could not speak about ‘fede’: the Dantean Virgil can, which means that he illustrates a new condition of things in the Dantean conception: he is there and not-there, implicated in what he says and also beyond it: displaced with regard to the position that he holds in the symbolic order that is Dante’s universe writ large. Perhaps a way of describing the poem is to say that it makes something positive out of this sense of displacement.

The third example is Cacciaguida’s crusading command to Dante, in the spirit of ‘resurgi e vinci’ (XIV. 125), so that poetry has a new importance in the public sphere (but since the way up is the same as the way down, it will be a rising up which will be a descent (XIV. 63). ‘Tutta tua vision’ presupposes the vision completed: Cacciaguida passes over the rest of *Paradiso* and imagines Dante back on earth. The effect is almost to suggest that what is to come in the other cantos may be assumed, accepted, and that there then needs to be the going on to some new experience. That Dante in all probability wrote this commission to himself only a matter of months before his death is the more strange. He puts himself into the position, it seems to me, of someone who has had a (poetic) experience, and who now makes it relative, no longer absolute, by making it public, part of a whole public world, and to be regarded with no