Dante's Masterplot

and the Alternative Narrative Models

in the *Commedia*

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Short Abstract

This thesis investigates the narrative models in Dante’s *Commedia* with the aim of opening up the poem to alternatives to the dominant narrative embedded in the text, which it terms *Dante’s masterplot*. This is the teleological trajectory which allows the poet to subjugate earlier works or earlier parts of the poem to the revisionist gaze of its endpoint. The thesis analyses the masterplot’s workings in the text and its role in the interpretation of the poem, and documents its overwhelming success in influencing readings of the *Commedia*. It then explores three competing narrative models that resist and counter its monopoly, which are enacted by (i) paradoxes, (ii) alternative endings and parallel lives; and (iii) the future. Paradoxes are used to neutralise the teleological hierarchy and thus allow Dante to represent contradictory ideas and experiences in the temporal medium of language. Through counterfactuals and twin episodes, Dante establishes in his poem a number of storylines that detour from and run parallel to the main narrative; this allows him to make room for an affective space within the text, which suspends narrative necessity and moral normativity. The future tense poses a problem case for the masterplot in that it indefinitely postpones the endpoint on which teleology relies, and thus exposes the poem, and its author’s, vulnerability to time and circumstance. By focusing on non-linear modes of storytelling, the thesis questions interpretations of the *Commedia* that favour one normative master-truth, and highlights instead the manifold poetic, theological and ethical tensions which, due to the masterplot’s influence, are often overlooked. The thesis concludes with a proposal that, alongside the traditional notions of Dante’s characteristic plurality of linguistic registers and styles, Dante’s narrative pluralism can and should come to play a key role in contemporary and future readings of the *Commedia*.

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Long abstract

This thesis sets out to interrogate and provide alternatives to the predominance of teleological language and frameworks in the reception of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. I came to the thesis after many years of reading Dante, through which I began to find recurring patterns in the vocabulary used by scholars and in the general trajectory of their arguments which more often than not cast the arc of Dante's story as a linear path away from previous mistakes and toward greater understanding and moral improvement. The task, for a scholar of Dante, seems to be to pick a goal for the protagonist—a quest for knowledge, for true love, for poetic authority, for God—and show how he eventually reaches such goal having overcome variously difficult stages. This uplifting, if predictable, *modus legendi* is inspired and underpinned by well-known discourses endogenous to the *Commedia*, such as the confessional narrative, seafaring voyage, penitential progress, mystical experience, and the pilgrimage of the soul to God. Yet while these macro-narratives certainly constitute an important element in the poem, they are repeateadly challenged by the many unforeseen episodes that constellate the *Commedia*: characters who according to the poem's theological system are beyond salvation, since they did not know God or were excommunicated, are unexpectedly saved; bodies that lost, with life, the ability to embrace physically are suddenly restored their earthly memories and desires; and

souls that are directed toward God freely choose to interrupt, if only for a moment, their journey forward. Readings of Dante that favour the idea of progress promote the impression that the poet and his universe ultimately achieve total coherence, and that when this coherence is not found, it should be engineered by the power of clever interpretations; the *Commedia*, however, seems to consciously remind readers that its rules can constantly and unexpectedly be broken. Upon scrutinising the poem's language more closely, one finds that it is considerably more ambiguous and troubling than how it is often portrayed; indeed, the optimistic trajectory of growth is invariably constellated with paradoxes, errancies and surprises that work at different levels in the text, from tiny verbal detail to wider long-range correlations. Not everything, in other words, is as linear as described.

This experience of the text kickstarts my work and affords it its two fundamental objectives: firstly, to interrogate the critical expectations and practices that accompany teleological readings of Dante with a view to identifying their basis within the poet's writing; and secondly, to search for possible alternatives in the poetic practice of the *Commedia* and explore their interpretative implications. The central claim proposed in this thesis is that, embedded within the text and conditioning its reception, lies what I call *Dante's masterplot*: the 'costante della personalità dantesca' which, as Gianfranco Contini put it in his 'Introduzione alle *Rime* di Dante' (1939), consists in 'degradare un'esperienza precedente, toglierle la sua finalità intrinseca, usufruirla come elemento dell'esperienza nuova'. The masterplot is so pervasive in the author's oeuvre, and its narrative of past mistakes and new beginnings has proved so suggestive, engaging, and inspiring to generations of readers that it often takes on a life of its own in their imagination. Influenced, with varying degrees of awareness, by the masterplot, scholars of Dante continue to reproduce teleological dynamics in their readings of the poem, leaving evidence of its workings in the very vocabulary, arguments, and structure of their writings. It is common practice in articles and monographs to explore Dante's oeuvre through a variety

of approaches and methodologies, yet largely in the order in which the poet himself articulated them. By reproducing the master narrative of linear development first suggested to them by the author, Dante's readers thus privilege the masterplot above other, competing, narrative models that however have the same textual dignity and thus demand close scrutiny.

The originality of my thesis lies in its joint analysis of the workings of the masterplot (within the text and in its effect on the poem's reception) and on an equally detailed study of three of the *Commedia*'s narrative alternatives. The teleological pattern in Dante's works has been detected by a handful of scholars from Erich Auerbach and his pioneering essay on Medieval hermeneutics 'Figura' (1938) and Gianfranco Contini's seminal introduction to Dante's youthful *Rime* (1939), to Teodolinda Barolini's own edition *Dante's lyric poetry* (2014). Others, like Manuele Gragnolati (*Amor che move*, 2013) and Elena Lombardi (*The Wings of the Doves*, 2012), have resisted its influence in their critical practice by opening the text to anti-teleological interpretations or by providing multi-angled readings that revel in the text's undecidability. Joining these two strands of scholarship for the first time, my research aims to investigate systematically the workings of the masterplot in order to build the methodological foundations for new post-teleological readings.

The introduction of the thesis is concerned with masterplots in general, and Dante's teleological masterplot specifically. A threefold aim is proposed. Firstly, I carefully document the teleological assumptions that drive modern interpretations of Dante through a close reading of the most common keywords in Dante Studies. Secondly, I consider a number of theoretical frameworks for understanding narrative, enlisting the help of such literary theorists as Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks and H. Porter Abbott in order to highlight the ways in which Dante imitates and harnesses within his fiction the meaning-making power of endpoints. Lastly, I tailor these models to the specific character of Dante's masterplot by analysing passages from his *Vita Nova, Convivio* and *Commedia*.

Through this attentive analysis, I shed light on both the narrative advantages of Dante's textual strategy—whose aim is to control the interpretation of his own text and enhance its credibility—, and on the (highly problematic) issues that accompany teleological narratives, not least Dante's own.

The body of the thesis then proposes, over the course of three chapters, three alternative narrative models that complicate and resist the hegemony of the masterplot: these are enacted, respectively by (i) the text's paradoxes, (ii) the storylines that deviate from or run parallel to the main narrative, and (iii) its problematic representations of the future. The first chapter 'Paradox in *Paradiso*' focuses on the alternative narratives created by the text's many paradoxes. Critiquing readings that seek to establish a hierarchy between the two contradictory horns of paradox, I explore various rhetorical and narrative forms with which Dante neutralises the hierarchy of his teleological temporality, thus making it possible on the one hand, to represent the complex theological and metaphysical ideas of *Paradiso*, on the other to expose the reader's wish for reductive interpretations. The chapter locates Dante's distinctive practice in its cultural context through an exploration of the treatment of paradox in Medieval Scholastic theology and mystical writings. In broad terms, it is possible to find among Scholastic thinkers the tendency to conflate paradox with the appearance of paradox, treating it as a problem of form that can be solved when translated into non-paradoxical discursive reasoning. In contrast, mystical writers tended to treat the paradoxical character of the form as pointing to something inherent in its content, and therefore unsolvable. These antithetical attitudes to paradox, reflected in the *Commedia*, carry different assumptions about the structure of the universe and its intelligibility, raising important issues over the relationship between form and content that are relevant to literary texts as to scientific writings, then as much as now.

The second chapter 'Alternative endings and parallel lives' discusses the detours from and parallels to the *Commedia*'s main storyline. These take the shape of hypothetical,

'disnarrated' narratives—events that could have happened, but did not—and parallel episodes, where two characters in a similar situation take different decisions with often antithetical outcomes. The chapter draws on a range of comparative readings, from novels by Marcel Proust and the contemporary writer Ben Lerner, to poems by Virgil, Robert Frost and T. S. Eliot, in order to identify what is distinctive about Dante's use of imaginative alternatives, and to reflect on why such alternatives, considered literary clichés by Proust, are often overlooked by Dante scholars. This narrative strategy has three main functions in the *Commedia*. Firstly, representing alternative scenarios balances the impression of determinism, inevitable in retrospective storytelling, with the existential perspective of the Christian endowed with free will and faced with choices of which, unlike the writer and readers of the *Commedia*, they do not yet know the consequences and significance. Secondly, alternative scenarios give expression to the personal affections that are trampled underfoot by the grand march of history and the poem's goal-oriented plot, offering Dante and the characters of the *Commedia* a second chance to dwell in this affective space before the poem presses on. Lastly, alternatives grant the poet creative freedom from the deterministic demands of historical truth and moral normativity, allowing him to stray from them imaginatively without straying from them *de facto*. The chapter ends by comparing detours and parallel episodes with the many 'secrets' revealed to Dante in the *Commedia*, the fiction of which offers its author a similar degree of narrative freedom.

The third chapter 'The Future in/out of the *Commedia*' gives a close reading of key passages in the poem that host future tenses or are otherwise oriented towards the future. Questioning the established paradigm of a clear division of labour between Dante the narrator and Dante the pilgrim—whose clear-cut roles are defined as, respectively, to live forward and to understand in retrospect—, I show how the future tenses in the poem unseat the narrator from his safe position as judge of the past, and throw him in the arena

among those living forward without knowing in advance the end to which they are driven. Significantly, in the poem, the narrator appears at his most vulnerable to time and circumstance when he is most closely associated with the act of writing. Having had considerable experience of the difficulty of writing and having left at least two of his literary projects unfinished, the author of the *Commedia* complicates his relationship to the future in the text: alongside Dante's stoic tetragonal prophetic persona, a new Dante begins to emerge whose relationship to the future is no longer one of certainty and authority but one of anxiety. Nightmarish representations of the future in the *Inferno* show it in all its unsettling connotations. Later in the poem, this anxiety takes a more nuanced shape. The optimistic trajectory of a journey of the body whereby the pilgrim's experience of the afterlife strengthens his senses and gives him increased vision and joy, is increasingly contrasted with the journey of the narrator's ageing body on earth. The future is presented in the poem in all its polyvalence, then: from a source of hope and growth, to a threat to every human endeavour.

The picture of Dante's *Commedia* that emerges from this exploration of alternative narratives is that of a poem animated by paradoxes and not reducible to teleological and normative readings. Although Dante's masterplot may portray the author as a controlling mastermind, the alternative narratives counter and soften that picture, by showing how the poem hosts within itself and embraces contradiction, centrifugal narratives, alternative endings, and its own vulnerability as a text—as well as the vulnerability of its author. The thesis concludes with a proposal that, alongside the traditional notions of Dante's characteristic plurality of linguistic registers and styles, Dante's narrative pluralism could and should come to play a key role in contemporary and future readings of the *Commedia*. By focusing on non-linear modes of storytelling, I highlight the manifold poetic, theological and ethical tensions which, due to the masterplot's influence, are often overlooked. My work shows Dante engaging with issues that are at the forefront of today's

debates: the uncertain boundaries between truth and fiction, the clashes between conflicting narratives, the thin red line separating authority and authoritarianism, and the fraught relationship between rhetoric and emotion.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Dante's Masterplot 17

1. Keywords of the masterplot 17

2. Masterplots and the masterplot 27

3. The cases of *Vita Nova* and *Commedia* 35

4. Exemplariness, credibility, reproducibility 46

5. Reading hermeneutic writing 52

6. '[Il] ben' and 'l'altre cose' 57

Chapter 1: Paradox in *Paradiso* 63

1. Paradox in the Middle Ages: Scholastic theology and mystical writings 64

2. Oxymoron as 'compact verbal paradox' 74

3. Reading long-range paradox in the *Commedia* 84

4. Coexistence of narrative models of teleology and paradox 89

4.1. Teleological plot and paradoxical content 89

4.2. The 'time' of antanaclasis 93

4.3. The ineffability topos 97

5. The role of the reader 104

Chapter 2: Alternative Endings and Parallel Lives 109

1. The affective space: *Paradiso* VIII 115

2. The 'disnarrated' and free will in the *Commedia*: a comparison with two twentieth-century poems and the *Convivio* 122

3. 'La tecnica dell'episodio parallelo': parallel lives as narrative correlative of alternative lives 129

4. Interpreting alternative endings and parallel lives: *Paradiso* XIII 135

5. The secret as narrative freedom 141

Chapter 3: The Future in/out of the *Commedia* 145

1. *Poeta* writing into the future 149

2. The proems of the poem 153

3. Unfinished writing 166

4. Vulnerable narrator, vulnerable text 171

5. Future's messes in the *Inferno* 180

6. The ageing author 191

7. Between vulnerability and performance: *Paradiso* XXV 196

Epilogue: Dante's Narrative Pluralism 201

Introduction

Dante's Masterplot

This narrative was so cemented in her mind that any attempt I made to stray from it she simply couldn't see: she was attached to a shadow-me and followed this instead.

Zadie Smith, *Swing Time*[1]

1. Keywords of the masterplot

There are a handful of words that most Dante scholars use and all encounter while studying the poet. These include (in English): *conversion*, *palinode*, *synthesis*, *reconciling, resolving*, *abandoning*, *purifying*, *surpassing*, *sublimating*, *overcoming*—the list goes on. Each comes with its own history, nuances and intentions, but together they suggest a general narrative arc that the seasoned Dantist will recognise, and the first-time reader can probably imagine. This narrative arc is what I call *Dante's masterplot*: the trajectory of progress through which the poet, at various stages in his path, understands in retrospect the most significant events of his autobiography, writing career, and the pilgrim's progress in the *Commedia*. This model, embedded in Dante's texts, promotes the hermeneutic practice of reading them teleologically, by subordinating earlier works or earlier parts of the poem to the revisionist gaze of its endpoint, towards which everything is said to have always aimed. The keywords have helped scholars delineate this teleological pattern in a variety of ways. Scholars will

[1] Zadie Smith, *Swing Time* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), p. 229.

argue for different degrees of continuity and discontinuity between old and new experiences, they will propose different periodisations and establish different turning- and end-points in Dante's path, they will chart its course by tracking a wide array of themes and interests, and will attribute varying significance and moral value to the overall trajectory of his path. Some of the keywords used to articulate these divergences have generated articles and entire monographs, others keep a low profile in the language employed by scholars and attract less critical attention. Among the most popular keywords, the noun *conversion* indicates a radical break with past existential or religious stances;[2] whereas *palinode* describes a *recantation* of previous works or poetics, which might be explicit or implicit.[3] *Synthesis* often appears as the third stage of a dialectic process between disparate elements (as in the case of Dante's *reconciliation* of pagan culture and Christian beliefs), implying the *resolution* of its conflicting aspects which are *sublimated* into a higher, and often less troubling,

[2] Two seminal works on the theme of conversion are Charles S. Singleton's *Dante studies: vol. 2. Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), and the collection of essays by John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). More recently, Christine O'Connell Baur, *Dante's Hermeneutics of Salvation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), esp. pp. 98-131; Monica Bisi, *Poetica della metamorfosi e poetica della conversione: Scelte formali e modelli del divenire nella letteratura* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012); Heather Webb, 'Deceit, Desire, and Conversion in Girard and Dante', *Religion & Literature*, 43.3 (2011), 200-208; Pierluigi Lia, *Poetica dell'amore e conversione: Considerazioni teologiche sulla lingua della 'Commedia' di Dante* (Florence: Olschki, 2015). For a critical review of the term see also Jennifer Petrie, 'Conversion', in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 222-224, and Jennifer Rushworth, 'Conversion, Palinode, Traces', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). For conversion (and its alternatives) in the Medieval lyric context, see David Bowe, '"E io a lui": Dialogic Models of Conversion and Self-Representation in Medieval Italian Poetry' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2014).

[3] The most comprehensive reflection on the palinode is in Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 274-300, based on his previous 'Palinode and History in the Oeuvre of Dante,' in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. by Theodore J. Cachey Jr (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); see also Rachel Jacoff, 'The Post-Palinodic Smile', *Dante Studies*, 98 (1980), 111-122; Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the 'Comedy'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Roberto Antonelli, 'Bifrontismo, pentimento e forma-canzoniere', in *La palinodia: Atti del XIX Convegno interuniversitario, Bressanone, 1991*, ed. by Gianfelice Peron and Gianfranco Folena (Padua: Esedra, 1998), pp. 35-49; and, again, Rushworth, 'Conversion, Palinode, Traces'.

formulation;[4] while describing Dante's work as *syncretic* or *encyclopaedic* (e.g., in the context of Dante's intertextual relations with medieval culture) may allow for the edges of its disparate elements to remain a little rougher.[5] All keywords come with their specific value-judgements, which are implicit in their use and often fly under the radar. Writing that earthly attachments and passions are *purified* and *purgated*, for instance, is not the same as saying that they are *abandoned*: the former reflects the assumption that the product of the purification process is preferable to its original unrefined form, whereas the latter arguably allows more neutral uses, even though it is by no means used only neutrally. If previous beliefs or poetics are *surpassed*, this implies the obsolescence of the past and an advantage to be had in the new position, much like *overcoming* agonistically evokes the idea of an obstacle, a struggle, and a victory over previous stances, whereas *transcendence* suggests instead a more ascetic detachment.

Naturally, these wordings have served, and continue to serve, a vast range of arguments, relating Dante's work to a dazzling array of historical insights, scientific ideas, theological conceptions, artistic productions, literary influences, theoretical frameworks,

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[4] See, for instance, Olivia Holmes writing that 'Dante is not a binary thinker, in any case, but a Trinitarian one, and when he proposes a thesis and an antithesis he generally looks for a synthesis' (*Dante's Two Beloveds: Ethics and Erotics in the 'Divine Comedy'* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 3; Guy Raffa briefly reviews dialectical understandings of Dante (including De Sanctis, Croce, and even Auerbach) in his *Divine Dialectic: Dante's Incarnational Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 8-9, before proposing his own. For examples of the term *synthesis* in relation to Dante's intertextuality, see Michelangelo Picone's 'Dante and the Classics', in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp. 51-73; and Reto R. Bezzola, 'L'opera di Dante: Sintesi poetica dell'antichità e del Medioevo cristiano', in *Studi danteschi*, ed. by Martina Albertini and Johannes Bartuschat (Locarno: Pro Grigioni Italiano, Armando Dadò, 2015), pp. 133-151. Gianfranco Contini famously defined the *Commedia* as a 'sintesi ed enciclopedia degli stili' in his influential 'Dante come personaggio-poeta', repr. in *Un'idea di Dante: Studi danteschi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), pp. 33-62 (p. 57).

[5] Contini's notion of the 'enciclopedia degli stili' is developed by the contributors to *L'enciclopedismo medievale: Atti del Convegno, San Gimignano, 8-10 ottobre 1992*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 1994). Zygmunt Barański has written extensively on the *Commedia* as a '*summa* di sincretismo polisemico' (most recently in 'Dante *poeta* e *lector*: "poesia" e "riflessione tecnica" (con divagazioni sulla *Vita nova*)', *Critica del testo*, 14.1 (2011), 81-110 (p. 89)); see also Simon A. Gilson, 'Sincretismo e scolastica in Dante', in *Studi e Problemi di Critica Testuale*, 90.1 (2015), 317-339.

and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, at their baseline the keywords used to phrase these different approaches have in common four assumptions about Dante's life, writing career, and/or his path in the *Commedia*. Firstly, they portray the relationship between past and present, as expressed in the poet's life and works, in linear terms: the past flows into the present, through momentous upheavals or more fluidly, but nevertheless in one continuous and mostly one-way stream. Secondly, even when authorial decisions and revisions are taken into account, the keywords suggest that the author always seeks ultimate coherence within his writings, not least between his past and his present; in this view, contradictions are typically revealed to be only the appearance of contradiction, and what is paradoxical tends to be resolved in the name of consistency. Thirdly, in cases where such contradictions and aporias arise, specifically, in the relationship between Dante's past and his new experiences, these wordings tend to solve them through a strategy evidently manifested in Dante's masterplot, the poet's pattern of retrospection and self-understanding. Authorised by this dominant narrative, such keywords teleologically subjugate previous experiences to the newest point of view. In this regard, they work in a generally predictable direction: *ubi maior*, new experiences are given the last word over previous ones, and coherence is restored. One final characteristic of these keywords is that the subordination of the past that they operate is typically conceived in positive and productive terms, with an emphasis on what Dante and/or his readers have arguably gained from this sacrifice: moral improvement, greater understanding, experience, meaning, truth, peace, purity, beatitude, consolation, consistency—different critics will claim different benefits depending on their focus and the target of their argument. Here, too, we find a common denominator: in order to produce this added value, an earlier experience must be emptied out of its intrinsic meaning and purpose, and replaced with the purpose and meaning of a new experience.

These basic assumptions are variously reflected in the teleological language that pervades critical discourse on Dante. Thus, when it comes to the complex question of erotic love in *Paradiso*, a popular view is that 'true love must ultimately *surpass* the object of its desire. *To achieve the ultimate purpose of the journey*, the pilgrim must learn to direct all his love toward God, thus *leaving behind* not only Virgil but even Beatrice. *The aim* of true love is *to reach beyond* human love'.[6] Or, with respect to Dante's fraught relationship with his lyric past: '[his] poetic career was a continual *askesis* in preparation for his last work. In such a *linear evolution*, a glance backward to a previous poetic achievement is more likely to be a sign of *transcendence* rather than of return'.[7] Or, apropos the problem of subjectivity and earthly attachments: 'Dante's *Comedy* is built on the principle that [...] the individual subject of experience' reaches 'the point through which Bonaventure said one is "totally *transferred* and *transformed* into God"' and thus 'begins to *dissolve* its exclusive self-identification with a particular finite identity and its attachments.'[8] Similar examples are countless. Their lines of

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[6] Lino Pertile, 'Does the *Stilnovo* Go to Heaven', in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey (New York: Fordham, 2003), pp. 104-114 (p. 110), italics mine. The phrase 'true love' ('vero amore' in the Italian version of the article), also appears in the title of Donato Pirovano's discussion of Dante's *caritas*, *Dante e il vero amore: Tre letture dantesche* (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra, 2009), which shares Pertile's outlook on Dante's progressive detachment from earthly love. Pertile's article was placed by the editors of the collection in dialogue with that of Regina F. Psaki, 'Love for Beatrice: Transcending Contradiction in the *Paradiso*', pp. 115-130. On the *querelle* and Beatrice's historicity and corporeality, see Elena Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), esp. p. 14 and n. 25 therein; Tristan Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption: Eros, Salvation, Vernacular Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 80-90; and Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 126-28.

[7] John Freccero, 'Casella's Song: *Purgatorio* II, 112', in *Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 186-194 (p. 186), italics mine, except for *askesis*. For different critiques of this view, see Gianfranco Contini, 'Introduzione alle *Rime* di Dante', repr. in *Un'idea di Dante*, pp. 3-20; Barolini, *Dante's Poets*; and Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption*.

[8] Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's 'Comedy'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 169 and 185, italics mine. Bonaventure's phrase 'totally transferred and transformed into God', appropriated by Moevs, is taken from a passage in Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), VII, 4, which stresses the role of affect in the soul's journey to God: 'In hoc autem transitu, si sit perfectus, oportet quod relinquantur omnes intellectuales operationes, et apex affectus totus transferatur et transformetur in Deum'. For a critique of this specific position, see Manuele Gragnolati, *Amor che move: Linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e*

argument, as expressed through teleological vocabulary, will be familiar to most Dantists, and are, more or less directly, inspired and sustained by metaphorical discourses endogenous to the *Commedia*—including the confessional narrative, spiritual pilgrimage, seafaring voyage, penitential progress, mystical *excessus*, *itinerarium mentis in Deum*, and the genre of *comedy*.

It might come as a surprise, then, that the language in which these arguments are couched is not as native to the text as one might evince judging solely by the scholarship. If one investigates the language of the critics just quoted, *superare*, used by Lino Pertile, and its synonym *sorpassare* never appear in the poem; similarly absent are *evoluzione* (and its cognates), used by John Freccero, and *trasferire*, used by Christian Moevs. Moreover, *trasformare*, in Dante's hands, has quite a different tone than in Moevs's, considering that it is reserved for the monstrous metamorphosis of the pageant of *Purgatorio* into the beast of the apocalypse, traditionally identified with the Anti-Christ (*Purg.* XXXII, 142). *Trascendere* occurs once in the etymological sense of (pseudo-)physically 'ascending through' the heavens ('ammiro / com'io *trascenda* questi corpi levi', *Par.* I, 99), and is otherwise reserved for God's transcendence, not to a human path toward it. [9] The one time the verb *dissolvere* does occur in the *Commedia* it describes the physical effects of death on the mortal body:

Con quella fascia

Morante (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013), esp. pp. 155-161. For the continuing presence of the embodied individual in *Paradiso*, see also Manuele Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); Vittorio Montemaggi, 'In Unknowability as Love: The Theology of Dante's *Commedia*', in *Dante's 'Commedia': Theology as Poetry*, ed. by Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), pp. 60-94; Webb, *Dante's Persons*, esp. pp. 164-205, as well as Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption*.

[9] In 'colui lo cui sver tutto trascende' (*Inf.* VII, 73), 'letizia che trascende ogni dolzore' (*Par.* XXX, 42); see 'trascendere' in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*. A similar pattern is found in *soblimare*: physically expressed by Dante in his posture (*Par.* XXVI, 87) and referring to the gospels as 'la verità che tanto ci soblima' (*Par.* XXII, 42); see *Enciclopedia Dantesca* there too.

che la morte *dissolve* men vo suso,

e venni qui per l'infernale ambascia.

(*Purg.* XVI, 37-39)

The verb's use, in this case, is rhetorical: firstly, it helps sharpen the contrast with the pilgrim's embodied 'unsolved' condition of living among the dead; and secondly, this *dissolution* is only temporary, lasting until the resurrection of the body, the gratuitous gift that will reverse it.[10] In this eschatological context, announced repeatedly throughout the poem, Dante's verb *dissolvere* connotes a process which is not as teleological as Moevs's 'irreversible dissolution of the ego'.[11] The same can be said about many teleological keywords that do not feature in the three quotations above. *Sviluppare*, *sintetizzare*, *palinodiare* and the related nouns are never used by Dante, and the same applies to *purificare*.[12] Its synonym *purgare*, on the other hand, occurs nine times, as a technical term specific to, unsurprisingly, the purging souls of the second cantica.[13] The keywords Dante does use are employed with nuance and often unpredictably. It is true, for instance, that he describes his journey in terms of what the pilgrim (and the narrator) *leaves behind*. Dante's *lasciare* has as its objects, variously, 'lo passo / che non *lasciò* già mai persona viva' (*Inf.* I, 27); '[l]o fele' of hell's torments (*Inf.* XVI, 61); 'Lucifero' (*Inf.* XXXIV, 89); the 'mar sì crudele' of the first cantica (*Purg.* I, 3); but also, more tragically, 'ogni cosa diletta più caramente' (*Par.* XVII, 56). *Pace* Lino Pertile's view quoted above, Dante never leaves Virgil, but is rather more interestingly left by him in *Purgatorio* XXX, 49 ('Ma Virgilio n'*avea lasciati* scemi / di sé'), an

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[10] In Statius's brief history of the human body from conception to the afterlife, told in *Purgatorio* XXV, the verb *solversi* is used about the soul releasing itself from the body upon death: 'Quando Lachesìs non ha più del lino, / *solvesi* da la carne' (*Purg.* XXV, 79-81).

[11] Moevs, *Metaphysics of Dante's 'Commedia'*, p. 11.

[12] Dante is of course '*puro* e disposto a salire alle stelle' at the end of *Purgatorio* (XXXIII, 145).

[13] As such it is absent from *Inferno* and appears once in *Paradiso* XXVIII, where it is paired with *risolvere* and employed figuratively, in a comparison between a sky cleared by the wind ('per che *si purga* e *risolve* la roffia / che pria turbava', 82-83) and Dante's mind cleared of doubts.

event which had been announced by the pagan poet as early as *Inferno* I, 123 ('con lei ti *lascerò* nel mio partire'). It is perhaps with this announcement in mind, that Dante expresses his fear of being *abandoned* by his guide on two occasions (*Inf.* VIII, 109 and *Purg.* III, 20). These two instances of *abbandonare* are emblematic of its use more generally: in the *Commedia* the verb has stronger emotional connotations than *lasciare* and the stories it tells are invariably less uplifting. Many occurrences, scattered throughout the poem, trace a rather more negative trajectory from a desirable situation to its wilful or accidental loss, as when Dante abandoned 'la verace via' (*Inf.* I, 12) and Fetonte '*abbandonò* li freni' of his father's chariot (*Inf.* XVII, 107), or in the case of emperor Albert I of Austria's abandoning Italy in a state of anarchy (*Purg.* VI, 97) and Ganymede abandoning his comrades, after he was kidnapped by Zeus (*Purg.* IX, 23). There are other instances where teleological readings of *abbandonare* can and will be proposed. For instance, when Dante compares his hesitancy to ask a question to that of a storkling who 'non s'attenta / d'*abbandonar* lo nido' (*Purg.* XXV, 11-12), he is promptly encouraged by Virgil to overcome his shyness and ask on, in the spirit of his journey of increased knowledge. Further, when the pagan poet explains the structure of purgatory, the last three circles of avarice, gluttony and lust come under the normative heading of 'L'amor che [...] troppo *s'abbandona*' to earthly attachments (*Purg.* XVII, 136), although it is worth noting that the adverb 'troppo' tempers and contextualises the negativity of 's'abbandona', suggesting that more moderate abandonment would not be censured as severely (these sins of incontinence can, after all, be expiated). As all commentators point out, Virgil's definition of incontinence in *Purgatorio* harkens back to Francesca's famous speech in *Inferno* V, where the lady draws her listeners' attention to the continuing presence of, depending on interpretations, either her love or her lover, 'che, come vedi, ancor *non m'abbandona*' (*Inferno* V, 105).[14] Traditional readings of the passage

[14] Lombardi, *Wings of the Doves*, pp. 139-40. On the issue of the speech's capacity to 'produce multiple interpretations' (p. 139), see esp. pp. 132-174.

reproach the lady for fixating on the past, but the text makes multiple interpretations possible when it comes to the specific quality of this fixation. Do Francesca's words portray the continuing presence of her love/lover as positive or negative, welcome or imposed? Is her unabandoned state 'a source of […] consolation or desolation'?[15] The poem tells us that she is not abandoned, not what not being abandoned is like. And yet elsewhere, the poem ascribes some merit to *not* letting go: *abbandonarsi* can only make exile hit Dante harder ('colpo [...] / tal ch'è più grave a chi più *s'abbandona*', *Par.* XVII, 108) and perhaps expose him to accusations of pride for his decision to undertake the otherworldly journey ('se del venire io *m'abbandono*, / temo che la venuta non sia folle', *Inf.* II, 34).[16] The verbs *lasciare* and *abbandonare* thus paint a morally and affectively rich picture of what moving forward entails: progress, of course, but also uncertainty, regret, pain, danger, and even hubris. Analogously, the important keyword *convertire* and its cognates too are capable of cutting both ways in their meaning and trajectory: they can describe the 'anime *converse*' of purgatory (*Purg.* XIX, 116) just as well as deride the '*conversi*' of Malebolge (*Inf.* XXIX, 41).[17] Indeed, *conversion* is perfectly capable of a negative trajectory: it leads from joy to tears, as 'la letizia *si convertia* in amarissimo pianto' in the *Vita Nova* (III, 7), and from good will, through greed, to sin, as 'la pioggia continüa' metaphorically '*converte* / in bozzacchioni le sosine vere' (*Par.* XXVII, 125-26). In the three appearances it makes as a noun, one per cantica, *conversion* is associated with an element of untimeliness: pope Adrian's conversion comes too late ('La mia *conversion*, omè!, fu tarda', *Purg.* XIX, 106), and Francis's conversion of the people in the holy land comes too early ('per trovare a *conversione* acerba / troppo la gente', *Par.* XI, 103), while Constantine's own conversion is the accidental cause of much

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[15] Lombardi, *Wings of the Doves*, p. 140.

[16] The remaining instances of *abbandonare* are in *Par.* V, 117 (the pilgrim not having abandoned the mortal condition yet, i.e., being still alive) and XVIII, 9 (the narrator giving up on his attempt to express Beatrice).

[17] *Converso* is a technical term for a lay friar, etymologically derived from *convertire*. See 'convertire' in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*.

evil and greed, through his misjudged donation of land to the pope (*Inf.* XIX, 116). The poetics of conversion, therefore, are far from univocal in the *Commedia*, but spoilage, grief, and untimeliness remain available as possibilities in its poetic universe as they are in life. For some reason, however, these possibilities are not as popular with Dante scholars. What makes teleological connotations so dominant in the critical discourse on Dante? And what picture of the *Commedia* would arise if we were to follow its alternatives instead?

This thesis aims to answer these questions. Its basic purpose is twofold. Firstly, to interrogate the critical expectations and practices that accompany teleological readings of Dante with a view to identifying their basis within the poet's writings. Secondly, to search for possible alternative paths undertaken in the poetic practice of the *Commedia*, and explore their interpretative implications. The central claim proposed here is that, embedded within the text and conditioning these readings, lies Dante's masterplot: the 'costante della personalità dantesca' which, as Gianfranco Contini put it, consists in 'degradare un'esperienza precedente, toglierle la sua finalità intrinseca, usufruirla come elemento dell'esperienza nuova'.[18] The teleological masterplot is so pervasive in the author's oeuvre, and its narrative of past mistakes and new beginnings has proved so suggestive, engaging, and inspiring to generations of readers that it often takes on a life of its own in their imagination. Influenced, with varying degrees of awareness, by the masterplot, scholars of Dante continue to reproduce teleological dynamics in their readings of the poem, leaving evidence of its workings in the vocabulary, arguments, and structures of their writings. It is for instance common practice in articles and monographs to explore Dante's oeuvre through a variety of approaches and methodologies, yet largely in the order in which he himself has articulated them. By reproducing the master narrative of linear development first suggested to them by the author, his readers thus become more Dantist than Dante.

[18] Gianfranco Contini, 'Introduzione alle *Rime* di Dante', pp. 4-5. Contini's magisterial essay offers one of the earliest and most perceptive explorations into what is called here *Dante's masterplot*.

Indeed, this kind of reproducibility is a defining trait of any masterplot. Let us then define what makes a masterplot.

2. Masterplots and the masterplot

The term *masterplot*, as used throughout this thesis, is defined as a basic narrative pattern that is prevalent within a text and, in various ways, directs its interpretation. The prefix *master-* is employed in its richness, but with three main connotations: firstly, *master* as ‘main’, indicating (as objectively as possible) the higher frequency of this pattern relative to other patterns within the text; secondly (less objectively), *master* as ‘dominant’, signalling the problematic quality of its domineering relation to other patterns and other interpretations of the text; and lastly, *master* as ‘original’ or ‘matrix’ (as in ‘master recording’), suggesting, the masterplot’s capacity to be reproduced over and over, and not exclusively by its author.

The word *masterplot* is lifted squarely from Peter Brooks’s work of narrative theory *Reading for the Plot: Desire and Intention in Narrative*.[19] Brooks’s monograph is interested in the questions that this thesis explores and that continue to attract theorists of narrative ever since Aristotle: beginnings, middles and ends, delays and digressions, the relation between time and narrative, between writing and meaning, between reading and pleasure. In chapter 4 of his book, ‘Freud’s masterplot: A Model for Narrative’, Brooks rearranges these elements to create an original model for narrative based on Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud’s paper, published in 1920 and traditionally regarded as a watershed in his conception of the human psyche, is not specifically concerned with narrative, but Brooks derives from it a dynamic narrative model for ‘the movement of the plot and its motor force in human desire, its peculiar relation to beginnings and ends, its apparent claim

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[19] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); chapter 4 is at pp. 90-112.

to rescue meaning from temporal flux'.[20] Brooks calls this particular model, 'Freud's own masterplot'.[21]

The focus of Brooks's analysis oscillates from describing the dynamics internal to texts to the experience of reading them, an ambiguity that he believes is never fully resolvable when thinking about narrative—something which bears on this thesis's understanding of Dante's masterplot.[22] Thus, on the one hand, Brooks treats the text as a living organism pulled and pushed by contrasting forces that are inherent in it; on the other, he shifts seamlessly to the experience of reading, with the pleasure and terror of suspense, recognitions, closure, and so on. In the model of Freud's masterplot, narrative is shaped by the tension between two basic and contrasting principles: desire for more narration (mapped onto Freud's 'pleasure principle') and wish for closure (mapped on Freud's 'death drive'). If left unchecked, the 'pleasure principle' of narration would stimulate endless storytelling without aim or reason; while the 'death wish' for closure, if left similarly unchecked, would drive the story to a premature end, interrupting the narrative before it has had a chance to achieve closure.[23] The distinctive path of narrative is shaped by the interplay between these conflicting forces and their respective risks. Thus, readers find supreme pleasure in following the twists and turns of plots that are delayed by obstacles and thrown off course by detours, but eventually reach the desired end.[24]

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[20] Ibid., p. 90.
[21] Ibid., p. 96.
[22] 'Ricoeur's emphasis on the constructive role of plot, its active, shaping function, offers a useful corrective to the structural narratologists' neglect of the dynamics of narrative and points us toward the reader's vital role in the understanding of the plot' (Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 14).
[23] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, pp. 108-109.
[24] In contrast with Peter Brooks, another reader of Freud, Leo Bersani, offers a critique of 'teleologically narrativized' readings of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*The Freudian Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 66). Bersani is interested rather in showing the ways in which Freud's line of argument in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* fails to proceed linearly as it incessantly returns to the pleasure principle it purports to move beyond (see also pp. 54-67).

Arguably, Freud's masterplot provides a useful model for thinking of Dante's *Commedia* as it stands. Olivia Holmes has already noted their affinities. 'The story of Dante-the-pilgrim's journey to blessedness', with its deviation from the straight path and descent before ascent, 'is always also a meta-textual story': 'the drive of narrative is ultimately the desire for the end and quiescence, but […] always on the verge of premature death or short-circuit'.[25] The pilgrim's meandering yet teleological path in the *Commedia*—Holmes thinks of it specifically in terms of Dante's tentative and progressive detachment from a 'mistaken erotic choice'[26]—thus emblematises the kind of narrative described as Freud's masterplot, where the possibility of errancy 'can be represented by "all manner of threats to the protagonist or to […] completion: it most commonly takes the form of temptation to the mistaken erotic object choice"'.[27] This model, however, is not specific to the dialectics between *eros* and *caritas* in Dante, but can be said to apply to desire, and textuality, more generally. Take the following passage from *Convivio*, for instance, which depicts 'the wanderings of the soul's desire toward God as the drive that pushes the pilgrim forward on the road' in terms that seem to anticipate the *Commedia* and its journey:[28]

> E sì come peregrino che va per una via per la quale mai non fue, che ogni casa che da lungi vede crede che sia l'albergo, e non trovando ciò essere, dirizza la credenza a l'altra, e così di casa in casa, tanto che a l'albergo viene; così l'anima nostra, incontanente che nel nuovo e mai non fatto cammino di questa vita entra, dirizza li occhi al termine del suo sommo bene, e però, qualunque cosa vede che paia in sé avere alcuno bene, crede che sia esso.
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> (*Convivio* IV, xii, 15)

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25 Holmes, *Dante's Two Beloveds*, p. 31.

26 Ibid., p. 32.

27 Ibid., p. 31, quoting Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 109

28 Elena Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 161.

In this simile, the pilgrim, with a movement that is both forward-driven and errant, wanders forward 'di casa in casa', mistaking each stage for the 'albergo' which constitutes his final goal; similarly, the soul mistakes different earthly attachments for the supreme good. Rather than by the tension between the two conflicting drives of Freud's masterplot ('pleasure principle' and 'death drive'), the narrative is here shaped by an internal conflict within a single drive, when the soul 'is distracted by the very desire that also serves as necessary catalyst and propeller for its forward motion'.[29] As Teodolinda Barolini notes, 'This view of life as a struggle along the pathway of desire […] profoundly informs the *Commedia*'s narrativity'.[30] Dante's narrative is shaped by the view that the many stops and starts along the way are as many turning-points that can either lead to one's final destination or lead astray.

Barolini contends that this passage from *Convivio* constitutes 'virtually a blueprint for the *Commedia*'.[31] The second and third chapters of this thesis especially sympathise with her appreciation of the forward-oriented perspective of the pilgrims depicted in the *Convivio*, for whom the 'cammino di questa vita' appears 'nuovo e mai non fatto' (*Conv.* XII, xiv, 15), and who, like the purging souls of *Purgatorio*, 'are repeatedly shown to be neither *esperti* nor *dottrinati*, but rather strangers in a strange land'.[32] This is the perspective of the living, who do not yet know the end and meaning of their existence and thus do not share the vantage point of the dead and of those who, like Dante, write about them in the past tense. Although the forward perspective of a pilgrim is very important in Dante's poem (as

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[29] Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine 'Comedy': Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 104. Barolini is comparing here the passage from *Convivio* to the path of 'l'anima semplicetta che sa nulla' in *Purg.* XVI, 85-93.

[30] Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 104.

[31] Ibid., p. 100.

[32] Ibid., p. 101. The scholar's emphases allude to the soul in *Conv.* IV, xii, 16 ('la sua conoscenza prima è imperfetta, per non essere esperta né dottrinata') and to Virgil's words in *Purg.* II, 61-63 ('Voi credete / forse che siamo esperti d'esto loco; / ma noi siam peregrini come voi siete').

discussed in chapter 2), and relevant to both *personaggio* and *poeta* (chapter 3), it actually remains atypical in Dante's oeuvre, where it constitutes what is arguably a late discovery on its author's part. The passage anticipates an important aspect of the *Commedia*, but, for a blueprint, it lacks a most fundamental element. Let us trade our pilgrims for a good merchant, and propose another passage from *Convivio* that contains a most defining feature of Dante's masterplot: creative retrospection. Here Dante is talking about the journey of the noble soul:

> E fa come lo buono mercatante, che, quando viene presso al suo porto, essamina lo suo procaccio e dice: 'Se io non fosse per cotal cammino passato, questo tesoro non avre'io e non avrei di ch'io godesse ne la mia cittade, a la quale io m'appresso'; e però benedice la via che ha fatta.
>
> (*Convivio* XIV, xxviii, 12)

As one of the prototypes for the *Commedia*'s many wayfarers, the 'buono mercatante' of *Convivio* appears surrounded by the metaphors of journey by sea and by foot that pervade the imaginative universe of Dante's poem.[33] The merchant has reached the safety of the haven he was aiming for, can take stock of his profit, and assess his journey from this vantage point. The value of his travels, in his eyes, depends on their outcome. Like the narrator of the *Commedia*, the merchant can revaluate his path from a new perspective whose domain is the present tense. In the merchant's case, this revaluation is so radical that its effects are registered on the syntax of his speech: the past does not appear to him in the historic indicative of storytelling, but is transfigured into subjunctive and conditional counterfactuals ('Se io non fosse […] passato', 'non avre'io e non avrei'). These hypotheticals, however, do not offer positive alternatives to what his path could have been,

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[33] Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, pp. 112-131.

for better or for worse, but, rather emphatically, they foreclose them. From the merchant's present perspective, the suggestion that the past could have gone differently is voiced as a strong impossibility (in triple negatives 'Se io *non*', '*non* avre'io e *non* avrei'). His use of counterfactuals is more akin to the syllogisms of logic: their effect is to reinforce the chain of cause and effect that links his past to the position of safety from which he is judging it. That path, in the merchant's speech, led him to his present position as though by an irresistible narrative necessity. After the merchant finishes his speech, Dante rounds off his character's teleological storyline with the merchant's benediction of the journey. The author's stage directions seem straightforward here: *because of* the sentiment expressed in his speech ('però'), the merchant blesses his past. And yet despite this causal connective of ordinary narrative where pasts are the cause of presents, the merchant's speech has been all but ordinary. Imperceptibly, the past has been transformed into something different. The merchant has literally *bene-dicted* a different past, performatively voiced it into being good.[34]

Blessing the past, cursing the past, any operation of revaluation of the past that is predicated upon reinterpreting its historical significance from a new vantage point is the province of Dante's masterplot. The masterplot need not always be as performative as it is in the merchant's story and as Manuele Gragnolati has demonstrated it to be in the creation of a new author in the *Vita Nova*—nevertheless, it is important to be aware of its performative potential.[35] Dante's masterplot operates, at its most abstract, by splitting linear time into *old* and *new*, *before* and *after*, *then* and *now*, *past* and *present*, *beginning* and *end*, and

[34] A merchant's life, as represented in the two other occurrences of *Convivio*, is far from simple: 'li miseri mercatanti che per lo mondo vanno' laden with riches experience anxiety every day on their job (*Conv.* IV, xiii, 11). Moreover, one's assessment of one's life is compared to that of the 'falso mercatante' who uses different measures according to whether he is buying or selling, 'sì che 'l numero e la quantità e 'l peso del bene li pare più che se con giusta misura fosse saggiato, e quello del male meno' (*Conv.* I, ii, 9). Positive experiences, in this view, are easily overestimated.

[35] Manuele Gragnolati, 'Authorship and Performance in Dante's *Vita nova*', in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 123-40, and *Amor che move*, pp. 17-34.

giving the *new*, the *after*, the *then*, the *present*, and the *beginning* hermeneutic precedence over the *old*, the *before*, the *now*, the *past*, and the *end*. For Dante's masterplot, it makes little difference whether previous experiences are now considered negatively or positively; the point is that they are reinterpreted from a new vantage point. It also makes little difference from what angle the past is considered, whether biographical, literary, spiritual, etc.; so long as they can be placed in a linear narrative, previous stages are always available for revaluation. In its crudest form, Dante's masterplot consists in this *divide et impera* of narrative time for the purposes of controlling interpretation.

How does the masterplot work and why is it so persuasive? The teleological narrative model imitates and harnesses, through a variety of tactics, one fundamental principle of storytelling. Brooks calls it 'the necessary retrospectivity of narrative: that only the end can finally determine meaning'.[36] This principle can be seen at work in most narrative texts, from the microcosm of a sentence, where 'only when all the words, one after the other, are uttered in time is the sentence completed and meaningful';[37] to the macrocosm of a complete work 'as the sentences flow toward the poem's ending in order to give it meaning';[38] and Dantists have clearly recognised the importance of different levels of end-determinacy in the very structure of the *Commedia*.[39] Even outside of literature, 'the structuring power' of the end to 'retrospectively give […] order and significance' is an important part of our understanding of life itself, which, like all narrative, is most

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[36] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 22.

[37] Lombardi, *Syntax of Desire*, p. 4. Lombardi's book recognises the structural importance of this pattern when she compares it to Dante's dynamics of desire.

[38] Freccero, *Poetics of Conversion*, p. 216. Freccero's links the way in which 'Dante's poetic history derives its significance retrospectively from its ending' to 'the spiritual evolution of his protagonist'.

[39] See references to Elena Lombardi and John Freccero in the two notes above. Dante's conception of syntax and narrative is often related to Augustine's discussion of time in the *Confessions* IV, xi, 15-17, where 'the temporal universe is described in terms of a syntactically organized sentence' (Lombardi, *Syntax of Desire*, p. 53). See for instance, Charles S. Singleton, 'The Vistas in Retrospect', *MLN* 81.1 (1966), 55-80 (p. 62).

intelligible when complete.[40] This idea of end-determined meaning seeps in all areas of human experience, and, as such, is not Dante's invention—if anything, a personal epiphany. The idea is at least as old as the fabulous dialogue between Solon and King Croesus, when the Athenian sage rejected claims that his life could be described as 'happy' by stating that 'before he comes to his end it is well to hold back and not to call him yet happy but only lucky'.[41] One can only judge a life from its endpoint. As one French essayists wrote, the last day of a life is veritably 'the master day'.[42]

The narrative principle of end-determinacy becomes the greatest ally of Dante's masterplot. If it is true, as Frank Kermode writes in his suggestive *The Sense of an Ending*, that '[w]e cannot, of course, be denied an end; it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end';[43] it is equally true that nothing prevents writers from mimetically multiplying ends within the confines of their works. Having taken care to punctuate his storytelling into binary *befores* and *afters*, *olds* and *news*, *pasts* and *presents*, Dante harnesses the end's capacity to determine meaning, and grants it to his various fictional *afters*, *news*, and *presents*. Such turning points are thus fashioned into as many endings from which revaluation in retrospect becomes possible. It is no wonder, then, that fictional endpoints scan and structure Dante's oeuvre: from the *Vita Nova*'s rereading of his past poetic and existential self, to the *Convivio*'s practice and theory of self-exegesis, and the canon established in book II of the unfinished *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, which traces a literary history

[40] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 94

[41] The anecdote is told by Herodotus, *Historiae* I, 32 (in English as *The Histories*, trans. by G. C. Macaulay, rev. by Donald Lateiner (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004). Herodotus stresses this point by telling us that Croesus only understood Solon's words when he himself was in captivity, awaiting execution.

[42] The expression is Michel de Montaigne's in *Les Essais*, ed. by Jean Balsamo, Michel Magnien and Catherine Magnien-Simonin (Gallimard: Paris, 2007), I, xviii, p. 81: 'C'est le maistre jour, c'est le jour juge de tous les autres: c'est le jour, dict un ancient, qui doit juger de toutes mes années passées'.

[43] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 23.

of the lyric culminating in the author's moral canzoni;[44] experiences which, in turn, are funnelled into the new end-all of the *Commedia*. In the poem, endpoints explode. The *Commedia* can be read as a sustained fiction that an ultimate endpoint is possible; at the same time, however, the poem's own endpoints do not cease to multiply, as Dante reports back to us from the end of his and his characters' errors, the end of life, the end of history, the end of time, each with their own significance and meaning-making power. Fictional ends matter to Dante insofar as they imitate and channel the power of real ends. They are instrumental in the retrospective revaluation of what precedes them, which is at the heart of the masterplot.

3. The cases of *Vita Nova* and *Commedia*

The *Vita Nova* represents the first and clearest embodiment of Dante's masterplot, as indirectly evidenced by the fact that refraining from teleological language when describing its story is virtually impossible. Thematically, the *libello* has been described as 'il racconto memoriale e teleologico di come il protagonista è riuscito a superare i limiti della concezione cortese del desiderio e a trasformare il proprio amore per Beatrice in una nuova modalità';[45] Dante's book offers a 'retrospective summing up, as well as a palinodic reframing and reinterpretation, of his earlier career as vernacular love lyricist'.[46] The salient moments in this narrative—'the shift to the new "stilo" of praise; the traumatic changes surrounding Beatrice's death; the reversion to Beatrice *in morte* after flirtation with a *donna*

[44] Here and throughout, this thesis adopts the title *Vita nova* proposed by Guglielmo Gorni: see his 'Paragrafi e titolo della *Vita nova*', *Studi di filologia italiana*, 52 (1995), 203-22. It should be noted that teleological readings of the literary history traced in the *Convivio* and *De Vulgari* are based on books that are unfinished. For the implications of unfinishedness, see chapter 3.
[45] Gragnolati, *Amor che move*, p. 23.
[46] Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, p. 179.

gentile'—are as many 'turning points' in this 'Augustinian conversion story'.[47] Retrospective revaluation pervades the youthful work not only thematically but in its very form.[48] Through the *prosimetrum*, Dante collects previously scattered lyrics and poetic fragments linking them by means of a unifying narrative. Scholars have identified an eclectic number of models behind the *Vita Nova*'s interaction between poetry and prose—from the *vidas* and *razos* of vernacular poetry, to the Latin commentaries to biblical books or to classical poets and philosophers—, while still maintaining the consensus that Dante radically innovates these traditions 'by introducing a first-person commentator identical with, though temporally successive to, a first-person author'.[49] The identity *and* temporal succession, here, are key. The autobiographical (or autofictional) narrative of the *Vita Nova* proceeds mainly chronologically from the past tense of Dante's earliest memories to the present tense of the time of writing (and eventually, the future beyond).[50] This linear development shows its seams in the formal break between Dante's past poetry and his more mature perspective in prose. This is where the author first adopts a strategy that will feature prominently in the *Convivio*, in parts of the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, and which also underpins, more subtly, the dual *personaggio-poeta* of the *Commedia*, as he 'formally splits himself in two: there is one "Dante" who analyses, another "Dante" who is analyzed'.[51]

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[47] Ibid., p. 183.

[48] Ibid., p. 179.

[49] Ibid., p. 185. For a review of the models behind the *prosimetrum*, see pp. 179-185.

[50] Teodolinda Barolini has detected in the *Vita Nova* 'the presence of a double *contaminatio*, whereby the *libello* is the locus not only of a narrativized – chronologized – lyric, but also of a lyricized – dechronologized – narrative' ('"Cominciandomi dal principio infino a la fine" (*V.N.* XXIII, 15): Forging Anti-Narrative in the *Vita Nova*', in *La gloriosa donna de la mente: A Commentary on the 'Vita Nuova'*, ed. by Vincent Moleta (Florence: Olschki, 1993), pp. 119-140 (p. 123).

[51] Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, p. 176. The modern scholarly construction of Dante 'poeta-personaggio' is founded on Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies 1. 'Commedia': Elements of Structure* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1954) and Contini, 'Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*'. For a review of the issue, see Michelangelo Picone, 'Dante come autore/narratore della *Commedia*', *Nuova rivista di letteratura italiana*, 2.1 (1999), 9-26; Maria Grazia Riccobono, *Dante Poeta-Profeta, Pellegrino, Autore: Strutturazione Espressiva della Commedia e Visione Escatologica Dantesca* (Rome: Aracne, 2012), esp. pp. 11-39; Lino Pertile, '"Trasmutabile per tutte

Scholars such as Ascoli and Gragnolati have studied the ways in which this strategy, in the *Vita Nova*, allows Dante to co-opt and performatively create for himself the authority of a Medieval *auctoritas*, and the personalised and individualised identity of a proto-modern author, and have related this, more widely, to Dante's other works and the *Commedia*.[52] What is important for the purposes of the present thesis is how Dante's strategy operates. The poet displays an acute understanding of how certain formal features (e.g., in the case of the *Vita Nova*, the distinction between commented text and prose commentary) have a strong hermeneutic potential (e.g., the power of the commentary to interpret texts), which is capable of being imitated and harnessed in other ways in a text. Understanding this, Dante first reproduces the hermeneutic potential of the commentary-form, straightforwardly, in the form of the *libello* (through the *prosimetrum*); he then takes this one step further as he translates the distinction between poetic text and prose commentary into a temporal distinction between an *old* and a *new* self, through his innovation of the auto-commentary written by a single author at different stages of his life. The achievement of this operation is as great as its strategy is simple: the mature Dante claims for himself the right to *interpret*, a right that did not traditionally belong to him as a then living vernacular poet, but that he rather harnesses mimetically from the form of the commentary. The traditional authority of the commentary-form thus casts its light on the retrospective Dante, who, for the first time in his career, shines in its reflected glory with a newfound power to reinterpret the past.

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guise'": Dante in the *Comedy*', in *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), pp. 164-178.

[52] See Toby Levers, 'The Image of Authorship in the Final Chapter of the *Vita Nuova*', in *Italian Studies* 57 (2002), pp. 6–10; Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, pp. 175-201; Gragnolati, 'Authorship and Performance', pp. 123-40, and *Amor che move*, pp. 17-34. As Barolini puts it: 'The shrewdness of the *Vita Nuova* in its construction of a new authorial persona cannot be overstated' (*Dante's Lyric Poetry: Poems of Youth and of the 'Vita Nuova'*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini, trans. by Richard Lansing (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 61).

By the time he is writing the *Commedia*, Dante does not need the form of the commentary to be able to interpret previous experiences but has learned how to imitate its hermeneutic power fully within the confines of narrative poetry. The temporal distance between forward-living pilgrim and backward-understanding narrator is no longer underpinned by a formal distinction as clear-cut as the *prosimetrum*;[53] it shapes the poem's form in more subtle ways. John Freccero has written eloquently on the relationship of the *Commedia*'s content to its form, by showing how the pilgrim's forward motion and the narrator's self-reflection are embodied in the form of the terzina: 'the verse pattern and the theme' of the poem 'proceed by a forward motion that is at the same time recapitulatory', which is arguably the formal 'representation of narrative logic' in general, but 'particularly autobiography'—a view of narrative and autobiography that is also held, independently, by Peter Brooks.[54] Freccero's account relies on a division of labour between the past-tense narration of Dante's pilgrimage and the narrator's present-tense perspective on it—a distinction that is commonly regarded as a defining character of Dante's self-narrative in the *Commedia*—, but also recognises their continuity. Although this general distinction of tenses and roles is certainly of structural importance in the poem, in the third chapter I will show more in detail how pilgrim and narrator's roles are often deliberately conjugated in other tenses and cross-contaminated. Leaving aside specific tenses, for the moment, what remains important in the poem, in its skeletal form, is a relative distinction between a previous experience and a successive position with the power to interpret it. In the *Commedia*, the watershed between the two is marked by the crucial experience of Dante's

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53 See esp. Amilcare A. Iannucci, 'Autoesegesi dantesca: La tecnica dell'"episodio parallelo"', repr. in *Forma ed evento nella 'Divina Commedia'* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1984), pp. 83-114; Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, pp. 301-405.

54 John Freccero, 'The Significance of *Terza Rima*', repr. in *Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 258-271 (p. 263). Brooks relates narrative in general to autobiography in *Reading for the Plot*, pp. 4-33. Within Dante Studies, Elena Lombardi has recognised the structural importance of Freccero's 'recapitulation', and its meaning-making ability 'to integrate the beginning [...] into the end', for the 'syntax/desire' nexus in the *Commedia* (*The Syntax of Desire*, p. 173).

fictional pilgrimage through the afterlife, which allows the *personaggio-poeta* to make sense of his past existence and reorient it towards a future the key points of which are gradually revealed to him—these include his personal exile, the historical events that are prophesied to him, and the eschatological future he witnesses first-hand and is personally promised.[55] There is no need for a division of labour between poetry and prose—the one expressing the past, the other interpreting it in retrospect—but the authority to reinterpret the past is conferred on the poet by the very story he is writing: in the logic of the fiction, the *poeta* has already achieved this authority by having experienced as *pellegrino* the afterlife, its encounters, and visions during the fictional journey.[56] The teleological masterplot is thus justified not through a formal separation, but through one main thematic division of *before* and *after* which has the journey as its watershed. The existence of this master distinction, however, does not prevent Dante from creating other ad hoc distinctions along the way and moving the watershed accordingly; in fact, it promotes and validates this operation by providing a model for it—a reproducible master. Compared to the 'crude' *prosimetrum* of the *Vita Nova*, there are considerable advantages in not fixing the distinction in the form of

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[55] The notion of Dante as pilgrim, rooted in such passages of the *Commedia* as *Purg.* II, 61-63 ('Voi credete / forse che siamo esperti d'esto loco; / ma noi siam peregrin come voi siete') and part of a long Christian tradition that interpreted life on earth as *peregrinatio* or even exile (cf. Gerhardt B. Ladner, '*Homo viator*: Medieval Ideas on Alienation and Order', *Speculum*, 42.2 (1967), 233-59) has been variously conceptualised in Dante Studies: see Roberto Mercuri, *Semantica di Gerione: Il motivo del viaggio nella 'Commedia' di Dante* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1984); John Demaray, *Dante and the Book of the Cosmos* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1987), pp. 1-60; Bruno Basile, 'Dante e l'idea di *peregrinatio*', in *Il tempo e le forme: Studi letterari da Dante a Gadda* (Modena: Mucchi, 1990), pp. 9-36; Julia Bolton Holloway, *The Pilgrim and the Book* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), esp. pp. 57-84; Michelangelo Picone, '*Inferno* VIII: il viaggio contrastato', *L'Alighieri*, 9 (1997), 35-50; Peter S. Hawkins, 'Crossing over: Dante and Pilgrimage', in *Dante's Testaments. Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 247-64 and 333-6; Catherine Keen, 'The Language of Exile in Dante', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 27 (2001), 79-102; Carlo Delcorno, '«Ma noi siam peregrin come voi siete»: Aspetti penitenziali del *Purgatorio*', in *Da Dante a Montale: Studi di filologia e critica letteraria in onore di Emilio Pasquini*, ed. by Gian Mario Anselmi (Bologna: Gedit, 2006), pp. 11-30; Giuseppe Ledda, 'Immagini di pellegrinaggio e di esilio nella *Commedia* di Dante', *Annali Online di Ferrara: Lettere*, 1 (2012), 295-308.

[56] On Dante's realism and its role in directing the interpretation of the poem, see Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, esp. pp. 3-20.

the text, but only evoking it mimetically and when necessary. Flexibility, subtlety, and reproducibility are all added bonuses to this strategy, while the all-important hermeneutic power of retrospection maintains its effectiveness.

When it comes to the *Commedia*, Dante's masterplot might well be pervasive and supremely influential on its readers, but in the text itself it is like the panther that is nowhere to be found but whose scent is everywhere.[57] Its constitutive elements are a handful: the distinction between *before* and *after*, a retrospective gaze, a revaluation of the previous position, and, ideally, the act of writing; yet in the *Commedia* they hardly appear together in a single quotable set of terzinas.[58] Charles Singleton's essay 'The Vistas in Retrospect', which pioneers the study of what is called here Dante's masterplot, draws attention to the various passages in the poem when the pilgrim turns his gaze backward to recapitulate the journey he has undertaken. Such passages, he claims, are as many 'details of a *pattern*, of a great vista of meaning that opens up in retrospect at the pivotal point'.[59] Indeed, Dante repeatedly looks back in the poem, from the entrance of hell ('così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva, / si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo / che non lasciò già mai persona viva', *Inf.* I, 25-27) to the garden of Eden ('Già m'avean trasportato i lenti passi / dentro a la selva antica tanto, / ch'io non potea rivedere ond'io mi 'ntrassi', *Purg.* XXVIII, 22-24) and (implicitly) the heights of the Empyrean ('questi, che da l'infima lacuna / de l'universo infin qui ha vedute / le vite spiritali ad una ad una', *Par.* XXXIII, 22-24). An emblematic instance of the pilgrim's backward gaze is offered by the heaven of Saturn, where Dante is

57 Cf. *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I, xvi.

58 Perhaps the most quotable instance of the masterplot is the poem's proem—*Inferno* I, 1-9 will be discussed in detail at the beginning of chapter 3.

59 Singleton, 'The Vistas in Retrospect', p. 61, italics his. Singleton's seminal article and its implications are discussed by Freccero, 'The Significance of *Terza Rima*', pp. 262-263; Barański, 'Structural Retrospection in Dante's *Comedy*: The Case of *Purgatorio* XXVII', *Italian Studies*, 41.1 (1986), 1-23, (p. 9), and his subsequent 'Without any Violence', in *Vertical Readings in Dante's 'Comedy': Vol. 1*, ed. by George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), pp. 181-202 (p. 182); and Simon A. Gilson, 'The Wheeling Sevens', in the same volume, pp. 143-160 (p. 149).

able to recontextualise from his new vantage point, with a smile, our planet and the struggles and ambitions it holds ('Col viso ritornai per tutte quante / le sette spere, e vidi questo globo / tal, ch'io sorrisi del suo vil sembiante', *Par.* XXII, 133-35). Earth—'l'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci' (*Par.* XXII, 151)—appears to the pilgrim's backward gaze one last time in *Paradiso* XXVII, 76-87, where the narrator's reference to 'il varco / folle di Ulisse' (82-83) evokes and embodies through its *enjambement* the Greek hero's trademark transgression. Everything in this retrospective passage contributes to make it a set-piece of unmistakeable moral exemplarity and endless imitability: its position at the end of the pilgrim's journey; the fact that it contains the last occurrence of the key adjective 'folle', which challenges Dante ever since the beginning of his pilgrimage ('temo che la venuta non sia folle', *Inf.* II, 35); and the episode's obvious intertextual allusion to the traditional models of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* and Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*.[60] This is what Dante's masterplot does best: it produces an archetypal and reproducible narrative that tells a tale of linear moral progress. The memorable scene was widely imitated and alluded to by such poets as Ariosto and Tasso.[61]

If the masterplot shows its retrospective aspect at the end of the journey, at the beginning it reveals rather its counterpart: a desire for ends. *Pace* Zygmunt Barański's claim that '[r]ather than forcing our readerly attention upwards and 'vertically', Dante normally encourages us to reflect and to look backwards: 'Ricorditi, ricorditi!' (*Purg.* XXVII, 22)', the

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[60] Scipio's dream is found in *De re publica* VI, 20, in *De re publica, De legibus*, trans. by Clinton Walker Keynes, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, II, 7, 15, in *The Theological Tractates and De Consolatione Philosophiae*, trans. by Hugh F. Stewart, Edward K. Rand, and S. Jim Tester, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[61] Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, ed. by Edoardo Sanguineti and Marcello Turchi (Milan: Garzanti, 1964), XXXIV, 71-72; Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, ed. by Lanfranco Caretti (Milan: Mondadori, 1957), XIV, 9-10.

two movements are not exclusive but mutually necessary.[62] Take this passage from the intensely meta-literary *Inferno* XVI:

> Però, se campi d'esti luoghi bui
> e torni a riveder le belle stelle,
> quando ti gioverà dicere "I' fui",
> fa che di noi a la gente favelle.
> (*Inf.* XVI, 82-85)

We are in the seventh circle of hell, among the violent against God, and this is 'the only time in hell that several sinners speak harmoniously as one'.[63] Displaying the typical concern with earthly fame that characterises Dante's infernal sodomites, these souls collectively ask the pilgrim to relate their story. The way they conceive of this storytelling is strictly tense-based: Dante's retrospective position, which they anticipate, is described as the time, in the future, when the pilgrim will turn into a narrator, able to use the past indicative of storytelling 'I' fui' (84). In the middle of the journey, Dante already directs his text towards an ideal endpoint from which retrospective (and public) storytelling will be possible, an endpoint that lies in the future ('quando ti gioverà…') but will be voiced in the past tense ('…dicer "I' fui"'). Even more remarkably, Dante cross-contaminates fiction and textuality in what can be considered a trademark move.[64] Thus, the author of the *Commedia* plants in the direct speech of a set of characters within his fiction an anticipation of the last line of the cantica that contains them. In the context of the souls' appeal for Dante's future

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[62] Barański, 'Without any Violence', p. 9. Barański makes this general statement in a polemical context against the recent hermeneutic practice of vertical readings conflating 'verticality' with 'vectoriality' a little sophistically (nothing prescribes vertical readers to move exclusively upwards). The third chapter will explore more in detail the structural importance of the forward movement of future tenses in proemial positions.

[63] Robert Hollander *ad Inf.* XVI, 82-85.

[64] See Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, esp. pp. 3-20.

writing, their wish 'se […] torni a riveder le belle stelle' (*Inf.* XVI, 83) appears not only verified, but *reified* as the conclusion of the narrative poem *Inferno* which the reader is holding in her hands ('E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle', *Inf.* XXXIV, 139), and which Dante even swears on (*Inf.* XVI, 127-128).[65] Their word is made text: retrospective retelling, which had been conceived from the very beginning, is accomplished through the writing of the poem, and the teleology of Dante's journey from *personaggio* to *poeta* is fulfilled.

As is often the case with passages that appear to exemplify the masterplot most clearly (this thesis explores a number of them), however, its workings are not as smooth as they seem. Since Pietro Alighieri, most commentators of the passage have pointed out that Dante's tense-based expression alludes to a speech by Aeneas, in the first book of Virgil's narrative poem—a quintessentially teleological epic in its own right (and a recurrent reference in the present thesis). Aeneas speaks as follows:

> O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem.
> […]
> revocate animos, maestumque timorem
> mittite: forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit.
> Per varios casus, per tot discrimina rerum
> tendimus in Latium; sedes ubi fata quietas
> ostendunt; illic fas regna resurgere Troiae.
>
> (*Aeneid* I, 199, 202-206)

[65] On the medieval practice of swearing on books in relationship to *Inferno* XVI, see Nicolò Crisafi and Elena Lombardi, 'Lust and Law: Reading and Witnessing in *Inferno* V', in *Ethics, Politics and Law in Dante*, ed. by Catherine Keen and Giulia Gaimari (London: UCL Press, forthcoming).

> [O you who have endured worse circumstances, to these too god will grant an end […]. Take heart and chase away gloomy fear: perhaps one day it will delight you to remember also these events. Through so many different chances and varied dangerous events, we head toward Latium, where the fates show us a resting place; there it is right for Troy's kingdom to rise.]

It is the beginning of the poem, and Aeneas is giving an inspirational speech to encourage his friends and allies to proceed on their journey. He urges them to keep in mind the ultimate goal and justification of their wanderings: the foundation of a new Troy, which will be their resting place. The passage is a textbook case of Brooks's theory: through meanderings and dangers, a desire for closure drives the narrative to an end that gives meaning to it all. Dante adapts a portion of the line 'forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit' (203) as 'quando ti gioverà dicere "I' fui"' (*Inf.* XVI, 84), his future tense *gioverà* mapping perfectly on Virgil's *iuvabit*, and the past tense 'I' fui' distilling the pastness of Virgil's infinitive *meminisse*. It is a touching yet restrained translation. There is no need to reproduce the semantics of Virgil's verb of memory through a one-to-one equivalent as *ricordare*. Speaking in the past tense already implies memory, and so Dante drops the verb to focus on the essentials (what matters to his narrative art): the knot between direct speech, self-narrative, and retelling the past.

Taken out of context in the commentaries of the *Commedia*, Aeneas's speech may seem confident, even triumphant. The hero claims that a god gives an end to everything (*Aen.* I, 199). This reassurance is clearly double-edged: on the one hand, all things have an end, a *telos* that logically directs their course and allows for retrospective meaning; on the other, all things are threatened by premature ends that care little about human aspirations and goals—a theme that the *Aeneid* explores through the story of Marcellus, discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis. Sure enough, as soon as Aeneas concludes his pep talk, Virgil

informs us that the hero is not as confident as he looks, his hope is feigned (207-208). It is to this ambiguous scene that Dante chooses to relate his storytelling. The Florentine poet's text is as ambiguous as his maestro's. The main clause 'fa che di noi a la gente favelle' (*Inf.* XVI, 85) depends on whether the wish 'se campi d'esti luoghi bui / e torni a riveder le belle stelle', with its positive trajectory from 'luoghi bui' to 'belle stelle', comes to fruition. There are no guarantess that the wish will be fulfilled, and so the construct draws attention to the ever-present possibility of failure.

In the body of the thesis, I offer close readings of a number of passages in the *Commedia*—from the proems of each cantica, to the encounter with Beatrice in the garden of Eden, and the very last canto of *Paradiso*—that are key to the establishment of a teleological master narrative in Dante's poem. Despite (and because of) their function, such passages are contaminated by design with ambiguities, contradictions, centrifugal forces, and vulnerabilities. Reading closely key loci of the masterplot in the poem confirms the findings of the preliminary close reading of teleological language at the outset of this introduction. Predominant though teleology is in the *Commedia*, alternative narratives begin to emerge on closer inspection that contrast and deviate from its trajectory, and thus question and complicate its message. Such narratives, disseminated at strategic points throughout the text, sound a minor chord or a dissonant note in the predominantly major harmonies of Dante's teleological masterplot with its uplifting story of poetic development and moral improvement, redemption, emancipation, and spiritual *askesis*. Alternative narratives, as this thesis aims to show, are as much a part of Dante's text as the teleological masterplot, encoded in the *Commedia* as deliberately as the dominant narrative, though not always as obviously. If this is indeed the case, then why are alternative narratives more likely to be overlooked by *Dantisti* and *dilettanti* alike? What is it that makes teleological readings of Dante so hegemonical?

4. Exemplariness, credibility, reproducibility

Of the reasons why Dante's masterplot rules supreme amongst the narrative models of the *Commedia*, only a few have to do with the poem's design, while the rest are more likely his readers' responsibility. Textual design is probed here first. It is hard to dispute that the teleological narrative, in Dante's otherworldly pilgrimage from the dark wood to the vision of God, is somewhat foundational and overarching. Indeed, the very fact that this narrative trajectory is so recognisable and adaptable to various aspects of Dante's progress—his relationship to the courtly love code, lyric canon, Beatrice, the body, earthly attachments, and so on—is one of its intended advantages. In his discussion of masterplots, narrative theorist H. Porter Abbott writes about the role of recognisable types in autobiographical writing. To illustrate his point, he refers to the paradigm of Augustine's *Confessions*, which 'invented the enduring form of the autobiography of a convert'.[66] Augustine's declared objective, Abbot argues, 'was not to demonstrate his uniqueness but to show how his experience played out *according to type*. In his case the type was that of the Christian convert, and it belonged in turn to a masterplot that involved initial ignorance, news of the right path to salvation, repeated straying, repeated guidance from others, repeated renewal of effort, hard thinking, temptation, struggle, suffering, and a climactic moment of conversion, marked by divine intervention and followed by the firm decision to renounce the old ways and take up the new'.[67] It is to Abbott's credit that his description of this type's distinctive narrative arc, in its broad strokes, could just as easily be applied to Dante's trajectory. Witness the fact that Dantist Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi describes the poet's story in broadly similar terms, when she writes that 'Dante eleva […] la sua storia personale a significato esemplare della vicenda propria di ogni uomo cristiano: innocenza,

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[66] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 132.
[67] Ibid. Italics in the text.

traviamento, intervento divino di salvezza, pentimento, redenzione'.[68] In her account also, type is conceived of in narrative terms; it is characterised and recognised not by some inherent quality, but by the arc of its story. Indeed, this recognisability is the point. As Abbott concludes, for Augustine (the same could be said about Dante), autobiographical writing becomes 'a matter of "collecting" or "re-collecting" from his memory those crucial events in the story of his life that conformed to the masterplot of conversion and that allowed him to fulfill the requirements of the type at the center of that story'.[69]

In all narrative, and especially in autobiography, there is always a two-way exchange between individuality and type, where the one plays with or against the other. Much is gained from this two-way exchange. In the specific case of autobiographical narratives of conversion, the main advantage is that they confer credibility to the writer's word. 'I can now say, I was bad then': in this most teleological of constructions, the convert concedes to the reader his past—characterised variously as sinful, erroneous, mistaken—, but through this sacrifice obtains that the current position, from which he judges, gets acknowledged as rightful and authoritative.[70] By fashioning one's individual story as fulfilling the requirements of the type of the convert—someone who has abandoned the error of their ways and is now righteous—a new credibility is achieved. This is the most basic practical advantage of all teleological narratives and one that Dante exploits repeatedly over the course of his career. Take the story of Dante's poetic development: when the poetry written with the aim of receiving Beatrice's 'saluto' is disowned, the 'stilo

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[68] Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, 'Introduzione' *ad Purg.* XXX (DDP). Freccero's *Poetics of Conversion* are of course based on an Augustinian reading of Dante.
[69] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 133. T. S. Eliot made a similar point about the *Vita Nova*, a book that he claimed 'cannot be classed either as "truth" or "fiction"', since the experiences it relates 'seemed to [Dante] of some importance' not for their personal significance, but for their emblematic status: 'they seemed to him to have some philosophical and impersonal value'. (T. S. Eliot, 'Dante' [1929], *Selected Essays*, 3rd rev. ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 237-277 (p. 268)).
[70] On Dante's rhetorical strategies for building authority throughout his career, see Ascoli's study *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*.

de la loda' gains currency (*Vita Nova* XIII); yet in the last chapter, the *Vita Nova* plans its own obsolescence in favour of a future work, as it promises to 'dicer di lei quel che mai non fue detto di alcuna' (*Vita Nova* XLII). Or consider the famous case of Dante's relationship with Beatrice: the relatively marginal *donna gentile* in *Vita Nova* XXXV, overshadowed by Beatrice, is reinterpreted as central as she is identified with Lady Philosophy in the *Convivio* (II, ii, 1-5); the *Commedia*, however, ostensibly disowns the *donna gentile* when Beatrice reinstates her own original pre-eminence and reproaches the pilgrim for having 'diverted himself from her and given himself to an other' (*Purg.* XXX, 126). Without entering here the scholarly debate over these important questions in Dante Studies,[71] it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the underlying mechanism that lends plausibility to this account at its various stages is broadly the same that underlies narratives of conversion such as Augustine's *Confessions* or Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.[72] Narratives of conversion operate teleologically by subordinating a previous, negative, straying experience to a subsequent righteous one; and by means of this sacrifice of the past, they endow the most current position with the credibility and authority that was required to move on from the past. From a rhetorical perspective, it is only of secondary importance what the position is, or whether it is eventually abandoned, recanted, or

[71] For the record, this thesis finds support in the view of scholars who acknowledge the discrepancies in the affaire *donna gentile*/Beatrice, yet refuse to resolves them teleologically: see for instance Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde, *Dante's Lyric Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), II, p. 341 and *passim*; Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, p. 30; Reed Way Dasenbrock, '"Paradiso ma non troppo"': The Place of the Lyric Dante in the Late *Cantos* of Ezra Pound', *Comparative Literature*, 57.1 (2005), 45-60; Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, pp. 282-283.

[72] 'The Augustinian conversion story provides a broad analogue for the various "turning points" dramatized in the *Vita Nova* (*Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, p. 183). Of course, as D. Bruce Hindmarsh points out in his study of spiritual autobiographies in Early Modern England, 'the narrative shape' of Christian narratives of conversion 'was clearly provided by the larger story of salvation history in the Bible. As in the case of Augustine, the Bible's account of fall from innocence and return provided a structure and many topoi for these spiritual autobiographies' (D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 8.

corrected in turn; teleological subordination of previous experiences is always available to those wishing to establish the authority and credibility of their current, converted position.

Quite apart from the rhetorical advantages of *teleological* narratives, all masterplots, regardless of their kind, are invested in questions of credibility. H. Porter Abbott considers their persuasive power one of the defining features of masterplots in general. Recognisable masterplots, with their culturally encoded associations, can have 'an enormous emotional capital that can be drawn on in the construction of narrative'.[73] Masterplots such as the quest, the story of revenge, rise and fall, seasonal myths of death and regeneration, and the story of conversion itself, are immediately recognisable and their effects often predictable. They are familiar, elicit strong affective responses and come with pre-made moral associations. As such they fall under the heading of what Gerald Prince calls the 'pragmatics' of narrative fiction, which extend beyond the semantic and grammatical relations of the words on the page, to encompass their impact on, and interaction with, 'the receiver and his or her decoding strategies' as well as 'the communicative context'.[74] In calling upon the reader to recognise and relate a narrative to other instances of the same type, with their distinctive associations, masterplots paradoxically achieve more credibility than reality itself. Indeed, in many cases reality is pressured into conforming to type. For this reason, masterplots are not only recommended, within fiction, for the writing of best-selling novels and Oscar-winning blockbusters—as promoted by such books as Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* and Ronald B. Tobias's *20 Master Plots and How to Build Them*—but their uses extend to such pragmatic purposes as selling products through advertisement, swinging voters through political propaganda, and winning a case in trials of justice, where credibility and reproducibility are key. Where competition is fierce, the credibility afforded by a familiar narrative can give the edge. In

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[73] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 42.

[74] Gerald Prince, 'The Disnarrated', *Style*, 22.1 (1988), 1-8 (p. 7). See also his earlier 'Narrative pragmatics, message, and point', *Poetics*, 12.6 (1983), 527-536.

trials, for instance, 'the prosecution and defense [*sic*] strive to establish narrative credibility by aligning their representation of events with rhetorically advantageous "masterplots," […] familiar skeletal narratives with an established cultural authority':[75] the same set of circumstances can as easily be portrayed through the archetypal narrative of the fallen woman or of the manipulating seductress.[76] The recognisability and unequivocal moral conceit afforded by masterplots are vital in these fields, where a consumer, voter, or juror's choices and actions are often decided by a narrative's credibility. As Abbott puts it: 'To the extent that our values and identity are linked to a masterplot, that masterplot can have strong rhetorical impact. We tend to grant credibility to narratives that are structured by it'.[77] Indeed, such is their rhetorical impact, that we often grant credibility to masterplots even over reality.

The notion that Dante's *Commedia*, might contain *typical*, *emblematic*, *exemplary* or *universal* elements is nothing new in Dante Studies.[78] This introduction's analysis of the exemplary character of Dante's masterplot aims to draw attention to the practical effects, the pros and cons, of its use in the *Commedia*. For the post-exilic writer whose historical circumstances made credibility a scarce commodity and whose moral integrity had to be

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75 Richard Walsh, 'The Pragmatics of Narrative Fictionality', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 150-164 (p. 151).
76 For similar forensic narratives in *Inferno* V, see Crisafi and Lombardi, 'Lust and Law'.
77 Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 42.
78 Variously conceptualised, in modern times, this notion dates back at least as far as Leo Spitzer's pioneering essay 'Note on the Poetic and the Empirical "I" in Medieval Authors', *Traditio* 4 (1946), 414-22; for its canonical formulation, see Singleton, *Dante Studies 1. 'Commedia': Elements of Structure*, and Contini, 'Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*', p. 35, who acknowledges his debt to Singleton. The notion is given credit by Dante himself in his theory of the four senses in the interpretation of a text (*Conv.* II, i), also in the so-called *Epistle to Cangrande* of uncertain attribution (*Epist.* XIII, 20-22). See also Picone, 'Dante come autore/narratore della *Commedia*'; and Riccobono, *Dante Poeta-Profeta, Pellegrino*, pp. 11-39; Pertile, '"Trasmutabile per tutte guise"'. The importance of type in the exemplary masterplot of the *Commedia* is not incompatible with this thesis's view of the central role of the historical individual in Dante's oeuvre and its radical embrace of affectivity, relations and all the memories that make up each character's 'vissuto'.

defended against a defaming sentence,[79] the teleological masterplot, with its surplus of credibility and integrity, offers invaluable benefits. These practical advantages have been highlighted by Albert Russell Ascoli and Justin Steinberg, respectively, in their studies of Dante's quest for authority and control of his works' reception. As Ascoli argues, 'the depersonalising, or rather, the de-historicizing of Dante himself' accomplished in the *Commedia* is an effective rhetorical strategy that 'permits him to transcend those personal and historical attributes that impede his access to authority', including his juridically invalidated credibility and vulnerable moral status as an exile.[80] Type, in Dante's case, is valued both for its capacity to obscure personal circumstances, and for its intrinsic ability to promote credibility.

There are, however, drawbacks to this strategy. If masterplots in general have an inherent rhetorical power, and if teleological masterplots specifically are perfectly engineered to produce narrative credibility and authority by subordinating previous experiences to a new decisive endpoint, they can sometimes go overboard in their outcomes. The very qualities that render Dante's masterplot so rhetorically effective are the ones that can make its influence disproportionate in the reception of the *Commedia*, where the dominant narrative risks becoming overly domineering, and its credibility becomes so powerful that it is difficult to expose the textual mechanisms through which it is constructed. 'Masterplots can be rendered stereotypically as well', reminds us Abbott, '[i]n such cases all we see is the masterplot'.[81] It is no minor tribute to the masterplot's authority and effectiveness as a rhetorical strategy, that teleological language figures overwhelmingly among Dante scholars. The fact that the teleological trajectory of the poem is so

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[79] Defaming crimes, such as the ones Dante was sentenced to, invalidated by law the defendant's moral integrity and thus credibility. See Justin Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law* (Chiacago: Chicago University Press, 2013), pp. 14-52; and Crisafi and Lombardi, 'Lust and Law'.

[80] Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, p. 316; Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), pp. 16, 145-169.

[81] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p. 45.

immediately recognisable helps make it endlessly reproducible. However, if the metaphorical discourse underpinning the *Commedia* consists in the pilgrim's progress toward a final revelation, this does not necessarily make all endpoints revelatory. Blanket-reading linearity into the entire *Commedia*; ordering its events hierarchically into teleological *before* and *after*; and proposing normative interpretations in the name of resolution and coherence, risks caricaturing its author's *modus scribendi*. The *Commedia* certainly exerts special control over its own reception by imitating and harnessing the interpretative power of endpoints and exploiting the credibility of emblematic narratives. At the same time, however, it also sets limits and proposes alternatives to this strategy by embedding in the text paradoxes, detours, parallel lives and open-ended futures that counteract its teleological linearity, complicate its moral message, and safeguard what it seeks to subjugate. Because these narratives are less predicated on the authority and reproducibility created by Dante's masterplot, they are often eclipsed by a masterplot that has been escalated from authoritative to authoritarian. As the body of this thesis shows, however, each of these alternative narratives demands, and teaches, a different style of interpretation. Before we explore their methods in the following chapters, then, let us consider the role of interpretation in Dante's writings more generally.

5. Reading hermeneutic writing

As readers of the *Commedia* we are in a privileged position. From our vantage point we are granted a power that is most jealously guarded by Dante over the course of his literary career: the power to interpret. How are we to use this power? And, given that Dante's writings are so concerned with interpretation, what are we to do with his own interpretations? Are we to respect them or to subvert them?

In Dante's writings interpretation is thematised and dramatized expressly, or merely implied, but it invariably underpins the structure of his narratives. Indeed, Dante's narratives can be said to share a constitutive common nature, which we may call, with Roland Barthes, *hermeneutic*. In his seminal *S/Z*, ostensibly a structural analysis of a single short story by Balzac, Barthes identifies two fundamental ways in which 'classical narratives' unfold through time: the *proairetic* and the *hermeneutic* code.[82] The *proairetic* code corresponds to the forward-oriented logic of action and is most obvious in 'narratives that give precedence to happenings':[83] a typical example is that of a thriller where the succession of the action constantly spurs us to read on. The story of the pilgrims from *Convivio* (section 2, above) is emblematic of this code, since they move forward stage by stage, 'di casa in casa', their outcome unknown. The *hermeneutic* code, on the other hand, is based on interpreting an outcome that is known from the start: an obvious example is a detective story where we are presented with a murder, but are motivated in our reading by our desire to discover who committed it and why. The story of the merchant from *Convivio*, is emblematic of the hermeneutic code, since he is not concerned with the outcome of his journey (it is a *fait accompli*) but rather with its significance. The distinction between the two codes can thus be summed up with Prue Shaw's concise phrase: 'We live forward, but we understand backwards'.[84] In this light, the question that occupies the merchant of *Convivio* does not regard actions, but their understanding: it is not 'What will happen next?', but 'How do I interpret what just happened?'. The issue, in other words, is one that occupies Dante throughout his literary career. The meaning and interpretation of the past is so deeply interwoven in the fabric of Dante's writings that it takes a special awareness on his readers' part to take his interpretations as critically as any other existing part of the text.

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[82] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Noonday Press, 1974), p. 30.
[83] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 18. See Brooks's discussion of Barthes therein, pp. 18-20.
[84] Prue Shaw, *Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity* (New York: Liveright, 2014), p. 134.

Dante's concern with hermeneutic questions is well known and covers a variety of areas: literature, biography, history, theology, philosophy, and more. Not only is it directed at Dante's own writings,[85] but it also looks outward to the reading and hermeneutic practices that characterised the literary culture(s) of his age.[86] 'Exegesis was central to the medieval literary experience', writes Zygmunt Barański, 'and in the *Commedia* Dante called his readers to this in ways which would have been immediately recognisable'.[87] A seminal work in the study of Dante's relationship with Medieval hermeneutics is Erich Auerbach's masterful 'Figura'. Auerbach famously argued that what was born as a relatively niche interpretative practice for understanding the relation of the New Testament to the Old Testament—figural interpretation—came to have a profound impact on 'the interpretation of history in the Middle Ages and even often play[ed] a role in the way that everyday realities of the period [were] understood'.[88] For Auerbach, this was most notable in Dante's *Commedia*. According to the scholar, Dante creatively incorporated figural hermeneutics in his poem, where 'they are decisive for its entire structure.'[89] 'Figural interpretation', wrote Auerbach, 'creates a connection between two events or persons in which one signifies not

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[85] See, for instance, Gianfranco Contini, 'Introduzione alle Rime di Dante', repr. in *Un'idea di Dante*, pp. 3-20; Iannucci, 'Autoesegesi dantesca'; Barolini, *Dante's Poets*; Zygmunt G. Barański, 'Dante commentatore e commentato: Riflessioni sullo studio dell'iter ideologico di Dante', *Letture classensi* 23 (1994), 9-39, and 'Dante Alighieri: Experimentation and (Self-)exegesis', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Volume II: The Middle Ages*, ed. by Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 561-582; Albert Russell Ascoli, 'Auto-commentary: Dividing Dante', in *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 175-226.

[86] See Barański's essays collected in *'Sole nuovo, luce nuova': Saggi sul rinnovamento culturale in Dante* (Turin: Scriptorium, 1996) and *Dante e i segni: Saggi per una storia intellettuale di Dante Alighieri* (Naples: Liguori, 2000); Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante*; and most recently, Elena Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[87] Barański, 'Experimentation and (Self-)exegesis', p. 576.

[88] Erich Auerbach, 'Figura' [1938], in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. by James I. Porter, trans. by Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 65-113 (p. 103).

[89] Ibid., p. 105.

only itself but also the other'.[90] As Auerbach argued, this interpretative practice can be seen as structuring the fictional universe of his *Commedia*. In figures such as Virgil, Cato, and Beatrice, for instance, 'the literal meaning and historical reality of [the] character do not contradict that figure's deeper meaning. Rather they figure it. Historical reality is not annulled by this deeper meaning. Rather it is confirmed and fulfilled by it'.[91] In figural hermeneutics, Auerbach believed to have found 'the historical foundation' of his claim that Dante was first and foremost a 'poet of the earthly world', for whom earthly experience in its historicity and concreteness did not constitute a mere shadow of the spiritual realities in which it was to be ultimately resolved, but had its own dignity and autonomy.[92] Indeed, Auerbach's work remains an essential point of reference for Dantists who agree (and disagree) with this view.[93]

For the purposes of the present thesis, Auerbach's contribution is invaluable for three main reasons. First of all, by pioneering the study of Medieval interpretative practices and models, Auerbach underlined the historical importance of interpretation in the design of Dante's *Commedia*. In his view, figural hermeneutics actively shaped the poem by being dramatised in such characters as Virgil, Cato, and Beatrice. At the same time, this model for interpretation can also be applied to 'la struttura a due tempi del poema', whereby the narrator reinterprets his earthly attachments and the journey he experienced as pilgrim.[94] Thus, if for Barthes a poem such as the *Commedia* can be called *hermeneutic* by virtue of its

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[90] Ibid., p. 96.
[91] Ibid., p. 111.
[92] Ibid., p. 110. The expression 'poet of the earthly world' comes of course from the tile of his 1929 monograph *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); 'earthly' is a better translation for *Irdisch* than 'secular'.
[93] Manuele Gragnolati makes Auerbach the starting point of his *Experiencing the Afterlife* (p. xi). For a 'theologising' critique of Auerbach, see John Freccero, 'Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell', repr. in *Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 93-109 (pp. 103-104).
[94] Riccobono, *Dante Poeta-Profeta, Pellegrino, Autore*, p. 12.

'structural retrospection' and search for meaning,[95] for Auerbach *figura* constitutes the historical foundation of this inherently hermeneutic character.

Auerbach's 'Figura' is not only instrumental in putting hermeneutics at the heart of the *Commedia*'s storytelling. The essay also offers an early critique of teleological interpretations of Dante, complete with its own alternative model. Auerbach's defence of the dignity of the historicity, concrete and earthy qualities of the *figura*, originally arose from his wish to balance out or counter allegorist interpretations of the Old Testament that denied the reality and truthfulness of the events depicted therein and replaced them instead with a 'spiritual and extra-historical' meaning supposedly dictated by the New Testament. Just like teleological readings of Dante, spiritualist interpretations subjugated the Old to the New. [96] Thus, in the *Commedia*, since Virgil the pagan poet was prior to Virgil poet-prophet and leader-guide, his historical character was to be superseded by its allegorical interpretation. However, as another master of narrative puts it, 'Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real'.[97] For Auerbach, restoring the reality and autonomy of Old Testament events, like restoring the historical dignity of Virgil, represented an antidote against the tendency to split history into old and new, and automatically subjugate the former to the latter on grounds of chronology. Auerbach's *figura* (as the second chapter shows) offered a more unresolved and paradoxical model instead: the old pointed to the new, but it did not have to be subordinated to it; although the spiritual world was to succeed the earthly, it did not thereby supersede its meaning.

In this respect, Auerbach's 'Figura' provides a cautionary tale of the dark side of teleological interpretations. As Avihu Zakai and David Weinstein have argued, the Jewish

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95 Barański's phrase: 'Structural Retrospection in Dante's *Comedy*'.

96 Auerbach's understanding of this problem was markedly temporal: he thought of the 'two poles of the figure' as successive and 'part of the ongoing flow of historical life'. 'Figura', p. 96. See also his 'Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature' [1952], in the same volume, pp. 114-123 (esp. p. 116).

97 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* [1981] (London: David Campbell, 1995), p. 255.

scholar's essay in defence of the historical aspect of figures and of the continuity between Old and New Testament was conceived in response to 'the European crisis' of the Thirties.[98] The goal of 'Figura', conceived in Germany, but completed after Auerbach's exile in Turkey in 1936, was polemical: to confute Aryan philology's attempts to eradicate the Old Testament from the Christian canon and literary tradition of Europe. While this tale is specific to the circumstances of the publication of 'Figura', when much was at stake, I believe it is important to be aware of the potential for violence that is latent in any teleological reading. Even at a hermeneutic level, a quest for authority comes at the cost of the marginalisation of other voices and can thread the line of authoritarianism (as Albert Russell Ascoli has warned Dantists),[99] while an interpretative desire for 'la cosiddetta lettura totale' (as Gianfranco Contini put it)[100] risks cancelling differences and deviancies and turning totalitarian. The dark side of teleology thus comes to light in its problematic relationship with the 'otherness' it inevitably chooses to leave behind, silence, or sacrifice, in the name of its ultimate aim.

6. '[Il] ben' and 'l'altre cose'

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[98] Avihu Zakai and David Weinstein, 'Erich Auerbach and His "Figura": An Apology for the Old Testament in the Age of Aryan Philology', *Religions*, 3 (2012), 320-328. The expression 'European crisis' is Auerbach's own and dates after the war: Erich Auerbach, 'Introduction: Purpose and Method', in *Literary History & Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 6.

[99] On the relationship between authority and authoritarianism in the Dantean project, see Ascoli's important reflections in *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, pp. 61-64, which also explores the question of otherness in Dante.

[100] Gianfranco Contini, 'Filologia ed esegesi dantesca', repr. in *Un'idea di Dante*, pp. 113-142 (p. 114).

While the *Epistle to Cangrande* inaugurates the critical tradition of interpreting the poem in terms of the trajectory of its plot, it also puts it in the context of competing narratives.[101] A *comedia*, the epistle declares, 'is a kind of poetic narrative which *differs from all others*':

> Differt ergo a tragedia in materia per hoc, quod tragedia in principio est admirabilis et quieta, in fine seu exitu est fetida et horribilis [..]. Comedia vero inchoat asperitatem alicuius rei, sed eius materia prospere terminatur […]. Et per hoc patet quod Comedia dicitur presens opus. Nam si ad materiam respiciamus, a principio horribilis et fetida est, quia Infernus, in fine prospera, desiderabilis et grata, quia Paradisus.
>
> (*Epistle* XIII, 29 & 31).
>
> [It differs from tragedy in its subject-matter, since tragedy is admirable and calm in the beginning but foul and horrible in the end or outcome [...], whereas comedy begins with harsh circumstances, but ends happily [...]. And thus it is clear why the present work is called *Comedia*. If we consider its subject-matter, in fact, at the beginning it is horrible and foul, as is the *Inferno*, but in the end it is happy, desirable and gratifying, as is the *Paradiso*.]

Sad beginnings, happy endings. The narrative trajectory of Dante's *poetica narratio* is exemplified by the author of the epistle through a semantic shift from negative to positive:

[101] The authenticity of the *Epistle* is debated—without taking sides, I treat the epistle as evidence of an early reading of the *Commedia*. On the issue of its authenticity, see Lino Pertile, 'La *Comedìa* tra il dire e il fare', in *Sotto il segno di Dante: Scritti in onore di Francesco Mazzoni* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1998) pp. 233-47; Mirko Tavoni, 'Il titolo della «Commedia» di Dante', *Nuova rivista di letteratura italiana*, 1.1 (1998), 9-34; Zygmunt G. Barański, '"Comedìa": Dante, l'*Epistola a Cangrande* e la commedia medievale', in *Chiosar con altro testo: leggere Dante nel Trecento* (Florence: Cadmo, 2001), pp. 41-76; and Alberto Casadei, 'Il titolo della *Commedia* e l'*Epistola a Cangrande*', in *Dante oltre la 'Commedia'* (Bologna: ll Mulino, 2013), pp. 15-43.

from 'asperitatem' to 'prospere'; from 'horribilis et fetida' to 'prospera, desiderabilis et grata'. The pattern is well-established in the *auctoritates* backing up the epistle, John of Garland and Hugh of Pisa,[102] and is clearly common currency with Dante's early commentators.[103] The terms used to characterise beginnings and ends in the epistle correspond roughly to their distribution across the three canticas of the *Commedia*: negative terms are prevalent in the *Inferno* and positives in the *Paradiso*. Listing them here from negative to positive: *orribile* occurs ten times in *Inferno*, three in *Purgatorio*, and none in *Paradiso*; *asperitate* (and its cognates) occur five times in *Inferno*, three in *Purgatorio*, and none in *Paradiso*; the positive (*am*)*mirabile*, in contrast, never occurs in *Inferno*, but appears once in *Purgatorio*, and ten times in *Paradiso*. Although *fetido* and *prospero* are never used in Dante's oeuvre and *desiderabile* only occurs in *Convivio*, the semantic field of desire, as is known, grows exponentially across the three canticas.[104] *Quieto* is alone in being evenly distributed, with four occurrences in *Inferno* and *Paradiso* and six in *Purgatorio*. Dante's *Commedia* seems to match narrative expectations of a Medieval reader of comedies. Indeed, at various stages in the poem Dante describes the trajectory of his journey through the same trick of semantic shifts from negative to positive. The pilgrim uses the antithesis in the middle of *Inferno* to characterise his pilgrimage ('Lascio lo *fele* e vo per *dolci pomi*', *Inf.* XVI, 61); the narrator employs it at the beginning of *Purgatorio* to express a gear-shift in subject-matter

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102 '[T]ragedia est carmen gravi stilo compositum incipiens a gaudio et terminans in luctu'; 'comoedia est carmen iocosum incipiens a tristicia et terminans in gaudium' (John of Garland, *Poetria magistri Johannis Anglici de arte prosayca metrica et rithmica*, ed. by Giovanni Mari, in *Romanische Forschungen*, 13 (1902), pp. 883-965 (p. 918)); 'Item comedia a tristibus incipit sed cum letis desinit, tragedia e contrario […]. Unde in salutatione solemus [...] optare tragicum principium et comicum finem, idest bonum et letum principium et bonum et letum finem' (Uguccione da Pisa, *Derivationes*, ed. by Enzo Cecchini and Guido Arbizzoni (Florence: SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2004), O 11 17). Cf. Carlo Paolazzi, *Dante e la 'Comedia' nel Trecento: Dall'"Epistola a Cangrande" all'età di Petrarca* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1989), p. 86.

103 Variations on this narrative definition are featured in the introductory notes to *Inferno* by Jacopo della Lana, Pietro Alighieri (all three redactions), Guglielmo Maramauro, Benvenuto da Imola, Filippo Villani. The relationship between these commentaries and the *Epistle to Cangrande* is debated.

104 See Lino Pertile, *La punta del disio: Semantica del desiderio* (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2005), pp. 19-23.

('Per correr *miglior acque* […] lascia dietro sé *mar* sì *crudele*', *Purg.* I, 1, 3); and at the top of *Paradiso* to recapitulate his astounding trajectory ('ïo, che al *divino* da l'*umano*, / a l'*etterno* dal *tempo* era venuto, / e di *Fiorenza* in *popol giusto* e *sano*', *Par.* XXXI, 37-39).[105] Consider the noun *asperitatem*, which the *Epistle to Cangrande* refers to comedic beginnings, and which 'non ha riscontri nelle tradizionali descrizioni di commedia'.[106] It appears as early as the first canto of *Inferno* as part of a whole host of negative adjectives used to describe the dark wood in which Dante finds himself: *oscura* (*Inf.* I, 2), *selvaggia*, *aspra*, *forte* (5), and *amara* (7). As Luca Azzetta notes in his commentary to the *Epistle to Cangrande*, 'che poi l'esito del poema dovesse essere positivo, il lettore poteva già arguire da *Inferno* I, 8-9'.[107] This very passage, however, offers also the earliest suggestion that there are alternative ways of reading Dante's poem:

> Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
> ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai,
> dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.
> (*Inf.* I, 7-9)

This programmatic statement has elicited a number of different interpretations over the course of the centuries.[108] As is generally acknowledged, its rhetorical construction turns on an antithesis between '[il] ben' (8) and 'l'altre cose' (9), deceptively straightforward terms

105 On the *hysteron proteron* used here and the rhetorical figure's relation to the *Commedia*'s structural retrospection, see Singleton, 'The Vistas in Retrospect', p. 64.
106 So vouches Claudia Villa, in her commentary to Dante Alighieri [?], 'Epistola a Cangrande', ed. by Claudia Villa, in *Opere*, ed. by Marco Santagata, 3 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 2011-), III, p. 1588.
107 See Luca Azzetta's commentary to Dante Alighieri, 'Epistola XIII', ed. by Luca Azzetta, in *Le Opere*, vol. V. *Epistole, Egloge, Questio de aqua et terra*, ed. by Marco Baglio, Luca Azzetta, Marco Petoletti, Michele Rinaldi (Rome: Salerno, 2016), pp. 271-487, p. 362.
108 The explanations proposed are in line with those reviewed by Francesco Mazzoni, *Saggio di un nuovo commento alla "Divina Commedia": "Inferno" Canti I-III* (Florence: Sansoni, 1967), pp. 51-55. See more recently, Nicola Fosca *ad Inf.* I, 8.

that reward a closer look. Whereas the context of *Inferno* I does not shy away from adjectives and nouns that carry negative associations, as we have seen, in this terzina the phrase used to describe the negative pole of the antithesis is not negative *per se*. '[L]'altre cose', in fact, are only understood negatively by the reader relative to their position with respect to '[il] ben'. They are otherwise neutral and without moral judgements, but through their rhetorical positioning, they get moralised and hierarchically subjugated: they become a generic negative to which '[il] ben' is opposed. These lines replicate, *in nuce*, the mechanism of Dante's masterplot. That the distinction between *good* and *evil* is the result of a rhetorical operation, not a given state of affairs, is even subtly reflected in the verbs used. There is a qualitative difference in how Dante writes about something morally connoted and how he writes about everything else. Whereas he can simply *dire* 'l'altre cose' neutrally, '[il] ben' requires *trattare*, a more self-conscious rhetorical treatment, a process of ex-traction from an experience that is otherwise neutral. Embedded in the very first lines of the *Commedia* is the desire to treat in writing the positives in the journey, which works, transparently here, by turning something as neutral as 'other things' into a negative, simply by its relative positioning. Anticipated in this microcosm, is not only the dominant narrative model of the *Commedia* but also a trace of what it leaves behind. By focusing on the narratives within the poem that offer alternatives to its hegemony, this thesis sheds light on the alternatives which are often sanitised through Dante's teleological masterplot, or through his readers' tendency to take its hermeneutic model too literally.[109]

Critiquing the teleological masterplot and exploring alternative narratives allows a new picture of the *Commedia* to emerge. It becomes evident that the fabric of the poem is woven with alternative storylines that run alongside, detour from, or otherwise resist the

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[109] See Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante's Sympathy for the Other, or The Non-Steretyping Imagination: Sexual and Racialized Others in the *Commedia*', *Critica del Testo*, 14.1 (2011), 177-204. Barolini concludes her essay by reflecting on the last adjective of the *Commedia*: 'the multiplicity, difference, and sheer otherness embodied in the «altre stelle» – an otherness by which [Dante] is still unrepentantly captivated in his poem's last breath' (p. 194).

dominant teleological and retrospective narrative. Dante Studies as a field has tended to overlook them or to order them in some new hierarchy thereby replicating once more the masterplot. The structural role of alternative narratives in the poem, however, is precisely to counter the hegemonic appetite for conclusive and cannibalising interpretations. What is at stake when talking about the alternative narrative models of the *Commedia* is the interpretation of the poem and of its world. The critique of teleological readings proposed here is also an exposé of the human temptation to iron out paradoxes and difficulties (in life and in fiction), and a little paean to the role of poetry in continually presenting us the creases.

Chapter 1

Paradox in *Paradiso*

Let me think about it in a different way [...]. *I won't try to force an explanation on the inexplicable, but instead I'll examine the phenomenon from a different angle, as the riddle that it is.*

Haruki Murakami, *1Q84*[1]

In her study on the formal workings of Dante's narrative poem, Teodolinda Barolini begins her discussion of *Paradiso* with what she identifies as the root problem of the last cantica, 'the temporality of narrative'.[2] The *Paradiso* sets out to thematise a realm that lies beyond time, yet narrative cannot follow so freely in this transcendence. With its every step, narrative 'creates time and difference in a context where [Dante] wants to create eternity and unity'.[3] The temporal nature of narrative stands as a serious structural limit to the poem's mimetic possibilities.

Yet although it is true, as Barolini writes, that 'if the problem of time in narrative afflicts most narrators […], it afflicts Dante in the *Paradiso* more than most',[4] this is not merely by virtue of the gap between the cantica's matter and the inescapable temporal dimension of narrative, language and indeed human experience. The problem inherent in this gap is not exclusive to the *Paradiso*, and in fact forms an important part of any attempt

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[1] Haruki Murakami, *1Q84*, 3 vols in 2 (London: Harvill Secker, 2011), III, p. 162.

[2] Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine 'Comedy': Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 166. For Barolini's discussion of time, see specifically pp. 166-174.

[3] Ibid., pp. 171-172.

[4] Ibid., pp. 171.

to represent eternity, be it in a fourteenth-century narrative poem, a postmodern novel, or the latest theory of the multiverse in quantum physics. What makes the problem of time in narrative a more critical one for Dante than for most writers of eternity is the special case of his masterplot. By virtue of the masterplot, narrative time in the *Commedia* is not simply a neutral, value-free order where the simultaneity of eternity is ready to be laid out linearly in a text that has a before and an after. Narrative time in the *Commedia* is rather a hierarchy, where the *after* takes precedence over the *before*. The question, then, is not simply how Dante can represent a dimension beyond time in the temporal medium of narrative, but how he can surmount this impossible task *given his masterplot* which grants the endpoint absolute authority over what preceeds it.

It is this question that I will explore in the present chapter. The specific truths that the *Paradiso* is concerned with at the level of content ask for a narrative model where they can coexist without being subordinated to one another; but since the only way they can coexist in a text is chronologically, Dante needs to undo his own meticulous, persuasive work of lading time with value in the dominant narrative model—the teleological masterplot—so as to restore to his text the ability to represent contradictions temporally without subordination. The narrative model that emerges from this need, as I will show in what follows, is afforded by paradox.

1. Paradox in the Middle Ages: Scholastic theology and mystical writings

To say that the world where Dante lived was rife with paradoxes is not a statement specific to the Middle Ages, but a truism about any world. So argues the historian Caroline Walker Bynum in her retrospective account of her academic career, titled 'Why paradox?'. Faced with evidence of a complex and often contradictory time period, the historian asks herself, 'How could medieval people have held those funny, incompatible beliefs and done such

silly, incompatible things?'. Her answer is simply, 'So do we'. [5] We are free to disagree with Bynum's view of the world as intrinsically paradoxical; and indeed, as literary critics rather than historians, it may be wiser for us to suspend our judgment as to what lies outside the text. But from the vantage point of the verifiable words on the page, we can examine the paradoxes that are an integral part of many of the writings that circulated or were composed in Dante's times. Let us look briefly at two traditions that engaged with the same paradoxes as the *Paradiso*: Scholastic theology and mystical writings.

Paradox was 'the starting point' of the Scholastic method.[6] Oral disputations and written works of theology and philosophy agreed in this practice. Each article of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* and *Quaestiones disputatae* sets up a theological problem in statements and counterstatements, and moves from there.[7] The declared aim of the Scholastic method is then to solve the contradictions arising from these statements. It is true, as Denis Janz argues, that the resolution achieved often takes the form of 'another yes and no which can be held simultaneously because of a distinction Aquinas makes in his response;'[8] but if the paradox can be said to endure, it can equally be said to never have been there in the first place. Paradox is only ever the appearance of paradox. The solution

[5] Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Why Paradox? The Contradictions of my Life as a Scholar', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 98 (2012), 433-455 (p. 435).
[6] Denis R. Janz, 'Syllogism or Paradox: Aquinas and Luther on Theological Method', *Theological Studies*, 59 (1998), 3-21 (p. 15). Janz makes a compelling case that 'Aquinas cannot be accused of solving paradox' (p. 19) by stressing the importance of the reminders, ubiquitous in his writings, of the ultimately incomprehensible nature of God. The moments in the *Paradiso* that follow Aquinas's method of solving (apparent) paradoxes often present similar reminders (*Par.* XIII, discussed below, is such a case).
[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, in *Opera Omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita* (Rome: Typographia Polyglotta, 1882-), vols. 4-12 (1888-1906), available in English as *Summa theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948). Out of seven *Quaestiones disputatae* and twelve *Questiones de quodlibet*, only one has been published in the ongoing *Editio Leonina*; collectively, they are available online as part of the Corpus Thomisticum <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html>.
[8] Janz, 'Syllogism or Paradox', p. 15.

is a reminder that if you look at it closely enough (or from a higher perspective), it isn't really paradoxical after all.

There are many passages in the *Paradiso* where Dante follows the Scholastic method, endorsing its view of paradox as merely the semblance of paradox. The most evident of these is in the heaven of the *spiriti sapienti*, where Aquinas 'himself' makes an appearance not simply as an intertextual source, but as a character in the fiction.[9] The core of *Paradiso* XIII consists in the fictional Thomas's explication of a paradoxical riddle with the method characteristic of his historical counterpart. As the character explains, a contradiction arises from Dante's faith that Adam and Christ were the only two people in whom human nature was ever perfect, and Thomas's own assertion, in canto X, that in his wisdom Solomon was second to none ('a veder tanto non surse il secondo,' *Par.* X, 114). After seventy lines of Scholastic arguments, syllogisms and objections, Thomas makes a qualification. The verb 'surse' in his sentence does not apply to human beings in general, but should be understood narrowly as referring to kings ('solamente respetto / ai regi,' *Par.* XIII, 107-108). With this qualification—'distinzion' is the theologian's technical term (lines 109, 116)[10]—the paradox ceases to be. In Thomas's words:

> Con questa distinzion prendi 'l mio detto;
> e così puote star con quel che credi
> del primo padre e del nostro Diletto.
> E questo ti sia sempre piombo a' piedi,
> per farti mover lento com'uom lasso

[9] For clarity's sake, I refer to the fictional character as simply Thomas to distinguish him from the historical Thomas Aquinas.

[10] The term 'distinzione' and its cognates occur four times in the heaven of the *spiriti sapienti* (*Par.* XI, 97; XII, 142; XIII, 109, 117), most notably in the hendyadis identifying Thomas's with the discriminating power of his discourse ('fra Tommaso e 'l discreto latino' XII, 142). In *Monarchia* III, iv, 5 Dante mentions distinction ('distinctionem') in the context of a list of logical fallacies.

e al sì e al no che tu non vedi:

chè quelli è tra li stolti bene a basso,

che sanza distinzione afferma e nega

ne l'un così come ne l'altro passo.

(*Par.* XIII, 109-117)

The *distinzion* allows the two contradictory statements to resolve their differences and discover that they can coexist without contravening Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction.[11] As Thomas liberally puts it, 'And so what I said can live with what you believe' (109-110): Solomon is the wisest king *and* Adam and Christ are the most perfect men. The discursive reasoning is there to bring into view what the form of paradox concealed, 'perché paia ben ciò che non pare' (91), so that what is hidden may appear more clearly. Paradox is an obscure, partial, preliminary form. The natural consequence of the solution of a paradox is the shedding of its paradoxical outer shell.

The Scholastic practice, then, has an ambivalent relationship with paradox, on the one hand accepting and even seeking out its appearance, on the other undermining its reality. Implicit in this practice is the tendency to treat paradox as solvable. When, for instance, Thomas Aquinas comments on such passages as the Pauline paradox 'for my power is made perfect in my weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9) he carefully distinguishes between the power of his reason and the strength of his body.[12] 'This interpretation', as Denis Janz explains, 'introduces a distinction and thereby essentially translates the paradox

[11] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 3-6, 1005a-10011b, in *Metaphysics*, trans. by Hugh Tredennick and George Cyril Armstrong, 2 vols, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); see Thomas Aquinas's commentary *Sententia Super Metaphysicam*, 5-15, available in English as *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. by John P. Rowan, 2 vols (Chicago: Regnery, 1964); reprinted in 1 vol. with revisions as *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1995).

[12] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.ii, q. 55, a. 3 ad 3; see also II.ii, q. 123, a. 1 ad 1. A similar exegetical practice is applied to various passages from Matthew: see Janz, 'Syllogism or Paradox', pp. 17-18.

into a straightforward assertion'.[13] The paradox's solution thus implies a *dissolution*: a translation of the content of the original paradox into another form, the form of discursive reasoning. In this exegetical practice, the paradoxical form is only an 'early stage' on the path that leads eventually to the discursive form. When conceived thus, paradox is bound to time not simply in the way all language is, but in a unique way, its content always waiting to be teased out and unfolded in the time it takes to give an explanation. The time that is unique to this view of paradox, then, is teleological: paradox always looks forward to its end.

The teleology intrinsic in the Scholastic method of dealing with paradoxes undoubtedly plays an important role in the *Paradiso*. As has been recognised by Lino Pertile and Elena Lombardi, the theological discussions of Beatrice and other characters are often the driving narrative force of the last cantica, pushing the reader forward with the protagonist towards the ultimate revelation.[14] For all its narrative advantage, however, this model of explication is also a matter of life and death for the *Paradiso*'s poetry. The Scholastic method of translating contradictions from a paradoxical form to a form that is discursive often uncritically informs readings of the last cantica. Benedetto Croce disparagingly called similar interpretations 'allotrie', thus underlining how they always posit a content extraneous to the words on the page: 'la teologia […] si assoggetta la poesia e la riduce a suo strumento e, in fondo, fa come se non esistesse.'[15] For these interpretations, the paradoxes of *Paradiso* can be solved by laying out their content through paraphrasis or commentary; indeed, these paradoxes have always been pointing to these commentaries. The price of the formal translation from poetry to prose, which aggrandises the interpreter

[13] Janz, 'Syllogism or Paradox', p. 17.
[14] '[T]he satisfaction of each doubt increases both his knowledge and his desire to know' (Lino Pertile, '*Paradiso*: A Drama of Desire', in *Word and Drama in Dante: Essays on the "Divina Commedia"*, ed. by John C. Barnes and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993), pp. 143-180 (p. 161). Elena Lombardi elaborates on Pertile's point in her *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montréal, 2012), p. 125.
[15] Benedetto Croce, *La poesia di Dante* (Bari: Laterza, 1921), p. 3.

as it belittles the text, is the poem itself. The poem is merely a step in the process of its explication.

Before I explain why this is not the case with the *Paradiso*, let us look at the other model of paradox considered in this chapter, the tradition of mystical writings and visions. In the years of Dante's lifetime, this tradition includes an enormous variety of genres from the apocalyptic fictions of Uguccione da Lodi, Giacomino da Verona and Bonvesin de la Riva to the religious lyrics of Iacopone da Todi and the mystical theology of Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart.[16] What these very different texts have in common, and what distinguishes them from Scholastic theology, is their emphasis not on systematic, discursive, rational understanding but on 'experiential knowledge'.[17] The very epistemology of these writings is not merely based on reason, but—so these texts claim—on experience. At the level of content, this means simply that these writings all purport to describe an experience. Vision literature and journeys to the afterlife are a case in point. At the level of form, more interestingly, it means that in reverence to that purported experience, mystical accounts often feel compelled to forego the Scholastic allegiance to Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction and rational and logical discourse. Indeed, one of the ways in which these fictions manage to fabricate textually the impression of a real, out-of-the-text mystical

[16] The relationship between Dante and these authors has been studied. For Uguccione, Giacomino and Bonvesin, see Manuele Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005); for Francis and Iacopone, see Paolo Canettieri, *Iacopone e la poesia religiosa del Duecento* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001); for Bonaventure, see Étienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, trans. by Illtyd Trethowan and F. J. Sheed (London: Sheed & Ward, 1938); Franco Ferrucci, *Le due mani di Dio: Il cristianesimo e Dante* (Rome: Fazi, 1999), pp. 58-59, and Zygmunt G. Barański, *Dante e i segni: Saggi per una storia intellettuale di Dante Alighieri* (Naples: Liguori, 2000); for Meister Eckhart, Rubina Giorgi, *Dante e Meister Eckhart: Letture per il tempo della fine* (Salerno: Ripostes, 1987), and Heinrich Fels, 'Dante und Meister Eckhart', *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch*, 27 (1948), 171-187. William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 229 lists at least twelve literary genres that can be included in the wide category of 'mystical writings'.

[17] Mysticism 'is a domain of religion that deals with the search for and the attainment of a profound *experiential knowledge* of God or of ultimate reality. It takes its literary form in mystical texts' (William Harmless, *Mystics*, p. 263, my italics).

experience, is by emphasising in their rhetorical choices the distinctive, untranslateable gap between such transcendent experience and human language. Different genres will opt for different strategies to convey that fundamental strangeness. The apocalyptic writings of Uguccione, Giacomino and Bonvesin largely confine the strangeness of the experience to their content, focusing on the description of the wonders of the afterlife; on the other hand, the poetry of Iacopone and the mystical writings of Bonaventure and Eckhart entrust that strangeness to their form, making extensive use of oxymora, anacolutha, adynata, which are part of the language of paradox.[18] Witness the following excerpt from the penultimate stage of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*:[19]

> dum mens nostra contemplatur in Christo Filio Dei, qui est imago Dei invisibilis per naturam, humanitatem nostram […] mirabiliter exaltatur, […] ineffabiliter unitam, videndo simul in unum primum et ultimum, summum et imum, circumferentiam et centrum, alpha et omega, causatum et causa, Creatorem et creaturam, librum scilicet scriptum intus et extra; iam pervenit ad quandam rem perfectam.
>
> [while our mind contemplates in Christ the Son of God, who is the image of the God that is by nature invisible, our humanity is […] marvellously exalted, […] ineffably united, as it sees, united into one, the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the centre, the *alpha*

[18] On the importance of these rhetorical figures in mystical writings, see the densely written Carlo Ossola, 'Apoteosi ed ossimoro: Retorica della «traslazione» e retorica dell'«unione» nel viaggio mistico a Dio: Testi italiani dei secoli XVI-XVII', in *Mistica e retorica: Studi*, ed. by Franco Bolgiani (Florence: Olschki, 1977), pp. 46-103; Massimo Baldini, *Il linguaggio dei mistici* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1986), pp. 47-54; Manuela Colombo, *Dai mistici a Dante: Il linguaggio dell'ineffabilità* (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1987); Giovanni Pozzi, 'L'alfabeto delle sante', in *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, ed. by Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), pp. 21-42 (pp. 38-39).

[19] Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VI (my translation).

> and the *omega*, the effect and the cause, the Creator and the creature, as a book written inside and outside; already it reaches a kind of perfection.]

The text centres on a series of antitheses. Bonaventure goes in quick succession through time, hierarchy, space, language, causation, and creation, but chooses to divide each concept up in the simplest constitutive paradoxes, each bound together by the copulative conjunction *et*. The fictional seams are not hidden but brought into view: the text does not make the paradoxes into its direct object, but draws our attention to the narrative frame afforded by the mind that experiences them ('*mens nostra contemplatur*' '*videndo*'); further, both the naming of God as '*alpha et omega*' and the comparison of the book stress the textual nature of this attempt to gesture at the ineffable. No discursive explanation follows; before we could get it, some kind of perfection has *already* been reached ('*iam pervenit ad quandam rem perfectam*').[20] The paragraph ends with the simple statement of what the culminating step of the soul's journey into God consists of: the day of rest ('*die requiei*'). The chapter again does not describe it, but performatively ends on this meditation that the rest is silence.

Much is at stake in bringing form into view as Bonaventure's passage does. The Scholastic method is based on the premise that it is possible to defuse the strangeness of paradox by translating its content into familiar discursive reasoning, thereby dissolving what is strange about its form. But mystical writings take the opposite route. They dare the reader to face the content in all its irreducible strangeness, to take the text seriously even though, especially though, it is strange. By drawing attention to the text's strangeness, they are able to prevent textuality from disappearing from under the reader's eyes. This is where the Scholastic method of dealing with paradox is more deceptive than that of mystical

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[20] Dante may have been inspired by Bonaventure's use of the adverb *iam* at the end of his own *Paradiso*: 'ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*' (*Par.* XXXIII, 143). On Dante's 'final time-defying' construct there, see Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 257.

writing.[21] For all its appeals to clarity, discursive language does not actually escape the problems inherent in every text; it merely disowns them with a magical trick. We have seen this at work in attempts to describe eternity that, however well explained, still fall into time. In contrast, mystical paradox reminds us that something as alien as eternity can never be accounted for textually unless it is expounded in a form that is founded on antinomies joined together by the conjunction '*et*', such as 'first and last', '*alpha* and *omega*'. The unignorable strangeness of the form is the way, and possibly the only way, in which the text can gesture towards its own irreducible difference from something as radically foreign to human language as eternity. The paradoxical form of mystical writings has this one advantage then: its claim is not to *describe* the content of the paradox, but to *perform* its paradoxicality; not to describe eternity, but to perform the fact that eternity, like paradox, does not obey Aristotle's rule of non-contradiction. By wearing its own insufficiency on its sleeve, mystical paradox manages to perform, rather than vainly purport to describe, the radical otherness that can only be gestured towards and never accomodated in a text.

The *Paradiso* learns important lessons from the paradoxes of Scholastic theology and mystical writings. Dante uses paradoxes according to the Scholastic model when he employs explanations in the fiction to push the narrative forward. In contrast, when he needs to point beyond the text, to an experience that transcends humanity, he follows the mystical model. But for the reader who wishes to resist teleology in her reading of the *Paradiso*, it is the mystical paradox that can provide a valid alternative model. This claim can be justified by looking at the hermeneutic problem identified above, arising from readings that effectively foresake the poetry of *Paradiso* in order to explicate it in commentaries and paraphrases; these readings seem to find a justification in the Scholastic model of paradox

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[21] As New Critic Cleanth Brooks, discussed below, writes, 'there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox' (*The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947) p. 3).

whereby a text can be explained by another—the critic's—text. It is important to notice here that in the only instances where Dante himself follows the Scholastic model, he is so doing in order to push his narrative forward—through the drama of doubts and answers, and the idea of increasing knowledge—through not to abandon it altogether; his aim is not to consume the *Paradiso*, but to fuel the writing of more of it. It is significant, then, that in the only glimpses we have of Dante ever reaching for meaning beyond his text, this is not for the sake of another text, but for experience. The *locus classicus* is the famous terzina of the first canto of *Paradiso*:

> Trasumanar significar *per verba*
> non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
> a cui esperïenza grazia serba.
> (*Paradiso* I, 70-72)[22]

Dante is known for often declaring the ineffability of his experience only to then proceed to write about it, and we will discuss instances of this more extensively later in the chapter. Suffice it to say, for now, that in contrast to the usual pattern, the terzina quoted offers a rare example of Dante ostensibly standing by his own declaration of ineffability and actually letting go, in the lines immediately following, of what he originally set out to represent. His appeal to experience exhausts the description, but also makes sure to affirm

[22] The idea is also expressed in *Par*. III, 37-39 ('a' rai / di vita etterna la dolcezza senti / che, non gustata, non s'intende mai'); X 74-75 ('chi non s'impenna sì che là su voli, / dal muto aspetti quindi le novelle'); and see also the sonnet 'Tanto gentile', 11 ('ch'intender no la pò chi no la prova'). As Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi comments, 'Dalla Scrittura (*Ps*. 33, 9; *Apoc*. 2, 17), l'idea passò […] nei testi mistici, tra i quali Bernardo, Riccardo di San Vittore e Bonaventura, tutti autori noti a Dante. Ricordiamo l'*Epistola ad Severinum de charitate* […] dove l'anima nell'estasi si immerge in Dio «gustando ciò che nessuno conosce se non chi lo riceve»' (Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *ad Par*. III, 38-39). See also Bernard of Clairvaux, *Liber de diligendo deo* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), XV, 39: 'Asserant hoc si qui esperti sunt. Mihi, fateor, impossibile videtur'.

the impossibility of any description after his own aborted one. In this, Dante follows the mystical model, though perhaps with an agonistic twist that is characteristic of its author.

It is time to return to the quotation with which this section opened. Caroline Walker Bynum was discussing the difficulties of analysing the paradoxes of the Middle Ages in her academic writings. I am no closer to answering the question of whether these paradoxes are inherent in the world itself, a question that I said I should bracket in favour of the analysis of the text. However, in light of this discussion of the traditions of medieval Scholastic theology and mystical writing a distinction between two kinds of paradox has emerged. Whereas mystical paradox keeps the stress on its form making its insufficiency unignorable, discursive reasoning (be it that of the Scholastic method or contemporary academic writing) introduces a phantomatic distinction between form and content only to identify the latter with the world beyond the text, thus bypassing the bracketing that is the starting point of any analysis of the text's workings. Before discussing paradox in *Paradiso*, then, it may be useful to keep this in mind as we consider Cleanth Brooks's words on the language of paradox: '[it] is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.'[23] If this claim has any meaning for us, it has to be for the simple reason that the object of our study is the truth of the *poem*, which consists in the indissoluble bond of form and content of the poetic text. In what follows, I will try to explore paradox in the *Paradiso* without dissolving it in the name of a putative content, but standing by its bond. The next section, then, will be devoted to the smallest possible form that paradox can take in language: the rhetorical figure of oxymoron.

2. Oxymoron as 'compact verbal paradox'

[23] Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, p. 3.

Oxymoron can be defined as a figure of speech whereby two words with contradictory meanings are coupled in one phrase; the etymology of oxymoron is itself an example of the term, as it is made up of two Greek adjectives meaning 'pointed' and 'foolish',[24] with connotations comparable to those that an English speaker perceives in the antonyms 'sharp' and 'dull'. The affinities between oxymoron and paradox should be evident, and indeed it is commonplace to define the one in terms of the other, either by calling the oxymoron a compressed, 'compact or succint form of verbal paradox',[25] or by noting that 'the structure of paradox is similar to that of oxymoron, which unites two contradictory concepts into a third.'[26] The affinity between the two figures extends to the assumptions that accompany them. Most definitions of oxymoron stress the fact that the contradiction between the two terms is only so *in appearance*. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, for instance, defines it as a 'figure of speech that yokes together two *seemingly* contradictory elements'.[27] We have seen how a comparable assumption was problematic in the Scholastic view of paradox, but it is nonetheless fruitful to think about some of the oxymora that we find in the *Commedia* as just a trick of the poetry. In *Inferno* XIV, for instance, the pilgrim encounters those who were violent against God. These damned are punished in the seventh circle, where fiery rain falls down on them like snow on windless mountains while

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[24] The Ancient Greek ὀξύμωρος is a compound of ὀξύς ('sharp, keen, pointed') and μωρός ('dull, stupid, foolish').

[25] Marvin K. L. Ching, *A Linguistic Analysis of Compact Verbal Paradox in Literature: A Semantic Interpretation of the Oxymoron*, Ph.D. dissertation, The Florida State University (1975), p. 11.

[26] 'Paradox' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene et al., 4th edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 996. See also 'Oxymoron' in David Mikics, *New Handbook of Literary Terms* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 219: 'The oxymoron is related to the paradox'.

[27] 'Oxymoron' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 988; 'A figurative […] combination of two *seemingly* contradictory words' (Raymond W. Barry and A. J. Wright, *Literary Terms: Definitions, Explanations, Examples* (San Francisco, 1966), p. 64); 'A figure of speech (rhetorical antithesis) which combines two *seemingly* contradictory or incongruous words' ('Oxymoron' in *Dictionary of World Literary Terms: Forms, Techniques, Critcism*, ed. by Joseph T. Shipley, new rev. ed. (London: Allen & Unwin), 1970); 'uniting (not opposing, as in antithesis) contrary and incompatible-*seeming* terms or states:' (Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p. 498).

scorching the sands on which they lie naked, sit or run, each according to their prescribed punishment. Dante lingers on the description of their torment:

> Sanza riposo mai era la tresca
> de le misere mani, or quindi or quinci
> escotendo da sé l'arsura fresca.
> (*Inf.* XIV, 40-42)

On first encountering this terzina, the reader will probably trip over the phrase 'arsura fresca'. Early commentators and the majority of modern ones clear up the misunderstanding, in the Scholastic-explicative mode, by glossing the adjective 'fresca' not as 'fresh' and 'cool', but as 'recent' or 'new', thus returning the reader to the torment of the damned shaking off the falling flames only to see them constantly renewed. [28] And yet our misunderstanding, originating from the double meaning of 'fresca' ('cool' *and* 'new') and its punning oxymoron with 'arsura' ('hot'), is precisely what awakes us to a more empathic appreciation of the painful torments experienced by the violent against God. The fiery rain burns *hotter* when it is *freshly* fallen: the oxymoron has an effect on the reader, and a precise poetic purpose, that defeat paraphrasis. If we then look back on the preceding terzinas we see that the ground for the punning oxymoron 'arsura fresca' has been set in the line '*piovean* di *foco* dilatate *falde'* (29) representing a rain of fire (29), and in the following comparison of that fiery rain to snow, 'come di *neve* in alpe sanza vento' (30). Both images play on the same trick of enhancing the contrast between the antonyms cold/wet and hot.

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[28] The commentators that call 'arsura fresca' an oxymoron are Manfredi Porena, Giuseppe Giacalone, and Nicola Fosca *ad Inf.* XIV, 40-42. Porena also comments on the pun, as do Gabriele Rossetti, Ernesto Trucchi and Daniele Mattalia, *ad loc.*

This kind of oxymoron I call 'poetic', as we generally expect to find it in poetic language.[29] The 'poetic oxymoron' does not purport to describe some essential or intrinsic property of the object it describes—fire is not revealed to be actually cold—but aims rather at presenting it vividly and freshly to the reader's imagination through a conspicuous rhetorical trick. The experience of reading this text is first of surprise, then of pleasure. Surprise derives from the unfamiliar form, pleasure from the realisation that one has been duped by the poet. The ensuing cognitive dissonance has the aim of involving the reader in a comprehension of the text that is not automatic. It is yet another expressive trick in the poet's bag, a *coup de théâtre* that, while representing the world under a particular light, does not really make any ontological claims about its inherent nature. Heat remains hot, rain remains cool.

There are a number of 'poetic oxymora' in the *Commedia*: they are used to express the inexhaustible hunger of the she-wolf in the first canto of *Inferno* 'che di tutte brame / sembiava *carca ne la sua magrezza*' (*Inferno* I, 49-50);[30] the duplicitousness of the fraudulent Sino who, though Greek, pretended he had defected to the Trojans so as to eventually betray them to the Greeks ("l falso Sinon *greco di Troia*', *Inferno* XXX, 98-99);[31] the bittersweetness of nostalgia, called 'il *memorar presente*' (*Purgatorio* XXIII, 117) and the rose of the blessed, which is called '*pacifica oriafiamma*' ('battle banner of peace') to highlight the fact that its triumph was achieved not in the conventional sense, through warfare, but by spreading peace (*Paradiso* XXXI, 127).[32] Purgatorial punishments, painful yet productive

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[29]For an argument for the relationship of the oxymoron to poetic language, see Yeshayahu Shen, 'On the Structure and Understanding of Poetic Oxymoron', *Poetics Today*, 8.1 (1987), 105-122.

[30] 'La lupa, che fa perdere a Dante la speranza di salire il colle […] è descritta con un ossimoro (carca […] magrezza)' (Nicola Fosca, *ad Inf.* I, 49-54).

[31] 'E adotta sottili artifici retorici' such as 'quella specie di ossimoro che è l'espressione *greco da Troia*' (Giuseppe Giacalone, *ad Inf.* XXX, 98-99, referring to Emilio Bigi, *Il canto XXX dell'Inferno'* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1963).

[32] Nicola Fosca (2003- 2015) and Robert Hollander (2000-2007) *ad Par.* XXXI, 127 notice the oxymoron.

and ultimately leading to bliss, constitute a special case. These are described by the purging souls as '*buon dolore*' and '*dolce assenzo d'i martiri*' (*Purgatorio* XXIII, 81, 86). Keeping in mind the productive outcome of their pain and martyrdom, the souls are able to teleologically contextualise their suffering and see it as *buono* and *dolce*.[33]

When we think of oxymora in poetic language, similar examples will spring to mind. After Dante, the oxymoron enjoyed great fortune in Renaissance and Baroque poetry, both in Italy and abroad, especially with the spread of Petrarchism,[34] so much so that Teodolinda Barolini calls Dante's antitheses in *Purgatorio* XXIII 'Petrarchism *avant la lettre*'.[35] Petrarch is celebrated for turning the oxymoron inward to express the psychological contradictions of his tormented self. He will remember Dante's 'arsura fresca' in his *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, where he writes the *ballata mezzana* 'Quel foco ch'i' pensai':[36]

Quel *foco* ch'i' pensai che fosse spento
dal *freddo* tempo et da l'età men *fresca*,
fiamma et martir ne l'anima *rinfresca*.
(*RVF* LV, 1-3)

[33] The commentators H.F. Tozer, Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi and Nicola Fosca *ad loc.* notice the oxymoron. The entire canto is dedicated to spelling out the apparent paradox of pleasure in the punishment, which is explained and resolved later: 'E non pur una volta questo spazzo / girando, si rinfresca nostra pena: / io dico *pena*, e dovrìa dir *sollazzo*, / che questa voglia a li alberi ci mena / che menò Cristo *lieto* a dire '*Elì*''. The concept of productive pain in the *Commedia* has been explored by Manuele Gragnolati in *Experiencing the Afterlife* and *Amor che move: Linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013).
[34] See 'Oxymoron' and 'Paradox' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, pp. 988 and 996 respectively.
[35] Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the 'Comedy'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 50. Barolini qualifies her assertion by claiming, somewhat enigmatically, that Dante's antitheses in *Purgatorio* XXIII have a 'rigour [that] is foreign to the lyric experience'.
[36] Cf. also Petrarch, *Il Canzoniere*, ed. by Gianfranco Contini (Turin: Einaudi, 1964), XXXVII, 49-50: 'Lasso, se ragionando *si rinfresca* / quel'*ardente* desio'.

Here the refrain of Petrarch's *ballata* sees Dante's punning oxymoron and, agonistically, doubles it over the two words 'fresca' and 'rinfresca', having insinuated the connotation of 'cold' into the reader with the astutely placed adjective 'freddo'. We may notice that in contrast with Dante's ultimately literal description, the fires, flames, colds and renewals in Petrarch are entirely metaphorical; something which may have led Barolini to claim about Dante's oxymora that their 'rigour is foreign to the lyric experience'.[37] Yet Petrarch's use of antitheses here, although metaphorical, expresses an experience of internal contradiction which remains all too real, and resists resolution. No amount of teleological contextualisation can explain away Petrarch's pleasant pain in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* in the same way as the 'buon dolore' or 'dolce assenso dei martiri' of *Purgatorio* XXIII.[38]

There is a different kind of oxymoron in the *Commedia* that has less to do with ornament and poetic language, but purports to tackle directly the contradictions intrinsic in the object it seeks to represent. Unlike the antinomies of the 'poetic oxymoron', the contradictions yoked together in this kind of oxymoron can never be fully accounted for or revealed to be only apparent. The famous terzinas of Bernard's prayer to the Virgin that opens the last and most paradoxical canto of the *Paradiso* are an example of just this kind of oxymoron:

> Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio,
> umile e alta più che creatura,
> termine fisso d'etterno consiglio,
> tu se' colei che l'umana natura
> nobilitasti sì, che 'l suo fattore

[37] Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, p. 50.

[38] For a recent exploration of paradoxes and teleological endpoints in Dante and Petrarch, see Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, 'From Paradox to Exclusivity: Dante and Petrarch's Lyrical Eschatologies', in *The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-Modern World: Petrarch and Boccaccio between the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. by Igor Candido (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

> non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura.
>
> Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore,
>
> per lo cui caldo ne l'etterna pace
>
> così è germinato questo fiore
>
> (*Par.* XXXIII, 1-9)

There is no way to paraphrase the oxymora in the first line of Bernard's prayer:[39] if you talk about Mary, the fact that she is both virgin *and* mother, both mother *and* daughter of her own son *and* father, even when glossed, remains unresolvedly paradoxical. The paradox does not belong to poetry any more than it does to prose. As commentators Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi and Siro Chimenz highlight, the paradox in these terzinas is not a matter of embellishment, but of fact: '[n]on vi è in esse alcuna retorica, perché tali antitesi sono un fatto'[40] and '[q]ui non sono artificio di stile, perché l'antiteticità è nel fatto stesso.'[41] And yet for all his claims of factuality, Chimenz at the same time reproaches this canto for being merely verbal and excessively artificial: 'si apre con una fiacca perifrasi e continua con un'antitesi che si risolve in giuoco di parole, di cui non starò a sottolineare l'artificio.'[42] In a similar contradiction, Daniele Mattalia can claim that these are 'antitesi concettuali fissate in diadi verbali di gusto scopertamente concettoso' even as he simultaneously holds that they state 'l'umanamente impossibile come naturale e normale'.[43] So which is it? Are these oxymora empty wordplay or do they reflect essential facts?

It is the defining property of this particular kind of oxymoron that we find in the *Commedia*—which I call 'literal oxymoron'—to be both at the same time. Within the fiction,

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[39] These oxymora, of course, have a long tradition in religious writings before Dante. Erich Auerbach discusses this tradition in the context of the *Paradiso* XXXIII in his article 'Dante's prayer to the Virgin (*Paradiso* XXXIII) and earlier eulogies', *Romance Philology*, 3.1 (1949), 1-26.

[40] Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *ad Par.* XXXIII, 1.

[41] Siro A. Chimenz, *Il canto XXXIII del 'Paradiso'* (Rome: Signorelli, 1951), p. 4.

[42] Ibid., p. 5.

[43] Daniele Mattalia (1960), *ad Par.* XXXIII, 1.

they purport to be a faithful, non-rhetorical, literal description of reality; at the level of the text, however, they remain what they are, rhetorical figures. Indeed, they flaunt their own artifice. The antitheses on which these terzinas are structured are in fact the sole mark of poetic language in a passage that is otherwise notable for its plainness.[44] As Erich Auerbach points out, 'this famous text, in its basic structure,' is simply 'a rigid composition of dogmatic statements.'[45] The language of the passage is especially lacking in metaphors.[46] When an image does appear—and it is the most hackneyed symbol of poetry conceivable: a flower[47]—it is not actually a metaphor, but the 'literal' *rosa dei beati* that Bernard sees in front of him.[48] In this general dearth of recognisable marks of poetic language, the oxymora stick out all the more as a rhetorical figure.

The self-evident literariness of the 'literal oxymoron' is another of Dante's extraordinary 'techniques of verisimilitude'.[49] With his trademark rhetorical strategy explained by Teodolinda Barolini, Dante draws attention to the self-contradictory nature of

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[44] I agree on this point with Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, Siro Chimenz (*ad loc.*) and with Erich Auerbach, who all remark on the 'plainness' of Dante's lines compared to the Marian tradition and the eulogies that are among his sources: 'Il mistero è espresso in vari modi in tutti i più noti testi mariani, dogmatici o liturgici («mater semper virgo»; «genuisti qui te fecit» ecc.), ma nessun luogo può competere con questo nudo verso dantesco, che col suo ritmo alto e la sua sobrietà assoluta – fatta di quattro parole – fa risuonare il grande mistero in apertura del canto finale del poema.' (Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *ad Par.* XXXIII, 1); 'l'espressione dantesca non fa che scolpire in termini essenziali [...], senza alcuno degli ornamenti e commenti che accompagnano i passi analoghi della tradizione mariana, l'inconcepibile miracolo' (Chimenz, *Il canto XXXIII del 'Paradiso'*, p. 4).

[45] Auerbach, 'Dante's prayer to the Virgin', p. 25.

[46] Mario Fubini points out the dearth of images in the passage: 'le antitesi si sciolgono in un'immagine, una delle rare immagini dell'orazione' (*Due studi danteschi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1951), p. 68).

[47]For the smack-in-the-face poeticity of the *fiore* (in rhyme with *amore*), witness Umberto Saba's memorable lines 'M'incantò la rima fiore / amore, / la più antica, difficile del mondo' ('Amai', *Mediterranee* (Milan: Mondadori, 1946).

[48] Fubini highlights the words 'così' and 'questo' that give literality to the image of the flower: 'Bernardo torna con lo sguardo al mondo che è suo e due semplice parole, un *così* e un *questo*, bastano a darci il senso di quella familiarità' (Fubini, *Due studi danteschi*, p. 68). For apparent metaphors that are revealed to to be literal, see also the ladder ('*escalina*') that Arnaut Daniel gestures towards in the Provençal passage of *Purgatorio* XXVI, 140-147; Dante will see the literal '*scaleo*' in *Paradiso* XXI. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the textual tradition of these lines is debated.

[49] Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 16.

the oxymoron, but imputes it to the self-contradictory nature of the content it is describing. It is by doing this that he creates the illusion of the existence of a content beyond the text. On Dante's terms, if 'Vergine madre' *appears* to be a trope, it is not because the *Paradiso* is a poetic text that uses this poetic convention, but because the reality it is describing is intrinsically paradoxical. To paraphrase Barolini, if this passage is candid in its highlighting of rhetorical figues as an issue, it is, however, far from candid in its ultimate goals, which are to displace onto Mary—here a character of the fiction—concerns that in fact belong to his poetic text.[50]

If we read Dante's 'literal oxymora' in this light, it will appear that they are paradoxical on a further level than that of their self-contradictory content. Their paradox consists in the fact that by making their fictionality obvious, they manage to gesture towards what lies beyond the fiction. It is not by chance that Dante's own metapoetic statements in the *Commedia* often take precisely the form of oxymoron. These are the 'oxymoronic formulations'[51] of the '*ver c'ha faccia di menzogna*' (*Inf.* XVI, 124), of the '*non falsi errori*' (*Purg.* XV, 117), of the 'cosa *incredibile e vera*' (*Par.* XVI, 124). With these metapoetic oxymora Dante openly declares the work that all his 'literal oxymora' perform for him covertly: 'literal oxymora' such as 'Vergine madre', or 'liberi soggiacete' (*Purgatorio* XVI, 80) and 'primavera sempiterna' (*Par.* XXVIII, 116)[52] illusionistically hold together reality and fiction; they contrive to gesture to a 'reality' beyond the poetic text by the very act of wearing their artifice on the sleeve. By being blatantly contradictory, incomplete, unsatisfying as fiction, they point to a truth beyond themselves. They are, in all the ambiguity of the oxymoron, *true fictions*.

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[50] Ibid., p. 187.

[51] Ibid., p. 60.

[52] Robin Kirkpatrick description of the effect of these lines bears witness to the mechanism of the self-evident paradox pointing beyond the fiction that I am trying to describe: the sentence 'is so evident a paradox as to be emblematic in its force, inviting one to countenance, in reason, the discrepancy between time and eternity." (Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante's 'Paradiso' and the Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 166).

Teodolinda Barolini has written eloquently on Dante's illusionism—the 'literal oxymora' that appear in the *Commedia* certainly have a place among Dante's 'techniques of verisimilitude'.[53] But I would like to conclude this section with the claim that the task Dante entrusts to his 'literal oxymoron' goes beyond this very important function. It is my claim that the 'literal oxymoron' is an instance of the paradoxes that provide Dante's text with an alternative narrative model capable of resisting the hegemony of the teleological masterplot. If in the narrative of the masterplot 'the truth' is located at the endpoint of the text, where the meaning of previous statements is interpreted retrospectively, the narrative alternative of the 'literal oxymoron' locates the truth altogether beyond the text. This is the pinnacle of Dante's illusionism. Just like the masterplot, in fact, the narrative model of paradox is itself a product of the fiction. Just like the masterplot, this fiction works by inventing a dualism between truth and falsehood; but whereas the masterplot entrusts truth and falsehood to the hierarchy of time, which identifies *before* with falsehood, and *after* with truth, the paradoxical narrative model displaces them respectively onto *inside* the fiction and *outside* the fiction. It is important to keep in mind here that what gives these categories their truth-value is not a given 'reality' outside of the fiction, but the fiction itself, which of course obeys the same laws of before-and-after or fiction-and-reality of all human language. By distracting the reader with an artificial, illusionistic distinction between a false fiction and the truth beyond it, the text is actually once more appropriating the categories of *truth* and *falsehood* for its own agenda. These forms are oxymoronic 'non falsi errori': they are fictional insofar as they are rhetorical tricks and at the same time they are literal if we buy into the fiction; they point our attention to the text and its workings by being so blatantly rhetorical and at the same time they point to the truth beyond it through the trick of their own insufficiency. At Dante's illusionistic bidding, *fiction* and *reality*, rather than

[53] Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 16.

before and *after*, are now laden with falsehood and truth. When paradox is represented, the hierarchy of time is neutralised; when the hierarchy of time is neutralised, paradox can be represented.

Paradox affords the *Commedia* an alternative narrative model to represent the kinds of 'truth' that the teleological model, by virtue of its hierarchising power, renders unrepresentable. Countering that power with paradox, Dante sacrifices Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction so as to free up a neutralised time that he can then have at his disposal in the writing of his text. This narrative model can be seen at work in the microcosm of the *Commedia*'s oxymora and related paradoxical figures, certainly, but it is also active over a more extended range, as I will show in the next section.

3. Reading long-range paradox in the *Commedia*

The narrative model of paradox can be useful for a 'lettura a lunghe campate' of some of the long-range contradictions in the *Commedia*.[54] This is the textual range where the pressure of the teleological masterplot is more strongly felt, as the pilgrim's progression through the three realms and their subject-matter can be automatically taken as the ordering principle of a hierarchical interpretation. Episodes in the *Inferno* are thus often read in line with successive revelations in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*; and the second cantica too is often read in light of the last. There are many good reasons for this hermeneutic practice, but there are as many reasons for interrogating thoroughly its blanket application to all long-range symmetries in the *Commedia*.

[54] I am borrowing the phrase from Paolo Cherchi and Selene Sarteschi, 'Il cielo del Sole: Per una lettura della *Commedia* a "lunghe campate"', *Critica del Testo*, 14.2 (2011), 311-331.

Take the following example from *Inferno* XX. As Robert Hollander points out, it is 'probably the tercet in the canto that has caused the most debate'.[55] 'Ancor se' tu de li altri sciocchi?', Virgil scolds Dante:

Qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta;
chi è più scellerato che colui
che al giudicio divino passion comporta?"
(*Inf.* XX, 28-30)

The meaning of the highly compressed one-liner 'Qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta' is clear to all commentators: when Dante appears to be moved by the infernal punishment of the diviners and sorcerers, Virgil remarks, 'Here it is more pious not to feel any pity'. What is less clear, and has been the cause of the ensuing critical debate, is everything else. Does Virgil's 'Qui' refer to hell in general, or is it limited to this *bolgia*? And consequently, should 'colui / che al giudicio divino passion comporta' be referred to Dante, whose compassion for the damned appears to question divine justice? Or should it be referred to the sorcerers and diviners themselves, whose activity impiously assumes that God's judgment 'admits of passion', i.e, can be affected by external, and more specifically human, agency?[56]

Although early commentators unanimously accepted the first interpretation, they soon puzzled over the evident contradiction with other passages in *Inferno* where Dante,[57]

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[55] Robert Hollander, *ad Inf.* XX, 28-30.

[56] Teodolinda Barolini, 'True and False See-ers in *Inferno* XX', *Lectura Dantis*, 4 (1989), 42-54 (p. 45): '[Virgil] concludes his rebuke with another fierce question, impugning those who, like the diviners, attempt to render the divine will inactive: "chi è più scellerato che colui / che al giudicio divin passion comporta?"'

[57] See Johannis de Serravalle, *ad Inf.* XX, 25-30 and Cristoforo Landino, *ad* 25-30; Benvenuto da Imola, *ad* 28-30 offers the same interpretation while holding that Virgil is talking about the soothsayers in particular, not all the damned. For the contradiction with Dante's compassion elsewhere in the *Inferno*: 'come si spiegherebbe tanta severità nel volere qui applicato un principio generale che dovrebbe essere applicato a tutto l'Inferno, se Virgilio avea piú volte lasciato che

and even Virgil himself,[58] unequivocally show compassion for the damned. Conversely, the competing interpretation that the sorcerers are impious in believing that God 'admits of passion', championed and made popular by Ernesto Parodi in a 1908 article,[59] has been found inconsistent at worst[60] and strained at best,[61] typically bringing to bear the contradiction with a passage from *Paradiso* to disprove it.[62] Made cautious or hermeneutically despairing by the debate, many recent commentators have chosen not to take a stance or to confess to the dilemmas in taking one.[63]

It is true, as these critics lament, that the text of the passage is particularly 'oscuro'.[64] If, on top of that, we make the *Commedia*'s 'internal consistency' our interpretive criterion and start following the trail of contradictions with other passages beyond the confines of the cantica, we should throw in the towel on the whole interpretative enterprise. The idea that questioning the dispositions of divine justice may be impious is

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Dante sentisse la guerra della pietà e ne mostrasse gli effetti, come dinanzi a Francesca, a Ciacco, a Pier della Vigna, a Brunetto Latini, ad altri tre Fiorentini, e questo senza fargliene mai rimprovero, non solo, ma talvolta anche assecondandolo, come per i tre Fiorentini (*Inf.* XVI, 13-18), e partecipando lui stesso al sentimento di riverente pietà, come per Pier della Vigna, per Diomede e Ulisse? (*Inf.* XIII e XXVI)' (Enrico Mestica, *ad Inf.* XX, 28-30).

[58] Siro A. Chimenz, *ad Inf.* XX, 28-30 lists Virgil's displays of compassion at *Inf.* IV, 19-21 e 43; V, 109-111; XIII, 50-54 e 84; XIV, 1-3; XVI, 10-18 and XXIX, 1-30.

[59] Ernesto G. Parodi, 'La critica della poesia classica del ventesimo canto dell'*Inferno*', in *Atene e Roma* 11 (1908), 183-195. Among the commentators, this interpretation has its advocates in Mestica, Steiner, Scartazzini-Vandelli, V. Rossi, Chimenz, Comparetti, Chiavacci Leonardi, Hollander.

[60] Manfredi Porena and Daniele Mattalia, *ad Inf.* XX, 29-30.

[61] Attilio Momigliano, *ad Inf.* XX, 29-30 and Natalino Sapegno, *ad* 28-30.

[62] 'Prima di tutto non è vero che la predizione del futuro sia uno sforzare i destini segnati da Dio (cfr. *Par.* XVII, 37-45)' (Manfredi Porena, *ad Inf.* XX, 29-30). The passage he refers to denies that prescience involves determinism, as following: 'La contingenza, che fuor del quaderno / de la vostra matera non si stende, / tutta è dipinta nel cospetto etterno: / necessità però quindi non prende / se non come dal viso in che si specchia / nave che per torrente giù discende.'

[63] These commentators include Grandgent, Grabher, Provenzal, Momigliano, Sapegno, Fallani, Giacalone, Bosco-Reggio, Pasquini-Quaglio; Pietrobono offers yet another interpretation, still based on referring the terzina, restrictedly, to the diviners.

[64] Attilio Momigliano, *ad Inf.* XX, 29-30. It is interesting that Momigliano uses here the word 'oscuro', as the fiction of the *Commedia* does attribute obscurity to the infernal language of the *porta dell'inferno*: 'queste parole di colore oscuro' (*Inf.* III, 10).

explicitly rejected by Piccarda in *Paradiso* IV;[65] and the notion that God is not affected by good deeds, wishes and prayers is openly contradicted by the eagle of justice in *Paradiso* XX.[66] In both instances, the comparison with *Inferno* XX is supported by striking formal parallels. If 'internal consistency' is our criterion, the only solution to the contradiction inherent in the two passages seems to be a teleological one. The interpreter's task would then consist simply in giving priority to the passage of the last cantica over its infernal counterpart and find a way to interpret the former in light of the latter.

However, if faced with these hermeneutic difficulties, we turn to the narrative model of paradox, our main criterion for the interpretation of the internal contradictions in the *Commedia*—internal consistency—falls and the tension between passages of the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso* becomes our irreducible starting point. Let us look more closely at the passage of *Paradiso* XX:

> *Regnum celorum* vïolenza pate
> da caldo amore e da viva speranza,
> che vince la divina volontate:
> non a guisa che l'omo a l'om sobranza,
> ma vince lei perché vuole esser vinta,
> e, vinta, vince con sua beninanza.
> (*Par.* XX, 94-96).

65 The passage in question is the famous terzina 'Parere ingiusta la nostra giustizia / ne li occhi d'i mortali, è argomento / di fede e non d'eretica nequizia.' (*Par.* IV, 67-69). The paradox that 'giustizia' may appear 'ingiusta' in *Paradiso* is formally mindful of the paradox that the 'pietà' should be dead in order to be truly alive in *Inferno*.

66 I am referring to the lines '*Regnum celorum* vïolenza pate / da caldo amore e da viva speranza, / che vince la divina volontate' (*Par.* XX, 94-96). The formal parallels are discussed below. See also *Purg.* VI, 28-46, where Virgil himself maintains that God is affected by prayers (so long as they do not come from pagans).

The eagle talks of a 'vïolenza' that affects and overcomes the realm of heaven and 'la divina volontate', thereby effectively paraphrasing the words of the 'scellerato […] / che al giudicio divino passion comporta' (*Inferno* XX, 29-30) as interpreted by Parodi and his disciples. The verb 'pate', used by the eagle, is an etymological match for Virgil's 'passion', and both cast God in a theologically tricky position of passivity to human agency. The contradiction lies in the fact that whereas in the *Inferno* this divine passibility is refuted as an impiety, in the *Paradiso* it is authoritatively affirmed.

The keyword, then, is 'passion'. In his essay '*Passio* as passion', which also discusses the passage from *Paradiso* XX, Erich Auerbach traces the semantic and cultural development of the term 'passion' from its etymological roots of passive suffering to a Christian idea of suffering as a redemptive activity, and beyond. What is unprecedented about this paradoxical concept of '*passio*', in Auerbach's view, is its distinctive ability to 'move between two poles that stand in opposition to one another.'[67] The Passion of Christ, for Auerbach, provides a model for the Christian whose 'goal was not to withdraw from the world as a way of avoiding suffering and passion. Instead they intended to prevail over the world precisely by suffering.'[68]

A similar model of suffering can be seen as surfacing behind the irreducibly paradoxical lesson of *Inferno* XX and *Paradiso* XX. Not only does this paradoxical understanding make up the substance of the eagle's speech on God's will as 'prevailing over the world', in Auerbach's words, by being prevailed upon ('vince lei perché vuol esser vinta, / e, vinta, vince con sua beninanza', *Paradiso* XX, 98-99), but it also informs the passages of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* in their correlation. From the nudge to Christ's Passion in the keywords 'passion' and 'pate', to the biblical allusion to his advent in the line '*Regnum*

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[67] Erich Auerbach, '*Passio* as passion' [1941] in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. by James I. Porter, trans. by Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 165-187 (p. 179).
[68] Auerbach, '*Passio* as passion', p. 170.

celorum vïolenza pate' lifted *verbatim* from Matthew 11:12 ('regnum caelorum vim patitur et violenti rapiunt illud'), the text alternatingly affirms in *Inferno* and *Paradiso* first what is called, in theological terms, God's impassibility and then its opposite, God's passibility.[69] And indeed Dante's poem offers a complete representation both of the inflexibility of God's justice and the openness of his mercy, alternatingly expressed. Such an accepting understanding of the long-range 'internal contradictions' of the *Commedia* is only possible if we take them at their word. The narrative model of paradox thus helps us resist the teleological reading that makes 'internal contradiction' a justification for its hierarchical ordering of the text in value-laden views of 'before' and 'after'.

4. Coexistence of narrative models of teleology and paradox

The seamless alternation between different narrative models is the most striking mark of Dante's mastery of storytelling. Although the proportion of text devoted to the different models changes as the story progresses, there is no definitive shift from one model to another, no forthright abjuration of one in the name of another. The very idea that there should be a palinode is rather imparted by the dominant model of the teleological masterplot, which only belongs to the fiction. In practice, the *Commedia* remains agile in its alternation of the various models and it demands similar agility from its readers to the very end. The coexistence of the different narrative models is the subject of this section, which focuses on *Paradiso* XXXIII.

4.1. Teleological plot and paradoxical content

[69] Teodolinda Barolini talks of 'Dante's alternating strategy, his attempt to accomodate a synchronic paradox to the unfolding diachrony of his text' (*Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 193).

The last canto of *Paradiso* is possibly the most forward driven of the *Commedia*. At the level of the plot, it contains the fulfilment of the desire that has been fuelling the pilgrim's journey, the desire that moves everyone to their ultimate end. The whole of *Paradiso*, if not the entire *Commedia*, has been anticipating and building up to this moment; the plot of the poem is even rehashed once more in Bernard's speech, where it is described as one continuous movement leading up to the vision of the 'ultima salute':

> Or questi, che da l'infima lacuna
> de l'universo infin qui ha vedute
> le vite spiritali ad una ad una,
> supplica a te, per grazia, di virtute
> tanto, che possa con li occhi levarsi
> più alto verso l'ultima salute.
> (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 22-27)

The two terzinas sum up the Commedia's basic plot from beginning to end, stretching it out from the prominent rhyme-words 'infima lacuna / de l'universo' to the 'ultima salute'; in reading these lines, our desire to make sense of the sentence and its syntax suspensefully draws us forward to the last words, which point towards the story's impending and ultimate vision of God. About a hundred lines later, the final vision of God—it seems inevitable to use such rich adjectives as 'final' and 'ultimate' when discussing it—will appear at the end of the book, in a textual place that we are used to regard as structurally decisive, establishing once and for all the meaning of the entire work. The solidarity between plot and structure, in the microcosm of these lines as well as in the poem as a whole, is very significant here; and it can be appreciated all the more if we consider that this solidarity, which we may take for granted, is deliberately constructed by the author of the *Commedia*.

The pilgrim's desire for the end of his journey and the reader's desire for the ending of the sentence (and the book) join forces and overlap to bring the narrative to its climax. The 'end' of the *Paradiso*, in all its connotations of 'conclusion', 'aim', 'fulfilment', is where both the pilgrim and the reader's desire are fulfilled, where the ultimate meaning of the pilgrimage and the text lies.[70] Indeed, so persuasive is the teleological masterplot at work here that no discussion of *Paradiso* XXXIII can resist including the charged descriptors 'final', 'last', 'ultimate', 'end'. In this, they follow in the wake of Dante's own crafty appropriation of these words in his last canto.[71] Teleology is most powerful at the *telos* of the *logos*: right at the end of the text.

And yet for all its unequivocal teleological investment, *Paradiso* XXXIII is also the canto of paradox and the narrative model it brings with it. The canto begins, as we have seen, with the oxymora that portray Mary in a language that aims to neutralise the hierarchy of time. The 'action' of the canto consists then in the vision of three great philosophical and theological paradoxes: the problem of the one and the many (represented as a book binding together the quires scattered throughout the universe, ll. 85-93), the mystery of the Trinity (three circles of different colours and the same size, ll. 115-20) and the mystery of the Incarnation (our human image inscribed inside one of the circles, ll. 127-31). In the text, these mysteries appear—as they must—in temporal succession. In a trademark move, Dante is perfectly aware of the problem of representing eternity in a time-bound human text and tries to displace the problem onto his fiction:

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[70] Elena Lombardi has explored the relationship between desire and syntax in her *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), to which I am indebted in this discussion.

[71] Blurring the lines between fiction and text, the word 'fine', its synonyms and their cognates appear repeatedly in the last *canto* of the *Commedia*: 'termine' (3), 'ultima salute' (27), 'fine di tutt' i disii' (46), 'l'ardor del desiderio in me finii' (48), 'quasi tutta cessa mia visione' (61), and then, antonymically, 'valore infinito' (81); I disagree with Teodolinda Barolini, then, when she claims that *Paradiso* XXXIII 'den[ies] beginnings and endings' and 'evades narrative distinctions' (*Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 252)—in the recurrence of 'fine' and its synonyms Dante seems rather to parade them: teleology is never defeated.

Non perché più ch'un semplice sembiante
fosse nel vivo lume ch'io mirava,
che tal è sempre qual s'era davante;
ma per la vista che s'avvalorava
in me guardando, una sola parvenza,
mutandom'io, a me si travagliava.
(*Par.* XXXIII, 109-114)

These lines explain the successive appearance of the three mysteries as the phenomenological perception of Dante; in the central line of the terzinas, the object of the vision is said to remain in itself unchanged and beyond temporal succession ('tal è sempre qual s'era davante'). Around this line, however, the subjective change of perception is expressed with words that subtend a development; a teleological development leading to a definitive vision. The verb 's'avvalorava' that refers to Dante's sight, in fact, is not time-neutral but signifies improvement, refinement. It is fully teleological, suggesting a hierarchy between the visions. As has often been the case in the *Paradiso*, the more Dante sees, the stronger his senses become ('la vista [...] s'avvalorava / in me guardando', 'mutandom'io'); the stronger they become, the more clearly is he able to see ('una sola parvenza / [...] a me si travagliava'). The last canto is but a dramatisation of this paradisiacal ploy of increased sight, with its three successive visions apparently getting closer and closer to the 'truth'.

It may be helpful to think back to the Scholastic model of paradox discussed above, whereby the 'content' of a paradoxical statement can be explained in another form as one's understanding of it matures. In this positivistic understanding of paradox, as I have shown, contradictions are only such in appearance and can be dissolved into a non-paradoxical form. As we have seen in our discussion of *Paradiso* XIII, this practice of solving paradox is

often dramatised in the *Commedia*'s narrative of doubts, questions, and answers through which Dante reaches greater and clearer knowledge, and thus pushes the narrative forward. In the vision of *Paradiso* XXXIII, however, the three mysteries are never explained further in a non-paradoxical form, but Dante simply abandons each vision in turn for the next one. Thus although the entire episode of the final vision is constructed as a progressive path toward increased sight and understanding, in practice it is but a succession of mysteries. The teleological model is at work in the ploy of improving vision, serving a narrative function as it pushes forward the narrative; it gives a sense of developing 'action', appealing to our desire for a plot, as we are led to believe that where there is improvement of understanding, the reader is getting closer to a final 'truth'. At the same time, however, Dante attributes the temporality of the three visions to his fiction so as to free up time for use in narrative without it compromising the timelessness of heaven; the fiction soberly reminds us, even as the verb 's'avvalorava' suggests otherwise, that there is no hierarchy between the coexistence of the one and the many, the coexistence of three in one, and the coexistence of the divine and the human. The three visions represent three different mysteries of the same God, and these remain in paradoxical relation with one another. They remain, in other words, equivalent—unteleologised. Once more, Dante manages our expectations that time should carry a hierarchy, an expectation that he himself has planted in us and that he now successfully contains with the alternative model of paradox.

4.2. The 'time' of antanaclasis

The last of the three visions of *Paradiso* XXXIII offers the final example of paradox counteracting time. The object of the vision is the mystery of the Incarnation, which appears to Dante as our human image painted in the same colour as the circle of the Trinity in which it is inscribed. The terzinas that portray this vision suspensefully withhold

the syntactic resolution of the sentence until the fifth line, where the image contained in the circle—the 'nostra effige'—is finally revealed:

> Quella circulazion che sì concetta
> pareva in te come lume reflesso,
> da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,
> dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,
> mi parve pinta di nostra effige:
> per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.
> (*Par.* XXXIII, 127-132)

The syntax of the sentence comes to a pause on the 'nostra effige', while the most paradoxical aspect of the vision—the fact that our image is visible in the circle even though it is 'del suo colore stesso'—is easily skipped over by the reader eager to find out what the pilgrim has seen. What he has seen, is something impossible to see, a visual paradox, an image that can somehow be discerned though not discernible from its background.[72] Dante parodies the attempt to understand such an image rationally, with the celebrated simile of the geometer wholly bent on squaring the circle and failing to make sense of it in his thought (133-136). He then returns us once more to the paradoxical image he has crafted:

> tal era io a quella vista nova:
> veder voleva come si convenne

[72] Several commentators have noted the impossibility of the image: Raffaello Andreoli, *ad Par.* XXXIII, 127-132; G.A. Scartazzini, *ad* 130; Giacomo Poletto, *ad* 127-132; Carlo Steiner, *ad* 130-131; Carlo Grabher, *ad* 127-132; Ernesto Trucchi, *ad* 127-132; Emilio Pasquini and Antonio Quaglio, *ad* 127-131; Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *ad* 130. Nicola Fosca, *ad* 127-132. See also Mirko Tavoni, 'La visione di Dio nell'ultimo canto del *Paradiso*', in *Dire l'indicibile: Esperienza religiosa e poesia dalla Bibbia al Novecento*, ed. by Cesare Letta (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2009), pp. 65-112 (p. 82 *et passim*).

l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova.

(*Par.* XXXIII, 136-138)

The vision that appears to Dante is the visual equivalent of the rhetorical figure of 'antanaclasis'. As the antanaclasis requires us to recognise two different meanings in two words that look identical—as, typically, when Dante uses in the same terzina 'ombra' (shadow) and 'ombre' (souls) in *Purgatorio* XXVI, 7-9—,[73] so here we are provoked to discern two different images in the same colour. Dante is neither new to this trope nor to its visual equivalent; indeed he often couples them in the same canto.[74] 'Visual antanaclases' are found, for instance, in the image of the indiscernible 'perla in bianca fronte' of *Paradiso* III, 14, used to represent the souls' deceptively insubstantial appearance in the heaven of the moon,[75] or in the simile of the hoar frost that is mistaken for snow in *Inferno* XXIV, 4-5 ('la brina in su la terra assempra / l'imagine di sua sorella bianca'). All these instances filter the image through the eyes of a viewer inside the fiction, but whereas the sameness of the two images in the previous cantos is revealed to be a misperception, the paradoxical colour-identity of the circle and our human image in *Paradiso* XXXIII holds up to Dante's scrutiny. The pilgrim in the fiction finds that the last vision he sees is not an apparent

[73] 'e io facea con *l'ombra* più rovente / parer la fiamma; e pur a tanto indizio / vidi molt'*ombre*, andando, poner mente.' (*Purg.* XXVI, 7-9).

[74] Teodolinda Barolini relates visual image and antanaclasis (in the form of a *rima equivoca*) in her discussion of *Paradiso* III: 'The image of the pearl on a white forehead ("perla in bianca fronte" [*Par.* III, 14]) visually relays the idea of subtle shades of difference within an overarching unity (in this case the whiteness that encompasses both pearl and forehead), as, in the linguistic sphere, do the rhyme words "vòto" ("empty") and "vóto" ("vow"): here the same sound encompasses two different meanings' (*Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 182). Guy P. Raffa affords a similar insight with regard to *Inferno* XXIV, the canto with the highest density of *rime equivoche*: 'The repetition of the word *piglio* (21, 24) is the third instance of equivocal rhyme in the opening verses of canto XXIV. These examples of poetic doubling, two words which look and sound the same but have different meaning, reinforce the image of doubling, the hoar froast that is mistaken for snow' (*Divine Dialectic: Dante's Incarnational Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000), p. 41).

[75] John Freccero calls this an 'anti-image'. As he comments, '[The] comparison is obviously self-defeating' and 'irreducibly literary' (*Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 212-13).

antanaclasis, but a 'literal' one that resists resolution. Between the first two antanaclastic images and the one in *Paradiso* XXXIII, then, there is the same qualitative difference that we find between the 'poetic' and 'literal oxymora'; one is a figure of speech that can be explained away, the other points to an irreducible 'reality'.

There is more to the last vision of *Paradiso* XXXIII. With the visual antanaclasis, it expresses the mystery of the Trinity not through a rhetorical figure, which takes place in time, but through an image, which in the fiction is non-temporal, simultaneous. This is, of course, a fictional, mental and entirely impossible image, but one whose impossibility does not exactly take place on the page in the same way as that of oxymora and paradoxes, which are verbal and immediately recognisible as paradoxes; instead, it relies on the reader to try to construct in her imagination a vision that is impossible to see. The insistence on the verbs of seeing in these lines is not another technique of verisimilitude, but aims to invite the reader to imitate the pilgrim in imagining an impossibility. It is important to notice at this point that the language of the last vision does not make use of any paradoxical figures of speech such as oxymoron. But although the perfectly 'normal' expression 'dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso' is immediately intelligible, it is impossible to conceive the image it is describing. It is indeed true, as Robin Kirkpatrick matter-of-factly points out, that the imagery of the last canto does not contain a 'sequence of paradoxes or of "clues" but a conspicuously normal presentation of colours, shapes, numbers and consequences.'[76] The paradox, in fact, does not lie in the 'conspicuously normal' words it

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[76] Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante's 'Paradiso' and the Limitations of Modern Criticism*, p. 150. Kirkpatrick sees 'the stable phrase', as he calls it, as a characteristic feature of the poetry of the *Paradiso*. Cf. also the introduction to his translation of Dante's *Inferno* (London: Penguin, 2006), which stresses the importance of 'plain style and syntax' in the *Commedia* (p. ciii). On Dante's plain language see also T. S. Eliot's 'Dante' [1929] in *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) pp. 237-277, p. 252; Giuseppe Ledda's comments on the 'parole […] nude' of *Purgatorio* XXXIII, 100-101 ('*Tópoi* dell'indicibilità e metaforismi nella *Commedia*', *Strumenti Critici*, 83.1 (1997), 117-141, pp. 139-140); and Elena Lombardi on the 'chiare parole e […] preciso / latin' of *Par.* XVIII, 34-35 (*The Syntax of Desire*, pp. 143-144).

uses, but one step removed, in the impossible image they encourage the reader to construct in her imagination.

The visual antanaclasis functions by asking the reader to perform the impossibility that oxymoron more blatantly depicts in words. Both tropes declare their own fictionality, but the oxymoron is immediately recognisable on the page, while the visual antanaclasis takes a second longer to identify. That second is a time that does not extend on the page in the same way as the swift but recognisable juxtaposition of words of the oxymoron, but elapses within the reader, who is asked to try to construct an impossible image, necessarily fails, and returns to the image. This very movement is dramatised in the plot of the lines quoted (127-138), which move from the impossible circle to the failing geometer and back. The reader, like the pilgrim, experiences the 'paradoxicality' of the hypostatic union of the human and divine nature of Christ; she experiences it not in the time of the words on the page, but in the time it takes her to realise that the image is impossible. In a discursive text, meaning is created through a string of words that are read in time; but in the last canto of the *Paradiso*, time is contracted and so the reader is given responsibility for taking over the function that time has in a text. Meaning then takes place not in the time of the text, but in the time it takes the reader to imagine the impossible circle, and fail.

4.3. The ineffability topos

It is not by chance, then, that the dialectic between words and their failure is one of the great themes of the fiction of the *Commedia*. We have already encountered the theme in the celebrated terzina from the first canto of the *Paradiso*, where Dante declares the impossibility of putting into words the experience of transcending humanity. The narrator of the *Commedia* cites a series of obstacles to the writing of his poem: the insufficiency of the pilgrim's senses, the failure of his memory to retain what he did see and hear, and the

inadequacy of language to express the little that he managed to retain.[77] Indeed, as the author declares in the first canto, the subject of the last cantica is not heaven *per se*, but only the portion that the narrator still remembers: 'quant'io del regno santo / ne la mia mente potei far tesoro' (*Paradiso* I, 10-11). There is a noticeable shift, here, from the ineffability of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. In the first canto of *Inferno*, the narrator attributes the inability to 'ridir' how he came to the dark wood to a drowsiness which is temporary, personal and morally charged ('io non so ben ridir com'i' v'intrai, / tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto', *Inferno* I, 10-11). In contrast, in the equivalent canto of *Paradiso*, the lines,

e vidi cose che ridire
né sa né può chi di là su discende.
(*Par.* I, 5-6)

make use of the impersonal subject 'chi' and the gnomic present tenses 'sa', 'può' and 'discende'. The inability to 'ridir' heaven is not personal and transient, but universal and definitive, a structural problem; the allusion contained in these lines to Paul's own inability to tell his experience of the afterlife (2 Corinthians 12:2-3) serves as an authoritative reference to Dante's statement. This is the first instance in the cantica of a staple of the poetry of the *Paradiso* and one of its distinguishing features: the so-called 'ineffability topos'. The bibliography expressly dedicated to the subject is considerable;[78] but virtually all

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[77] Dante draws a distinction between conceptual and linguistic 'ineffabilitadi' in *Conv.* II, iii, 14-15; see Ledda, '*Tópoi* dell'indicibilità e metaforismi nella *Commedia*', p. 128. For the most recent review of the occurrences of the different ineffability topos in the *Commedia*, see Giuseppe Ledda, 'Teologia e retorica dell'ineffabilità nella *Commedia* di Dante', in *Le teologie di Dante*, ed. by Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna, 2015), pp. 261-292.

[78] Cf. Luigi Tonelli, *Dante e la poesia dell'ineffabile* (Florence: Barbera, 1934); Francesco Tateo, 'Il tema dell'ineffabile', in *Questioni di poetica dantesca* (Bari: Adriatica, 1972), pp. 173-200; Peter S. Hawkins, 'Dante's *Paradiso* and the dialectic of ineffability', in *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Anne Howland Schotter (New York: AMS Press, 1984), pp. 5-21; Colombo, *Dai mistici a Dante*; Steven Botterill, '"Quae non licet homini loqui": The Ineffability of Mystical

scholars of the *Paradiso* have to confront the paradox of a cantica that routinely states the inexpressibility of heaven even as it devotes four thousand seven hundred and fifty-eight lines of poetry to its expression.

It is indeed a paradox;[79] and like the other paradoxes of the *Commedia* it tempts scholars to take sides when it comes to interpreting it. This is particularly evident in the case of *Paradiso* XXXIII, a canto whose movement is built on three successive professions of ineffability, each contradicted in turn by the following description of the three mysteries.[80] As with the other ineffability topoi of the *Paradiso*, scholars are generally divided between those who place the emphasis on the 'negative' moment of the profession of ineffability and those who stress rather the 'positive' moment of expression.[81] When it comes to the famous terzina,

Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio

Experience in *Paradiso* I and the "Epistle to Can Grande"', *The Modern Language Review*, 83.3 (1988), 332-341; Claire E. Honess, 'Expressing the Inexpressible: The Theme of Communication in the Heaven of Mars', *Lectura Dantis*, 14-15 (1994), 42-60; Angelo Jacomuzzi, 'Ond'io son fatto scriba', in *L'imago al cerchio e altri saggi sulla 'Divina Commedia'* (Milan: Angeli, 1995), pp. 29-100 and 'Il topos dell'ineffabile nel *Paradiso*', ibid., pp. 78-113; Giuseppe Ledda, *La guerra della lingua: Ineffabilità, retorica e narrativa nella 'Commedia' di Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 2002); Giuseppe Polimeni, 'Grammatica e stile dell'ineffabile: Spitzer legge Dante', in *Leo Spitzer: Lo stile e il metodo*, ed. by Ivano Paccagnella and Elisa Gregori (Padua: Esedra, 2010), pp. 371-379. For the 'inexpressibility topos' in the Latin Middle Ages, see Ernst Robert Curtius's concise section in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 159-162.

[79] David Mikics comments on this in his entry on the subject: 'the inexpressibility topos often carries with it an automatic paradox' ('Inexpressibility topos' in Mikics, *New Handbook of Literary Terms*, p. 156).

[80] The three inexpressibility topoi proper are 'Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio / che 'l parlar mostra, ch' a tal vista cede, / e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio' (*Par.* XXXIII, 55-57), 'Omai sarà più corta mia favella, / pur a quel ch'io ricordo, che d'un fante / che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella' (106-108) and 'Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco / al mio concetto! e questo, a quel ch'i' vidi, / è tanto, che non basta a dicer "poco"' (121-123), to which perhaps the 'per tal modo / che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume' (89-90). The *canto* also refers twice to the inadequacy of the senses and intellect (139, 142) and once more to the failure of memory (94-96).

[81] The two moments are sometimes referred to as 'apophatic' and 'cataphatic', borrowing the Greek forms used in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De mystica theologia*, ch. 3. See Harmless, *Mystics*, p. 101 and Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 194-205.

che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede,

e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.

(*Par.* XXXIII, 55-57)

and the similes that follow it, 'cataphatic' scholars hark back to the literary tradition of the ineffability topos as ground for dismissing it as a rhetorical convention set to play up the difficulty inherent in the subject-matter and thus show off the author's prowess;[82] conversely, 'apophatic' scholars take the topos at its word and seek to show how the *Paradiso*'s language 'breaks down'[83] and surrenders to 'silence'.[84] One can see how these readings might appeal to different interpretations of the *Commedia*, by promoting an image of its author as either proud proto-modern layman or awed and reverent Christian mystic. Although the two interpretations may be at odds in their ideological stance, in this case they share a methodological assumption: they take for granted some kind of determining relationship between what the fictional narrator says and the way we should interpret the *Commedia*, but they disagree over the sense of the relationship, by taking the ineffability topos as either 'playfully ironic' or in earnest.[85] When they do this, both camps are engaging

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[82] Emblematic of this position is James Miller: 'His fallback to speechless wonder is playfully ironic: what the ineffable topos is meant to signal here is, as usual, the very opposite of what it literally means' ('Introduction: Retheologizing Dante', in *Dante and the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*, ed. by James Miller (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), pp. 1-62 (p. 2)). On the rhetorical tradition of the topos, cf. Ernst Robert Curtius' contribution, noted above, and Giuseppe Ledda's analysis of the ineffable in the *Inferno*, which he relates to traditional hyperbole ('Teologia e retorica dell'ineffabilità nella *Commedia* di Dante', p. 283).
[83] Miller, 'Introduction: Retheologizing Dante', p. 2.
[84] See for instance Hawkins, 'Dante's *Paradiso* and the dialectic of ineffability', p. 9.
[85] Miller, 'Introduction: Retheologizing Dante', p. 2. Robin Kirkpatrick also notices the irony 'that the inexpressibility topos elicits from [Dante] […] some of his most highly wrought and complex poetry', but does not share Miller's conclusions ('Introduction', in Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2007), p. lix).

in what Teodolinda Barolini calls 'theologising':[86] judging the fiction in terms promoted by the fiction itself and which do not necessarily reflect the workings of the text.

This is perhaps more evident in the case of the 'apophatic' readers whose 'narrative credulity'[87] goes so far as to be blind to the basic facts of the text. It is particularly misleading, for instance, to talk about the language of the *Paradiso* 'breaking down', as this overlooks the fact that the *Paradiso* uses some of the plainest language of the poem when it is at its most paradoxical, as my analysis of the visual antanaclasis has tried to show;[88] it is even more perplexing to insist on the 'silence' of language in the face of the evidence that, for all the ineffability of the mysteries, the text does go on to represent them for a while longer. 'Cataphatic' readings, on the other hand, seem to show a more sophisticated understanding of the text, insofar as they take into account the fact that the narration continues after the profession of ineffability. These readings typically use this as evidence to interpret the ineffability ironically. And yet in so doing, they are no less subject to the laws of the fiction than their 'apophatic' counterpart. The criterion they are adopting in their interpretation of the text, in fact, arises from the most insidious and pervasive of the *Commedia*'s constructs, the teleological masterplot.

Indeed, the interpretation of the ineffability topos in the *Paradiso* cannot ignore the fact that, formally, the narrator's professions of inexpressibility take turns on the page with poetic acts of expression. It is precisely this formal alternation, repeated three times in *Paradiso* XXXIII, that gives us a clue to the way in which these are to be interpreted. In explaining the narrator's profession of ineffability as ironic in light of the poetry that follows it, 'cataphatic' readings base their interpretation on the criterion of temporal

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[86] Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 17.
[87] Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 16.
[88] The adjectives 'plain' and 'simple' along with 'stable' and 'normal' are Robin Kirkpatrick's. For his insistence on the plain style of the *Paradiso* see n. 76 above.

hierarchy promoted by the fiction of the *Commedia*. The teleological prejudice can be distinctly perceived in James Miller's discussion of the topos:

> [Dante] has trained us through nearly a hundred cantos […] to read the temporary "failure" of his words as a cue for the imminent triumph of speech over silence—the ecstatic silence that paradoxically gives rise to the inexhaustible 'effability' of the Sacred Poem![89]

Miller's temporal expressions 'temporary failure', 'imminent triumph' and 'gives rise to', and his discounting of the ineffability as a mere 'cue' for what follows it, order the succession of ineffability and 'effability' in a teleological hierarchy where the former points to the latter and is superseded by it. I contend instead that we are closer to an understanding of the workings and meaning of the professions of ineffability of the *Paradiso*, if we think of them in line with the narrative model afforded by paradox. Dante's insistence on alternating them with demonstrations of effability, in other words, is not to be ordered in a teleological hierarchy that privileges one side of the paradox or the other, but the two should rather be read simultaneously, as equals in a neutralised time. Only then can the nuances of the fiction be understood. It is true that we should take the narrator seriously and acknowledge that 'when Dante confesses the inadequacy of his words, he means what he says';[90] but equally, we should take him seriously also when he then describes the indescribable. If we follow through the 'automatic paradox' that 'ineffability carries with it' to its implications,[91] we will see that the narrative model that I have analysed over the course of this chapter is particularly relevant for the present discussion. By not taking for granted the hierarchy of telological time, the paradoxical model can help us make

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[89] Miller, 'Introduction: Retheologizing Dante', p. 2.
[90] Kikpatrick, 'Introduction' to Dante's *Paradiso*, p. lx.
[91] David Mikics cited in n. 79 above.

sense of the ineffability topos as a 'reminder' of inexpressibility whenever something is actually expressed; just as the representations of the *Paradiso* act as a 'counter-reminder' whenever the ineffable is professed. Witness the terzina already quoted:

> Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
> che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede,
> e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.
> (*Par.* XXXIII, 55-57)

While it is absurd to take seriously the narrator's statement that ''l parlar [...] cede' to the point of claiming that the poem is 'stopped in its tracks [...] "a tanto oltraggio"';[92] it is also misleading to cite the fact that the poem continues for another eighty-eight lines as evidence that the statement is entirely ironic. The 'oltraggio' Dante speaks of here is not expressed *qua* content, in the shape of a perfectly rational description of the mystery of the one and the many that follows this terzina. Rather, the 'oltraggio' is *performed* in the poetic act of going beyond the ineffability topos with words. The coexistence and equivalence of ineffability and effability, in a paradoxical model, is what accomplishes this performance. The cataphatic representation does not delete or surpass the apophatic topos teleologically, but works together with the apophatic moment to perform the paradox of its 'oltraggio'. It is not the *representation* of the 'oltraggio' that expresses something of its essence, but its *performance* in the paradoxical alliance of ineffability and effability that exceeds the laws of human expression and thus captures an essential aspect of the 'reality' it is pointing towards.

[92] Hawkins, 'Dante's *Paradiso* and the dialectic of ineffability', p. 16. On this 'oltraggio', see Lino Pertile, *La Punta del Disio: Semantica del desiderio nella 'Commedia'* (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2005), pp. 247-263.

The paradoxical alternation between the ineffability topos and the poetic expression takes advantage of paradox's ability to neutralise teleological time. The paradoxical model frees up time as a building block in the narrative construction of the *Paradiso*, and thus opens up for Dante the possibility of expressing an essential trait of the transcendent, excessive, *oltraggiosa* 'reality' that is the subject matter of the *Paradiso*.[93] This 'reality' is not put into words directly, by expressing the ineffable *qua* content (which is impossible), but indirectly, by performing the paradoxical form of ineffability which is then left for the reader to experience. Just like the oxymoron, the long-range paradox and the visual antanaclasis, the ineffability topos and its contradiction hold together two unresolved antinomies to create an illusionistic experience of the aspects of Dante's vision that resist Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction inherent in discursive reasoning. Indeed, the coexistence between the ineffability topos and its contradiction can be read as thematising the paradoxical workings of the formal devices analysed in this chapter. These rhetorical tricks all draw attention to the non-discursive form of the text and, by apophatically declaring its insufficiency, make the reader focus on the words of the *Paradiso* even as they cataphatically point beyond them.

5. The role of the reader

In the preceding discussion, I have shown the ways in which the fiction of the *Commedia* manages meaning by divesting of value the antinomies *before/after* and attributing it instead

[93] Erich Auerbach wrote eloquently of excess as a distinctive character of Dante's universe, which he considered 'richer, deeper, and more dangerous than pagan antiquity's culture of the person, for it inherited from the Christian religion out of which it sprang and which it finally overcame a sense of disquiet and a drive towards excessiveness' (Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 176). As James I. Porter notes, for Auerbach Dante's poem is exemplary of a world that is 'driven not simply by a need for more, but by a need for "too much," for excess (*das Zuviel*)' ('Introduction', in *Time, History and Literature*, p. xxviii).

to the binary *fiction/reality*. These two sets of antinomies are the building blocks, respectively, of the teleological masterplot and the narrative model of paradox. Dante's teleology makes meaning by placing the 'truth' of the fiction at the end of a string of words that are read in time; paradox, on the other hand, neutralises the hierarchy of time so as to allow the expression of self-contradictory truths in a sequence of words without resolving the first contradiction into the last one. Meaning, then, is no longer entrusted to the time of the text, which is neutralised, but to the time it takes the reader to make rational sense of a paradox and fail. The reader's desire for meaning is thus used to create an illusionistic perception of 'depth' in a text that is otherwise a two-dimensional fiction unfolding through time. Similarly to a painting in perspective, the *Commedia* depicts a distinction between *fiction* and *reality* on the surface of the fiction itself. Paradox thus makes the reader focus closely on the words on the page, while simultaneously exploiting their professed inadequacy and the reader's own desire for meaning to illusionistically conjur up the third-dimension where the truth of the text purportedly lies.

The representation of the Trinity that opens the heaven of the sun inhabited by the *spiriti sapienti* will shed light on the hermeneutic process associated with reading the paradoxes of the *Paradiso*:

> Guardando nel suo Figlio con l'Amore
> che l'uno e l'altro etternalmente spira,
> lo primo e ineffabile Valore
> quanto per mente e per loco si gira
> con tant'ordine fé, ch'esser non puote
> sanza gustar di lui chi ciò rimira.
> (*Par.* X, 1-6)

To my knowledge, it has not been noticed before that all the depictions of the Trinity in the *Commedia* include in the representation a fictional viewer through the eyes of whom this greatest of mysteries is seen.[94] With this choice, I contend, Dante dramatises the essential role of his reader in the experience of the paradoxes of his poem. The two terzinas of *Paradiso* X introduce the semantic field of sight from the very first word 'Guardando', which describes the self-reflexive gaze of the Father into the Son in the loving relationship of the Holy Spirit. The syntax of the terzinas is a masterpiece of suspense. We do not find out who the subject of the verb 'Guardando' is until the third line 'lo primo e ineffabile Valore', and we do not get the main clause's finite verb 'con tanto ordine fé' until the fifth line; even then, the resolution of the syntax is again delayed, as the adjective 'tanto' commits us to the consecutive clause 'ch'esser non puote / senza gustar di lui'; the grammatical subject and syntactic resolution of this clause are postponed, one last time, until the end of the terzina, in the relative clause 'chi ciò rimira'. On these three words the sentence comes to rest. They are a *coup de theatre*: they turn the reader's attention on the reader, who suddenly recognises herself as 'chi ciò rimira', the person holding the whole sentence, and the universe it describes, in her view; and sure enough Dante goes on to address her as reader in the following lines ('Leva dunque, lettore, a l'alte rote / meco la vista […]' *Paradiso* X, 7-9). Rearranging her understanding of the sentence as a series of nested and concentric Chinese boxes, and her position in it, the reader will recognise this representation as a circular *mise en abyme*: here we are, in our universe, reading a work of fiction where we find ourselves represented as we contemplate the God that looks over all of this. The seamless transition between the fiction of the text and the reality of the reader has at its hinge the discovery that a reader, in which you may recognise yourself, is the

[94] Representations of the Trinity are other than than the one of *Paradiso* X discussed here, are found at *Purg.* III, 34-36, where it is hubristically searched by 'our reason'; *Par.* XIII, 55-60, where it is mirrored in the creation; *Par.* XIII, 25-27, *Par.* XIV, 28-33 and *Par.* XXXI, 28-30, where it is sung or contemplated by the blessed, and *Par.* XXXIII, 115-120 and 124-138.

grammatical subject of the sentence.[95] The person responsible for joining the world of the fiction and that of reality, giving the text its third-dimension, is the real reader. The moment she recognises herself in 'chi ciò rimira' she will have done the dirty work of welding together fiction and reality, thus setting the seal on the *Commedia*'s narrative illusionism.

More than the teleological masterplot which already has the temporality of the text to lade with value, the narrative model of paradox requires the reader's collaboration. It is the reader who, through the act of holding together two contradictory elements and joining them in her mind, creates the illusion of a reality beyond the fiction, where meaning lies. Without a reader mindful enough to experience the performance of the contradiction, paradox is not merely incomplete, but a risky poetic strategy, lending itself easily to partial readings that privilege any one aspect over others. Just like the representations of the Trinity in the *Commedia*, the ultimate paradox always needs someone to gaze on it in wonder.

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[95] Eugenio Montale will remember this syntactic construct in his 'L'anguilla', *La bufera e altro* (Venice: Pozza, 1956). The last lines of the poem 'puoi tu / non crederla sorella?' reveal the second person 'tu' to have been the grammatical subject of the sentence all along, with a similar recognition/estrangement effect.

Chapter 2

Alternative Endings and Parallel Lives

I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel [...] about fabricating the past,

but into an actual present alive with multiple futures.

Ben Lerner, *10:01*[1]

Dante's masterplot—his personal take on the Christian narrative of 'innocence, straying, saving divine intervention, repentance and redemption'[2]—finds its most authoritative and purest formulation halfway through the *Commedia*, in Beatrice's speech in the Garden of Eden (*Purgatorio* XXX, 109-45). At this stage, the pilgrim has already undertaken the first three steps of the journey and the canto ends with the word 'pentimento'. The last step of redemption, we are led to imagine, does not lie too far ahead.

However, in contrast with the exemplary function of this biographical story, its plot is, unexpectedly, hijacked. The momentous facts of Dante's life are told in the most straightforward possible order, in the indicative mood of storytelling, but two aberrant conditional sentences appear:

Non pur per ovra de le rote magne,

che drizzan ciascun seme ad alcun fine

[1] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 194

[2] Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, 'Introduction' to *Purg.* XXX.

secondo che le stelle son compagne,

ma per larghezza di grazie divine,

che sì alti vapori hanno a lor piova,

che nostre viste là non van vicine,

questi fu tal ne la sua vita nova

virtüalmente, ch'ogne abito destro

fatto averebbe in lui mirabil prova.

(*Purg.* XXX, 109-117)

Everything in the syntax of these three terzinas—from the suspenseful 'Non' / 'ma' construct and parallel relative clauses it holds ('che drizzan', 'che sì alti vapori hanno') to the adverbial clause of result 'tal' / 'che'—conspires to delay the disclosure of what Dante was indeed like in his youth. But at the turn of the line, when the reader might expect such disclosure to be finally made, it is further deferred by the five-syllable-long word 'virtüalmente' on which the whole sentence pivots. The three terzinas do not describe what Dante *was*, but what he *could have been*, in the conditional ('fatto averebbe'). Spreading out before the reader's eyes is a glimpse of an alternative future, a potential life of marvellous exploits that the pilgrim, however, failed to realise.

And so Dante has had to go instead through his personal take on the Christian narrative of conversion, which Beatrice promptly rehearses to her Edenic audience. The pilgrim has had to fall after her death and consequently be saved by journeying through the otherworld; now, he must repent. The second conditional sentence reinstates the inevitable course of his life with the syllogistic necessity of a *reductio ad absurdum*:

Alto fato di Dio sarebbe rotto,

se Letè si passasse e tal vivanda

fosse gustata sanza alcuno scotto

di pentimento che lagrime spanda.

(*Purg.* XXX, 142-45)

God's high fate cannot possibly be broken, therefore Dante must repent. The conditional's function, here, is to restore narrative necessity and exorcise the very alternatives that the first conditional conjured up.

But why does Dante, in the moment of giving his masterplot its most definitive statement, put it under the pressure of an alternative storyline? If one takes the fiction of the *Commedia* seriously, one soon realises that such an alternative threatens the work that envisions it. Had Dante lived his virtuous life, he would not have carried on the journey that culminates, as we know, in the writing of the *Commedia* itself. Through this brief narrative detour, then, Dante exposes the conditions of possibility of his autobiographical masterplot as such. As John Freccero puts it, 'the exigencies of autobiography' place 'a radical discontinuity into the sequence of a life, thanks to which one can tell one's life story as though it were true, definitive, concluded'.[3] Indeed, it is thanks to a radical discontinuity such as that of Dante's sin and conversion that one can tell one's life story at all. The fact that the pilgrim's life could have gone differently *then* highlights what makes it significant *now*.

[3] John Freccero, 'The Significance of *Terza Rima*', in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 258-271 (p. 265). Peter Brooks notices similar radical discontinuities in Rousseau's autobiographical writing: 'There are many [...] contrivances of finality and endstop in the *Confessions*: conversion, fall (from childhood, from grace, into authorship, into publicity, etc.), and even simulacra of death [...]. There is a repeated insistence on special experiences and unique moments that open and close epochs in Rousseau's life, as if in an attempt to demarcate and stabilize the passage of life and time. As Sartre claimed, in order to narrate one's life one must become one's own obituary' (Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 33). Fredric Jameson analyses comparable disruptions as necessary for creative thinking, in his study of Utopian writing, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Fictions* (London-New York: Verso, 2005), esp. pp. 10-21 and 211-233.

In the following canto, Beatrice asks Dante to identify the moment of discontinuity. When Dante confesses that 'Le presenti cose / col falso lor piacer volser miei passi'—that is, took his life off course—(*Purg.* XXXI, 34-35), Beatrice tells again a contrasting, alternative story. But this time she does not phrase it in terms of what Dante *could* have done, but of what he *should* have done:

> sì udirai come in contraria parte
>
> mover *dovieti* mia carne sepolta.
>
> (*Purg.* XXXI, 47-48)

The verb 'dovere', here and three more times over the next four terzinas,[4] expresses the moral imperative of the straight path Dante should have taken even as it obscures the narrative exigency of the straying path he did in fact take. Straight and straying, in this case, have two interchangeable meanings depending on whether we view them from a narrative or moral standpoint: the biographical errancy is as necessary to Dante's narrative as the righteousness is to his moral message—and vice versa.

We see, then, that even at the core of his masterplot, where uniformity is most expected, the centrifugal tendencies of Dante's alternative storylines play a structural role. Insofar as the fiction of the *Commedia* purports to be a truthful narrative of past events, it recounts them as they happened; insofar as it purports to be a moral narrative, it represents them as they should have happened. Bridging the gap between these two modes of discourse—which are normative inasmuch as they are determined, in the fiction, by historical facts and a moral order—alternative stories and parallel lives explore the realm of

[4] 'qual cosa mortale / *dovea* poi trarre te nel suo disio? / Ben ti *dovevi* [...] levar suso', 'Non ti *dovea* gravar le penne in giuso', *Purg.* XXXI, 53-56, 58, my italics.

possibility throughout the *Commedia*. They open up a creative and imaginative space at the heart of the poem, which is structural to its narrative thinking.

It is not by chance that in the few other instances when Dante imagines alternatives to his own life story, these are couched in the context of discussions of how heavenly influence determine his personal destiny, a question which Dante examines at greater length in *Purgatorio* XVI and *Paradiso* VIII and refers to throughout his text. The quotation above, where Dante gives credit to claims of a positive astral influence on his life by having them confirmed by Beatrice's authority, is not the first time that we hear about his own blessed potential. In *Inferno* XV, Brunetto Latini introduces the theme when he famously tells his former student:

> *Se* tu segui tua *stella*,
> non puoi fallire a glorïoso porto,
> se ben m'accorsi ne la vita bella
> (*Inf.* XV, 54-56)

His words and hypothetical construct are picked up by the narrator himself in *Inferno* XXVI:

> e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i' non soglio,
> perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;
> sì che, *se stella* bona o miglior cosa
> m'ha dato 'l ben, ch'io stessi nol m'invidi,
> (*Inf.* XXVI, 21-24)

Lastly, in *Paradiso* XXII:

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;
e poi, quando mi fu grazia largita
d'entrar ne l'alta rota che vi gira,
la vostra region mi fu sortita,
(*Par.* XXII, 112-20)

The word 'ingegno' looks back to the comparable passage in *Inferno* XXVI, while 'stelle', 'grazia' and 'rota' allude to Beatrice's Edenic speech of *Purgatorio* XXX. The first thing to notice about these three passages is that—from the prophecy of a damned soul and the narrator's hesitant pledge, to Beatrice's unequivocal revelation and the narrator's ultimate acknowledgment—the *Commedia* stacks on its claims of a positive heavenly influence on its protagonist's life all the authority it can progressively muster. In the face of this indubitable investment in what we must not forget is but the fictional masterplot, one should also notice that the stress is not placed on the certainty of Dante's brilliant future, but always on its conditional, tentative, pending status. In *Inferno* XV and XXVI this condition is expressed by the hypothetical 'se', and Brunetto's confident indicative 'non puoi fallire' is further tempered by the qualification 'se ben m'accorsi ne la vita bella', which is itself all but unquestionable, considering that it comes from a damned soul; in *Purgatorio* XXX, as we have seen, Beatrice puts the emphasis not on Dante's promise but on its betrayal; whereas in *Paradiso* XXII Dante merely calls on the Gemini constellation to help him live

up to the strength and virtue he was imbued with at birth (straying is still very much available as a possibility). Again, there are two levels at work in these passages and both are essential to the message of the *Commedia*: on the one hand, Dante the narrator is promoting the truth-claims of his masterplot of promise, betrayal, grace, and salvation—the teleological life story that granted him the authority of a prophet on all matters—; on the other hand, however, he is no different from his readers in that he too is still on his way, both as a pilgrim in the fiction and as a man writing the book on which all his hopes of a glorious return from exile are staked. The 'cammin di nostra vita', the path of our life, looks as open and undivinable to that man as ours does now to you and me. What is crucial to these claims of Dante's potential as they are phrased, then, is not so much their prophetic certainty (the hypotheticals will all in fact turn out to be true once the pilgrim has accomplished his otherworldly pilgrimage and the author has finished the *Commedia*), as the existential truth that *in itinere* promises can be disappointed, the certainty of a prophecy is only verified retrospectively and all salvation is threatened by a fall. Dante the prophet is reminding his readers that prophets too could have been mere 'could-have-been's. No matter how supremely ordained, existence as represented in the *Commedia* is always played out on a plane of simultaneous possibilities. It is always, by its very essence, 'on the perennial verge of existence';[5] on the brink, as it were, of failure or success, of betrayal or promise, or—in terms closer to Dante's *Commedia*—of damnation or salvation.

1. The affective space: *Paradiso* VIII

Later in the chapter I will discuss the ways in which the *Commedia* finds a solution to the formal challenge of joining in one poem this binary theological view of human (after)life

[5] I am borrowing Ben Lerner's poignant expression from his novel *10:04*, p. 157.

with a more nuanced existential take.[6] Suffice it to say, for now, that because the poem's theology requires us to think of all life stories from their endpoint in the antithetical terms of the drowned and the saved—with Dante as the one temporary exception to this rule—, it does not follow that the poem itself is only interested in this binary point of view. On the contrary, the *Commedia* often promotes alternative perspectives through the souls' wishes that their life had been different. Their wishful thinking opens up a space that is tangential to the historical narrative it sparks from. Whenever such a fantastical space is opened, it is consecrated to affectivity. Thus the prophecy contained in Brunetto's words quoted above ('Se tu segui tua stella, / non puoi fallire a glorïoso porto, / se ben m'accorsi ne la vita bella') develops into an alternative storyline of mutual love: 'e s'io non fossi sì per tempo morto, / veggendo il cielo a te così benigno, / dato t'avrei a l'opera conforto' (*Inf.* XV, 58-6), which the pilgrim mirrors, when he replies, a few lines later, 'Se fosse tutto pieno il mio dimando, / [...] voi non sareste ancora / de l'umana natura posto in bando' (79-81). But this desire is not as exclusive to the damned as one may be led to expect. As high up as the heaven of the *spiriti amanti*, the blessed Carlo Martello expresses a similar wish as he imagines an alternative future of reciprocal affection: 'Assai m'amasti, e avesti ben onde; / che, s'io fossi giù stato, io ti mostrava / di mio amor più oltre che le fronde' (*Paradiso* VIII, 55-57, my italics). That wish for a different life adds a further layer to the binary distinction between the damned and the blessed, an affective dimension that literally takes on a life of its own.

[6] Two scholars talk about the 'existential' perspective in Dante: Robert Pogue Harrison and Giuseppe Mazzotta. Harrison uses the expression 'Christian "existentiality"'—ironically from the point of view of this thesis—to describe the *Vita Nova*'s recapitulation of the present in the past, which I see as the teleological masterplot *in nuce* (*The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore-London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 132 and ff.). Mazzotta uses the term 'existential' in relation to the experience of time of the *Purgatorio*, but I differ from his account which ties the future-oriented perspective of the living to a return to the past: 'In *Purgatorio,* we are given an existential sense of time, which is understood as future-oriented, as a projection into some kind of future, and, at the same time, a return to the past.' (*Reading Dante* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 117).

In *Paradiso* VIII, this personal, emotional, extravagant dimension outside the teleological timeline is so strong that in one instance it distorts the poem's syntax to the point of near-ungrammaticality. Scholars have noticed the remarkable frequency of hypothetical clauses in this canto, which indeed displays the highest concentration of 'se's in the *Commedia*: 13 over its 148 lines, compared to an average per canto of less than 5 (the other high-density canto is, interestingly, *Inferno* XV, with 12 occurrences, discussed below).[7] The hypotheticals play a structural role throughout the episode. The first of these is voiced by the prince Carlo Martello, as he answers Dante's question on his identity:

Il mondo m'ebbe
giù poco tempo; e se più fosse stato,
molto sarà di mal, che non sarebbe.
(*Par.* VIII, 49-51)

The meaning appears clear to all commentators: Carlo Martello died young; because of his death, many misfortunes will ensue, that would not have happened had he lived longer. But if we read the text more closely, we realise that the syntax is not as plain as it seems and the paraphrase proposed, which coincides, give or take, with that offered by all commentators, is actually quite strained.[8] Two communicative intentions are interwoven in these lines. On

[7] Among the scholars to have pointed out the hypotheticals: Carlo Muscetta, 'Canto VIII', in *Lectura Dantis Scaligera*: *III. 'Paradiso'* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1966), pp. 255-292 (p. 281); Michele Dell'Aquila, 'Gli spiriti amanti del cielo di Venere (*Par.* canti VIII e IX)', in *Al millesmo del vero: Letture dantesche* (Fasano: Schena, 1989), pp. 146-158, p. 152; Eugenio Ragni, 'Il canto VIII del *Paradiso*', in *I primi undici canti del 'Paradiso'*, ed. by Attilio Mellone (Rome: Bulzoni, 1992), pp. 157-175, p. 164; Michelangelo Picone, 'Canto VIII', in *Lectura Dantis Turicensis: 'Paradiso'*, ed. by Georges Güntert and Michelangelo Picone (Florence: Cesati, 2002), pp. 119-132 (p. 119); and commentators Giovanni Fallani, *ad Par.* VIII, 148; Giuseepe Giacalone, *ad Par.* VIII, 71.
[8] The only two commentators to notice the 'distorted' and 'curious' construct are, respectively, C. H. Grangent, and Charles S. Singleton, *ad Par.* VIII, 51, who, as non-native speakers, did not take this interesting syntax for granted. They both make reference to the construct of *Par.* VI, 146-48: 'e

the one hand, Carlo foresees, prophetically, that 'molto sarà di mal', much evil will ensue; on the other, he contemplates the alternative scenario in which 'se più fosse stato, / molto [...] mal [...] non sarebbe', if he had lived longer, much evil would not have happened. Thus unpacked, Carlo's thought seems perfectly intelligible, even though the extreme compression of Dante's poetry causes the sentence to test the limits of grammar. Syntactically, the prophecy 'molto sarà di mal' splits in two the hypothetical clause 'se più fosse stato' from its rightful consequence 'molto [...] mal non sarebbe', bullying the latter into a relative clause. With that very violence, the reader is made to understand, death interrupted Carlo in the fulfilment of all his promise.

The sentence has a literary antecedent, as has been recognised, in the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*:

si qua fata aspera rumpas,
tu Marcellus eris.
(*Aeneid* VI, 882-883)

The untimely death of Marcus Claudius Marcellus—Augustus's beloved nephew and successor to the imperial throne (42-23 BC)—is the supreme example of wasted potential in the *Aeneid*. This episode is the basis of Dante's portrayal of Carlo Martello.[9] The poignancy of Virgil's phrase lies all in the tension between the present subjunctive expressing the possibility ('rumpas': 'if you *could break* the dire fate...') and the future

se 'l mondo sapesse il cor ch'elli ebbe / mendicando sua vita a frusto a frusto, / assai lo loda, e più lo loderebbe.' The manuscripts do not offer notable variants for this terzina, which suggests that it seemed generally intelligible to copyists.

[9] Marcellus's precedent has been widely accepted by commentators: Carlo Grabher, *ad Par.* VIII, 142-48; Umberto Bosco-Giovanni Reggio, *ad Par.* VIII, 34-39; A. M. Chiavacci Leonardi, 'Introduzione a *Par.* VIII'. Edward Peters, 'Human Diversity and Civil Society in *Paradiso* VIII', in *Dante Studies*, CIX (1991), 51-70 (p. 62), compares Carlo Martello's untimely death to Manfredi's in *Purg.* III.

indicative of certitude ('eris': 'you *will be* Marcellus'). Marcellus will be Marcellus regardless of his future; yet there is a sense in which he will never fully be Marcellus, inasmuch as he will never get to fulfil the promise of his potential, as he would have doubtless done—the text suggests—had he defeated the death lying in his destiny.[10] But the syntactical ambiguity also allows us to read the hypothetical clause as an optative subjunctive, which may be translated thus: 'Oh, if you could only break fate! / But you will only be Marcellus'. Bearing this reading of Virgil's lines in mind, it is possible to hear a voice of regret in Carlo Martello's words, which may be rendered with alternative punctuation:

e se più fosse stato!
Molto sarà di mal, che non sarebbe.

Similarly to Marcellus's, the meaning of Carlo's life lies in the tension between 'ciò che avrebbe potuto essere e ciò che non è stato.'[11] The text tries to forestall melancholy interpretations of his story, carefully underlining, as many scholars are quick to point out, the growing 'allegrezza', the cheerfulness and joy of Carlo's soul as he relates it (*Par.* VIII, 46-49).[12] But the Virgilian allusion opens a space of disquietude, in that it betrays a trace of the regret for the individual destiny that has gone unfulfilled and a desire, within the text, for the alternative life story that would have realised that destiny. Behind Carlo Martello's

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[10] I find similar comments in Ettore Paratore's edition of Virgil, *Eneide*, trans. Luca Canali (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), p. 641: 'solo nel caso in cui riuscisse a sconfiggere l'avverso destino che lo attende, il giovane potrebbe divenire un Marcello paragonabile al suo grande proavo,' the omonymous general from the second Punic war. The 'si' of line 882, writes Paratore, 'configura un'ipotesi irrealizzabile.'

[11] Ragni, 'Il canto VIII del *Paradiso*', p. 164.

[12] Francesco Torraca, *ad Par.* VIII, 49-51; Muscetta, 'Il canto VIII del *Paradiso*', p. 281; Nino Borsellino, *Il poeta giudice: Dante e il tribunale della 'Commedia'* (Turin: Aragno, 2011).

allegedly 'impersonal', disinterested statement that his death 'avrebbe evitato molto di quel male', lies this emotional dimension.[13]

It is important to clarify that I do not mean to suggest that Dante introduces here such intertextual ambiguity with the deliberate aim to undermine the *Commedia*'s fundamentally optimistic view of the relationship between human beings and their ordained life story (as might more conceivably be argued, I think, in the case of Virgil's text); and I am not claiming either that we are witnessing here the author's slippage or an aporia in his text. I argue, rather, that lines 50-51 of *Paradiso* VIII, in their extreme compression, are the most condensed expression of the desire for unresolved contradiction that sustains and animates the entire *Commedia*. The two voices that are distinct and yet harmonised in these lines—the teleological perspective underlying the prophetic mode and the existential perspective of infinite possibilities—express two seemingly incompatible narratives, in a poetic form that makes us perceive them as non-conflictual. The moment we choose to switch on the usual kind of thinking that is aware of contradiction, it is too late—the poem has already tricked us into thinking in its poetic mode, creating for us the experience of a universe where incompatible narratives are in fact possible.

Dante plays an analogous rhetorical trick with the musical simile of the two distinct and harmonised voices in this very canto, when he compares the dance of the *spiriti amanti* to sparks in a fire and voices in polyphony: 'E come in fiamma favilla si vede, / e come in voce voce si discerne, / quand'una è ferma e altra va e riede.' (*Par.* VIII, 16-21). Thematically, the whole heaven of Venus is concerned with harmonising heavenly influences and human freedom, showing that 'the fact of their diversity makes possible a "concord" or "harmony"',[14] which in turn 'origina dalla ferma opposizione di note diverse

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[13] Muscetta, 'Il canto VIII del *Paradiso*', p. 281. The claim of the text's 'impersonality' is Muscetta's own.

[14] Patrick Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's 'Comedy'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 283. See also *Par.* VI, 124-26.

ed è inconcepibile se ne viene privata.'[15] But it is on the formal level that Dante is able to pull off poetically what he is concerned with thematically. With the antanaclasis of 'voce', the repeated word takes on two different meanings, first the choir that sustains one note collectively and then the single voice that solos over it: although 'voce' means here two opposite things, we do not experience it as contradiction.

One may bear this in mind when reading the hypothetical periods of *Paradiso* VIII, 50-144.[16] They are used to express two opposite modes of storytelling. On the one hand, the four hypotheticals in the first half of this section refer to the universe of unexpressed potential of Carlo's affective 'storia virtuale' and on its consequences for the future;[17] in the second half, on the other hand (from line 94), the hypotheticals become the means of an argumentative logic aimed at demonstrating syllogistically scientific-theological truths on heavenly influence. Dante and Carlo themselves draw attention to the logical nature of the second half of the canto as they make use of the technical terms 'deducendo' (121), 'conchiuse' (122) and 'corollario' (138); the preferred rhetorical strategy of this part, in six out of nine cases, is the *reductio ad absurdum*, which was commonly employed in Scholastic diatribes to support one's claims by demonstrating the absurdity of the alternative

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[15] Giuseppe Mazzotta, 'Musica e storia nel *Paradiso* 15-17', *Critica del testo*, 14.2 (2011), 333-348, p. 338. Although Teodolinda Barolini does not analyse those lines directly, her discussion of diversity and uniformity in *The Undivine 'Comedy': Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), ch. 8 is highly relevant here.

[16] In the ninety-eight lines from its first appearance, the hypothetical conjunction *se* appears thirteen times—on average once every two and a half terzinas. The one category of virtual hypotheticals are: 'e se più fosse stato, / molto sarà di mal, che non sarebbe' (50-51); 's'io fossi giù stato, io ti mostrava' (57); 'attesi avrebbe i suoi regi ancora / [...] / se mala segnoria [...] / [...] non avesse / mosso' (71-75); 'E se mio frate questo antivedesse / [...] / già fuggeria' (76-78). The other category of syllogistic hypotheticals are: 'S'io posso / mostrarti un vero, [...] / terrai lo viso' (94-96); 'Se ciò non fosse, il ciel che tu cammine / producerebbe' (106-07); 'ciò esser non può, se li 'ntelletti / [...] non son manchi' (109-10); 'sarebbe il peggio / per l'omo in terra, se non fosse cive?' (115-16); 'E puot' elli esser, se giù non si vive' (118-19); 'Non, se 'l maestro vostro ben vi scrive' (120); 'Natura generata il suo cammino / simil farebbe [...] / se non vincesse il proveder divino' (133-35); 'Sempre natura, se fortuna trova / discorde a sé [...] / [...] fa mala prova' (139-41); 'E se 'l mondo la giù ponesse mente / [...] / [...] avria buona la gente' (142-44).

[17] I am borrowing the helpful expression from Picone, 'Canto VIII', p. 119.

hypothesis.[18] This mechanism, especially, shows the radical difference between the two goals to which hypothetical thinking is bent in this canto: on the one hand, the scientific reasoning aims at eliminating alternative possibilities in order to enforce an exact truth; on the other hand, Carlo's virtual life story aims at exploring alternatives affectively, defending their 'thinkability'. This kind of narrative thinking precedes, in the reader's experience of the poem, our usual rational understanding. By giving free rein to alternative futures, the prince's speech expresses a model of causality that is fluid, open and free; but it does this with the same rhetorical tools which he employs to express the exact and univocal truths of theological knowledge. This is the natural development of the paradox of line 51, which gave us a chance to glimpse another side of the intrinsically paradoxical nature of the *Commedia*. Without sacrificing a human desire to a theological truth, but emphasising continuity between the two by the same formal means (the hypothetical period), Dante narrates a history that never happened through the hopes and regrets of a young prince who was never king, even as he writes about the grand march of what happened by providence. The fact that these contradictions are not perceived as such is the greatest testament to the triumph of the *Commedia*'s poetic thinking.

2. The 'disnarrated' and free will in the *Commedia*: a comparison with two twentieth-century poems and the *Convivio*

It is my contention that this attention to the alternative lives that could have been, as opposed to the predetermined storylines of what was and what should have been, is characteristic of the *Commedia*. This formal technique reflects the poem's content and is of structural importance. Alternative narratives, as I suggested above, are the formal expression of the theological doctrine of free will: they inhabit the space between the given

[18] As noted by Bosco-Reggio, *ad Par*. VIII, 106-11 and Chiavacci Leonardi, *ad Par*. VIII, 109-11.

narratives of a man's past actions and their moral value; at the same time, and more significantly, they are a reminder to the reader that the life that eventually unfolded was played out on the stage of freedom, where historical actions and their moral value are yet to be revealed. This use of alternative narratives is structural to the *Commedia*'s theological message, where freedom and the grand teleological narrative are not in contradiction, but are instead simultaneous and equally true. The formal technique itself, of course, is not original; but the structural role it plays in the poem's theology is not only unique to Dante, but, more specifically, to the narrative poetry of the *Commedia* (as opposed to the argumentative prose of Dante's treatises), as I will now show.

In his studies in the French novel, Gerald Prince formalised what I have so far called alternative or hypothetical lives as the narrative category of the 'disnarrated'. The disnarrated, according to Prince's definition, 'covers all the events that *do not* happen though they could have and are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text.'[19] Unlike virtual storylines, which take place in an imaginary world of possibility without ever having to intersect with actuality, the disnarrated is such 'only relative to a given diegesis, and only if it designates in that diegesis a possibility that remains unrealized.'[20] We appreciate best its value when it brings out the fact that the main story 'could have been otherwise, [...] *it* usually is otherwise, [...] *it* was *not* otherwise.'[21] The *Commedia* employs the disnarrated to highlight this intersection between the choices always open to free will in the present and the retrospective determinism of a teleological narrative.

The paradoxical simultaneity of these two perspectives is unique to the *Commedia*, as will appear clearer if we compare it to two twentieth-century poems concerned with

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[19] Gerald Prince, *Narrative as Theme: Studies in French Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 30.
[20] Ibid., p. 30.
[21] Ibid., p. 36.

'what might have been'. In Robert Frost's celebrated poem *The Road Not Taken*, the narrator comes to the conclusion that his ultimately arbitrary choice, one morning, at a crossroads, 'has made all the difference.'[22] We immediately recognise the symbolic implications of the narrator's dilemma, where the stress is placed on the intrinsic impossibility for humans to follow the divergent futures opened up by different choices. The impossibility lies in the linear temporality of existence and is ontological: 'I could not travel both / And be one traveler' (2-3). It is not by chance, then, that the alternative future of the road not taken remains opaque to the narrator: just like any human being, he can only sense that there was a difference, and is forever unable to know it or visualise it with any guarantee of certainty. This perspective appears to us so universal, that it is all the more surprising that anyone would argue against its pertinence to Dante's *Commedia* on the grounds of the retrospective clairvoyance achieved by the narrator in his otherworldly journey. On the contrary, the alternative perspective's function is to remind us of its pertinence right when the teleological narrative that Dante is so committed to sell us could induce us to overlook it.

But is this 'What might have been' just 'an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation', as T. S. Eliot claims in the first of his *Four Quartets*?[23] Artfully leading his reader into a disnarrative universe ('Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened / Into the rose-garden'), Eliot eventually writes, 'But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know.' Eliot's allegedly 'purposeless' virtuoso trick shows us by contrast the extent to which Dante's own exploration of the disnarrated is so essential to the *Commedia*'s inmost purpose. Just when the pilgrim finds himself at the end of time and can see clearly the main narrative thread, Dante chooses to interweave it with the existential perspective of

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[22] Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, 20, from *The Mountain Interval* (New York: Quinn & Boden Company, 1916).
[23] T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943).

free, open, undivinable choices. Similarly to the post-modern narrator of Ben Lerner's novel *10:01* quoted in the epigraph of this chapter, Dante 'resolve[s] to dilate [his] story' not in the reassuring direction of the retrospective teleological narrative, but from the viewpoint of the living, branching out 'into an actual present alive with multiple futures.'[24] The *Commedia*, therefore, finds a formal solution to the ontological problem of time's linearity, and makes that formal solution essential to the experience of existence that the poem is striving to represent. Thus we see that the alternative and disnarrated storylines of the *Commedia* slice through its narrative necessities, expressing 'the narrow cleft of earthly human history, the span of man's life on earth, in which the great and dramatic decision must fall'. This cleft, as Erich Auerbach awesomely wrote, is 'the magnificent and terrible gift of *potential freedom* which creates the urgent, restless, human, and Christian-European atmosphere of the irretrievable, fleeting moment that must be taken advantage of.'[25] As James I. Porter comments, '[i]t is the experience of these possibilities, not their realization *per se*, that Auerbach', following in Dante's footsteps, 'seeks to capture.'[26]

Indeed, it is precisely this existential dimension of potential freedom that animates the *Commedia*'s poetic form and differentiates it the most from Dante's prose in the *Convivio*. The treatment of Guido da Montefeltro in the two works offers a remarkable insight into what the *Commedia*'s poetic form brings to its theological content. As most commentators point out, the fraudulent counsel to Boniface VIII that determines Guido's damnation does not appear in the *Convivio*, where Dante speaks in praise of his conversion in no uncertain terms, calling him 'lo nobilissimo nostro latino Guido montefeltrano'

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24 Lerner, *10:04*, p. 194.

25 Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (Chicago, 1961), p. 132, my italics.

26 James I. Porter, 'Introduction' to *Time, History and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. by James I. Porter, trans. by Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. xiv.

(*Convivio* IV, xxviii, 8).[27] This discrepancy between the two works has led to some speculation as to whether further information may have induced Dante to change his mind on Guido da Montefeltro. A scholarly hunt for possible historical sources was launched.[28] In a recent article, Mirko Tavoni meticulously reviews these sources and dismisses them on grounds of their late chronology, as he reclaims Dante's 'totale libertà, potentemente e sovranamente fantastica, nel creare i suoi propri percorsi di senso.'[29] And indeed there is a sense in which that freedom to create personal meaningful paths is deeply embedded into *Inferno* XXVII, possibly more so than Tavoni himself implies, constituting what is formally the most significant difference from the Montefeltro chapter in the *Convivio*. There Dante commented on the line 'Poi ne la quarta parte de la vita' of the related canzone 'Le dolci rime d'amor ch'i' solia' with a discussion of the feelings appropriate to old age (*Convivio* IV, xxviii, 5, 7):

> E sì come a colui che viene di lungo cammino, anzi ch'entri nella porta della sua cittade, se li fanno incontro li cittadini di quella, così alla nobile anima si fanno incontro, e deono fare, quelli cittadini della etterna vita; e così fanno per le sue buone operazioni e contemplazioni: ché, già essendo a Dio renduta e astrattasi dalle mondane cose e cogitazioni, vedere le pare coloro che apresso di Dio crede che siano. [...] Rendesi dunque a Dio la nobile anima in questa etade, e attende lo fine di questa vita con molto desiderio e uscire le pare dell'albergo e ritornare nella propia mansione, uscire le pare di cammino e tornare in cittade, uscire le pare di mare e tornare a porto. O miseri e vili che

27 Mirko Tavoni, 'Guido da Montefeltro dal *Convivio* all'*Inferno*', *Nuova Rivista di Letteratura Italiana*, 13 (2010), 167-198 (p. 171), reads this as a relative superlative: 'the noblest of all Italians'.
28 See Tavoni's recent review thereof, in 'Guido da Montefeltro'.
29 Ibid., p. 174.

> colle vele alte correte a questo porto, e là ove dovereste riposare, per lo impeto del vento rompete, e perdete voi medesimi là dove tanto camminato avete!

If we read the passage closely alongside the *Commedia*, we notice that the treatise's moral language is unequivocal and normative: 'noi *dovemo* calare le vele' (3); 'così a la nobile anima si fanno incontro, e *deono* fare, quelli cittadini de la etterna vita' (5); 'O miseri e vili che con le vele alte correte a questo porto, e là ove *dovereste* riposare, per lo impeto del vento rompete' (7). The prose work relies on clear-cut value judgments: through its use of adjectives, it creates binaries between the positive 'buono marinaio' (3), 'buono mercatante' (9), 'nobile anima' (5, 7, 11) on the one hand, and the negative 'miseri e vili' (7) 'sventurati e male nati' (19) on the other; praising the former ('*Bene* questi nobili calaro le vele de le mondane operazioni', 8; '*bene* li può benedicere', 11) while inveighing against the latter in the vocative (7). The two similes of the sailor and the pilgrim certainly open up a poetic space, but they are meant as inventive *exempla*: they are the moral pattern that we the readers must follow.

Inferno XXVII, on the other hand, makes use of analogous moral language yet turns it to a radically different use. These terzinas contain Dante's most notable self-quotation of the passage from *Convivio*:

> Quando mi vidi giunto in quella parte
> di mia etade ove ciascun dovrebbe
> calar le vele e raccoglier le sarte,
>
> ciò che pria mi piacëa, allor m'increbbe,
> e pentuto e confesso mi rendei;
> ahi miser lasso! e giovato sarebbe.
>
> (*Inf.* XXVII, 79-84)

In Guido's words, the textual parallel 'ciascun dovrebbe / calar le vele' turns the original 'noi dovemo calare le vele' (*Conv.* IV, xxviii, 5) to a more prudent conditional mood, and keeps the verb impersonal ('ciascun dovrebbe') where the *Convivio*'s more overt didacticism tries to involve its audience in the first person plural ('noi dovemo'). Instead of delegating the moral normativity to the verb 'doverebbe', the poem entrusts it to its rhyme-word 'giovato sarebbe', alluding, with some restraint, to Guido's alternative life in which he withheld the fatal advice instead of giving it—a rhetorical trick he pulled in a previous conditional ('credendomi, sì cinto, fare ammenda; / e certo il creder mio venìa intero', 68-69). The value judgment implicit in the verb 'giovare' can do without a personal pronoun here because the past tense makes it clear that 'it would have helped' not in the absolute, obviously, but in Guido's particular case. The pathetic poignancy of this man's destiny is expressed in the exclamation 'ahi miser lasso!'. The 'miser' here is not some generic target of invective, as in the *Convivio* ('miseri e vili', 7), but the damned Guido da Montefeltro himself. The alternative story points to the juncture between two potential destinies, one of which was discarded at the time, and now takes on a life of its own in the affective realm of Guido's anger and regret.

In this episode, then, the *Commedia* weaves together the three narrative modes of moral duty, historical storytelling and alternative storylines into one organic whole in a manner that radically distinguishes its poetic thinking from the moral didacticism of the prose of the *Convivio*. Indeed, the narrative poem's urge to accommodate in its form the tensions between the personal and the universal, the existential and the moral, the affective and the historical, without compartmentalising them into the *Convivio*'s incompatible binaries, is essential to the theological and existential truths that the *Commedia* is concerned with at the level of its content.

3. 'La tecnica dell'episodio parallelo': parallel lives as narrative correlative of alternative lives

It is not by chance that the poetic technique of the disnarrated discussed above is employed in the context of the most artistically self-conscious parallel lives in the poem: Guido da Montefeltro's damnation in *Inferno* XXVI and his son Buonconte's complementary salvation in *Purgatorio* V. Indeed, 'la tecnica dell'episodio parallelo', as Amilcare Iannucci named it in an important essay, may be interpreted as the narrative counterpart of the poetic practice of alternative lives. What Dante achieves over the course of a few lines in one canto, he replicates over the long-range, across different canticas. Commentators have not failed to point out long-range parallels such as that of the two Montefeltros, but the significant correlation between the two techniques has gone undetected. The potential openness of Guido da Montefeltro's life, for instance, is already embedded in the text of *Inferno* XXVII independently of its purgatorial parallel, beginning with the apparent antithesis between 'uom d'arme' and 'cordigliero', warrior and corded friar (*Inf.* XXVII, 67). Faithful to its etymology, Guido's initial con-*version* over-*turns* with ease the value of the two terms. 'Ciò che pria mi piacëa, allor m'increbbe' (82), he says: these lifestyles are to him relative and easily interchangeable. It is but a natural consequence, then, that Dante expands this interchangeability over different canticas. Iannucci picks up on it, as he asks, rhetorically, 'Chi avrebbe mai pensato di trovare Buonconte tra coloro che si salvano e il padre tra i dannati? Ci si sarebbe aspettato esattamente l'opposto.'[30] Indeed, the parallel episodes pivot on 'quel «punto» in cui si decide una vita, e che è tipico di tutti i grandi racconti danteschi,'[31] Auerbach's 'narrow cleft

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[30] Amilcare Iannucci, 'Autoesegesi dantesca: La tecnica dell'"episodio parallelo" (*Inferno* XV – *Purgatorio* XI)', in *Forma ed evento nella 'Divina Commedia'* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1984), pp. 83-114 (p. 95).
[31] Chiavacci Leonardi, 'Introduction' to *Inferno* XXVII.

[...] in which the great and dramatic decision must fall.'[32] That moment is decisive, but also so elusive as to confound even a saint and a devil at the point of the men's deaths in *Inferno* XXVII and *Purgatorio* V.[33] The commentators refer to relevant disputes between angels and devils in the legendary lives of saints or in contemporary religious theatre, but the point of Dante's use of the trope is to stage the interpretative failure even of those who are supposed to be experts on the matter. The scene's reversal in the parallel episode stresses the decisive, yet elusive moment, when for the Montefeltros, as for any living person in their place, it could have gone either way. In contrast with Robert Frost's poem, Dante's speculative, creative interest lies with the anatomy of the moment that 'made all the difference', not with what that difference turned out to be retrospectively: in the fiction of his otherworldly journey, he does, after all, already know this.

In the vast universe of the *Commedia* parallel episodes are numberless, if only for the obvious fact that 'qualsiasi opera di una certa grandezza si autocommenta semplicemente creando la possibilità di una visione retrospettiva.'[34] Iannucci's article is interested in parallel lives proper (such as the Montefeltro's; Pier de le Vigne/Romeo di Villanova; Brunetto Latini/Oderisi da Gubbio), but his definition of 'episodio parallelo' also includes whole cantos sharing larger themes such as *Inferno* I (which he correlates with cantos as diverse as *Purgatorio* I, XXX, XXXI and *Paradiso* VII), and Ulysses's 'caso speciale' seen as the key to the whole poem.[35] By way of comparison, another critic, Ernest H. Wilkins, comprises in his definition of 'pendant passages' only three episodes: the Montefeltros' parallel lives, to be sure, but also analogous scenes such as 'the account of the passage of Acheron in the third canto of the *Inferno* and the account of the passage from Tiber to Purgatory in the second canto of the *Purgatorio*', and the pilgrim's encounters

[32] Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, p. 132.

[33] See Iannucci, 'Autoesegesi dantesca', p. 95 and Robert Hollander, *ad Inf.* XXVII, 112-14 on the deception.

[34] Iannucci, 'Autoesegesi dantesca', p. 93.

[35] Ibid., p. 97.

with the two Donati siblings Forese and Piccarda in *Purgatorio* XXIII and *Paradiso* III.[36] A more specific definition of what we are looking for seems desirable. In line with this chapter's interest in alternative lives, I limit my definition here to the self-contained episodes in different canticas that show significant correlation at the level of their rhetorical form and/or of the fiction of the poem *in their representation of two characters' life stories*. Thus, although the word 'folle' does indeed create many meaningful analogies between Ulysses and Dante throughout the poem, I will not consider this a parallel life proper because it is not self-contained; conversely, all self-contained episodes that are intratextually linked by a theme but not by a life story lie outside the scope of this chapter. The best example of parallel lives, as both Iannucci and Wilkins point out, is that of Guido and Buonconte da Montefeltro, but the parallel lives of Francesco and Domenico—although somewhat of an exception—are no less deliberate in their symmetry;[37] the episode of Francesca has many analogues throughout the text, yet her collocation among the lustful in the fiction of the poem makes her life a closer parallel to that of the *spirito amante* Cunizza da Romano; as a victim of envy and injustice, Pier de le Vigne suffers a similar fate as Romeo di Villanova (not to mention Dante himself), but his suicide also invites comparison with Cato; Brunetto Latini can be likened to Oderisi da Gubbio if one thinks of his story from the point of view of earthly fame, as does Iannucci; Virgil's fate as a damned pagan poet bears relation to that of the saved pagan poet Statius; more examples can certainly be put forward.

If we look at these instances we may notice that many doubles and self-divisions appear within the confines of each episode: although not as explicit as the alternative

[36] Ernest H. Wilkins, 'Reminiscence and Anticipation in the *Divine Comedy*', *Dante Studies*, 118 (2000), 95-107 (pp. 104-105).

[37] For a close reading of the two passages in parallel see Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, pp. 218-256, pointing out that 'The two narratives are, moreover, essentially the verbal equivalent of the double rainbow invoked to describe the two circles of souls' (p. 198). Barolini also remarks on the 'parallel syntax' in *Par*. X, 1-6 noticed by John Freccero, 'The Dance of the Stars: *Paradiso* X', in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 221-244 (pp. 242-43).

storylines of *Inferno* XXVII, they serve the same purpose by pointing towards the many possibilities beyond the unity of a character's life. It is true, for instance, that with the 'episodio di Romeo di Villanova (*Paradiso* VI, 127-42) [...] Dante costruisce attentamente una situazione parallela a quella dell'episodio di Pier della Vigna: una corte invidiosa, un principe ingrato, un uomo giusto', as Iannucci observes, yet it is also worth taking a closer look at the 'terzina cruciale' describing the latter's suicide that seals his fate and marks the moment when the two parallel lives diverge:

> L'animo mio, per disdegnoso gusto,
> credendo col morir fuggir disdegno
> ingiusto fece me contra me giusto.
> (*Inf.* XIII, 70-72)

Here 'Dante distingue due Pier della Vigna: uno, giusto (l'uomo che non tradì la fiducia del suo signore); l'altro, ingiusto (l'uomo che, nonostante la sua innocenza, si suicidò).'[38] The rhyme-word 'giusto', on which this self-division pivots, also serves as the link to the parallel life of Romeo, referred to simply as 'questo giusto' (*Par.* VI, 137), whose voluntary exile can thus easily be read as Pier delle Vigne's own road not taken.

Inferno XV sets up a binary comparable to that of *Inferno* XIII, when Brunetto Latini is famously compared to 'quelli che vince, non colui che perde' (*Inferno* XV, 124) among the competitors that ran a country race in Verona for the prize of a green banner: here the affirmative 'vince' struggles to counter the negative 'perde', which it cannot help but conjure up, in much the same way as 'la cara e buona imagine paterna' has to confront the 'cotto aspetto' and 'viso abbrusciato', leaving scholars free rein in their arguments as to

[38] Iannucci, 'Autoesegesi dantesca', p. 96.

which side is the more significant.[39] But in *Purgatorio* XI the terms of the antithesis are exposed in their interchangeability: doubles seem to spawn each other into infinity when Oderisi da Gubbio is overshadowed by Franco Bolognese, Cimabue by Giotto, and one Guido is replaced by his doppelgänger, soon to give way in turn to someone who looks suspiciously like Dante Alighieri himself, in an endless series of duplicates where everyone who won, also lost. Similarly, the colour of the 'drappo' that Brunetto seemed to have won turns out to be green: the 'verde […] color d'erba' (*Purgatorio* XI, 92, 115) is the ephemeral colour that in Oderisi's speech 'poco [...] dura' and 'viene e va' (92, 116). *Inferno* XV is, after all, the canto with the second highest density of hypotheticals (12 over 124 lines), as I mentioned above, and at least two of these express the wish for an alternative life that death brought to a full stop: Brunetto's words to Dante, 'e s'io non fossi sì per tempo morto / [...] / dato t'avrei all'opera conforto' (*Inferno* XV, 58-60) and the pilgrim's specular reply, '«Se fosse tutto pieno il mio dimando», / rispuos'io lui, «voi non sareste ancora / de l'umana natura posto in bando;' (79-81). But whereas the desire for an alternative storyline expressed here leaps over the ruling narrative of Brunetto's death with the power of imagination, the hypothetical periods in Oderisi's speech use the imagination to leap into his potential death:

Ben <u>non sare' io</u> stato sì cortese
mentre ch'io vissi, per lo gran disio
de l'eccellenza ove mio core intese.

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[39] I side with Hollander, *ad Inf.* 121-24: 'The canto concludes with a simile that perfectly expresses Dante's ambivalent feelings about Brunetto. He looks every bit the winner – but he is in last place [...]. The case can be made that Dante treats Brunetto in exactly both these ways'; and Chiavacci Leonardi, 1991-97, *ad Inf.* XV, 124: 'la *cara e buona imagine paterna* ha sopraffatto per sempre il *viso abbrusciato* di Brunetto? In realtà questo discorso non è fattibile, perché tutta la forza e bellezza di quella immagine, tutta la dolcezza e il dolore della grande scena infernale stanno proprio nel drammatico rapporto tra le due realtà, tra la dignità e grandezza umana di Brunetto e la sua rovina eterna'.

> Di tal superbia qui si paga il fio;
>
> e ancor non sarei qui, se non fosse
>
> che, possendo peccar, mi volsi a Dio.
>
> (*Purg.* XI, 85-90)

Through the repeated use of negative hypotheticals, Oderisi's life is represented here as the negation of a possible storyline made of unkindness and excessive desire for excellence. It is the fatal determinism of this hybristic road that Oderisi chose not to take the moment he turned to God, though free to fall. As the negation of the ruling storyline, it is the converted, rightful life, not the straying one, that is presented here as the alternative narrative.[40]

The key expression is 'possendo peccar', still able to sin. Once again the *Commedia* reminds readers that the narrative it represents as so inevitable and teleologically driven is given greater significance by the fact that it came so close to never happening. Again, the message is the plane of potential freedom on which every human action is being played even when it will eventually appear to have a retrospective meaning. The medium is through alternative endings and parallel lives. These restore the existential perspective of potentials that the teleology of the *Commedia* risks 'ending' and 'expropriating': 'Se prima fu *la possa* in te finita / *di peccar* più, che sovvenisse l'ora / del buon dolor ch'a Dio ne rimarita, / come se' tu qua sù venuto ancora?' (*Purg.* XXIII, 79-81); the afterlife is indeed described as the place where possibility is taken away, 'dove *poter peccar* non è più nostro' (*Purg.* XXVI, 132). Through alternative endings and parallel lives, the *Commedia* seeks to create this potential perspective anew.

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[40] This can be compared to Beatrice's speech in *Purg.* XXX, discussed at the start of the chapter, where Dante's virtual life of marvellous exploits is presented as a possible alternative that Dante however failed to take.

4. Interpreting alternative endings and parallel lives: *Paradiso* XIII

The potential perspective represented in the *Commedia* through alternative endings and parallel lives offers a useful alternative to the hermeneutics of teleology. A teleological prejudice is evident in many studies on the structure of the poem. When Amilcare Iannucci, for instance, writes that 'La struttura ascensionale della *Commedia* nega la perversa nozione brunettiana di cosa costituisca l'immortalità, ma è soprattutto l'episodio parallelo che distrugge il suo ragionamento,' the underlying assumption is that the relation between the two episodes is teleological, that the first life is 'denied' or 'destroyed' by the last.[41] But notwithstanding the argument that the parallel episode technique is a hierarchical strategy of self-commentary embedded in the text of the *Commedia*—whereby one episode 'rivela e capovolge' the other, 'completandolo e chiarendolo' (p. 94), or provides 'parametri critici' and 'chiavi interpretative', or 'ci riporta al contesto e illumina le intenzioni', or 'mette a fuoco il linguaggio' (p. 105)—the language of Iannucci's article couches a more dynamic and reciprocal relation between the two parallel episodes: the scholar writes, in fact, of '*mutuo* chiarimento'; the two episodes, in his words, 's'illuminano *a vicenda*'.[42] Their relation is more mutual and reciprocal. To borrow from Erich Auerbach's seminal article on figural interpretation, the two phases 'point to one another'.[43] Before one episode can be said to deny, destroy or sublimate its parallel according to the logic of teleology—which remains, let me be clear, a fundamental mode of creating meaning in the *Commedia*—, we must always first call attention to the fact that both events point to one another as two fulfilments of the same potential. It is not a case of the one fulfilling the other teleologically, but of both actualising in a different narrative the same existential potential.

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[41] Iannucci, 'Autoesegesi dantesca', p. 109.

[42] Ibid., pp. 94, 105, my italics.

[43] Erich Auerbach, 'Figura' [1938], in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. by James I. Porter, trans. by Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 65-113, p. 100.

Auerbach's study seems to be aware of the teleological as well as the existential side of the question, as his text often interweaves the two aspects. With perfect teleological logic, the Romance philologist writes that 'The first event points to the second, the second fulfils the first.' But he immediately adds: 'To be sure, *both* remain concrete events that have taken place within history. Yet, *when seen from this perspective, both also have something provisional and incomplete about them*.'[44] The sense of this 'provisional and incomplete' quality, I wish to suggest, is the sense of the present alive with multiple futures that alternative narratives and parallel episodes try to convey as they point to one another. Holding together the two perspectives, Auerbach writes, 'They point to one another *and* both point to something in the future that is still to come. This will be the actual, complete, real, and final event.'[45] 'Both' is here the keyword, one which abolishes teleology and the primacy of 'the actual, complete, real, and final event': 'there is no either/or here, no choice to be made' between the two episodes in the poem, 'It is both at once'.[46] This two-fold perspective of the *Commedia*, at once retrospective and existential, is what Charles Singleton most memorably grasps as the underlying paradox at the heart of 'the understanding of the *Commedia*':

> For the understanding of the *Commedia* does, in the end, attain to a vista in retrospect of a total unity and harmony, which is itself one of the great experiences the Poem holds for us. *But it is one experience among others and does not* (as if it were some beatific vision) *cancel out the many other experiences* that are had along the way to the end.[47]

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., p. 107.
[47] Charles S. Singleton, 'The Vistas in Retrospect', in *MLN*, 81.1 (1966), 55-80, p. 63, my italics.

In this dazzling refusal to cancel out the alternative endings and parallel lives, the *Commedia* is closer to the novel than the teleological narrative it is more often identified with.[48] In fact, this chapter's impassioned apology for the autonomy of each parallel episode from the teleological narrative, which, in Singleton's terms, seeks 'to cancel out the many other experiences that are had along the way' in the name of 'a total unity and harmony', would be almost entirely superfluous if it had as its object the genre that makes it its point to welcome the superfluous, the manifold, the contingent, the centrifugal.[49] Indeed, a novelist who could be said to be at once radically existential and radically teleological, such as Marcel Proust, depicts the narrative ploy of parallel characters as nothing short of conventional when he relates a notable dream of Charles Swann in *Un amour de Swann*. Swann has dreamt a mysterious man wearing a fez and comes to realise that he and the man were two sides of the same person:

> Ainsi Swann se parlait-il à lui-même, car le jeune homme qu'il n'avait pu identifier d'abord était aussi lui; *comme certains romanciers, il avait distribué sa personnalité à deux personnages*, celui qui faisait le rêve, et un qu'il voyait devant lui coiffé d'un fez.[50]

The impression that parallel lives are somehow more at home in the novel than in the *Commedia* says more about the teleological prejudice that holds sway over its readers than about the actual nature of this extraordinary narrative poem. Indeed, my goal in this chapter has been to show precisely how the ruling teleological narrative is offset within the

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[48] Roberto Mercuri argues that the *Commedia* anticipates the modern novel in 'Il metodo intertestuale nella lettura della *Commedia*', *Critica del testo*, 14.1 (2011), 111-151. It was an argument also made by György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

[49] Singleton, 'The Vistas in Retrospect', p. 63.

[50] Marcel Proust, *Un amour de Swann*, in *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Grasset, 1913), p. 379, my italics.

poem itself by an attention to alternative storylines, centrifugal narratives, affective spaces that work as in the novel. This is not to say that the *Commedia is* a novel, though it may be very helpful to think of it in terms of the narrative techniques active in it that one generally regards as novelistic. The passage by Proust gives the measure of the specific distance between a novel like the *Recherche* and the narrative poem *Commedia*. Proust's 'certains romanciers' are more concerned with the 'personnalité' of the characters; parallel episodes are for them a way of exploring human psychology analytically by 'distributing' it over two characters. Although Dante doubtless shares a comparable interest in characterisation, the focus of his parallel lives is not on personality *per se* as much as on its relation to the moment of salvation or damnation. The fact that this relation is not arbitrary, but structural, is characteristic of the *Commedia*. Nothing intrinsic beyond character psychology keeps together Swann and the man with the fez in the dream. The point of Dante's alternative endings and parallel lives, on the other hand, is that each character could have had the other's fate. The *Commedia* is the dramatic tale of how they could have had it, even when, in the end, they did not.

The most explicit, almost theoretical statement about parallel lives appears in *Paradiso* XIII, as Amilcare Iannucci recognised. 'Come l'episodio di Guido serve a commentare il *Convivio* IV, xxviii, 8, così quello di Buonconte commenta quello di Guido. Le riflessioni critiche di Dante su Guido sono complete o quasi: le parole di S. Tommaso riguardanti i limiti del giudizio umano nel *Paradiso* XIII, 109-42 trattano esplicitamente un tema che Dante ha rappresentato drammaticamente in *Inferno* XXVII e *Purgatorio* V.'[51] Iannucci's distinction between explicit treatment and dramatic representation is helpful when referred to the original aspects of the poetic thinking of the *Commedia* as opposed to the theoretical prose of the *Convivio*, discussed above; but, more interestingly, the

[51] Iannucci, 'Autoesegesi dantesca', p. 96. See also John S. Carroll, *ad Par.* XIII, 129-42; Ernesto Trucchi, *ad* 139-42; Umberto Bosco-Giovanni Reggio, 1979, *ad* 112-42; Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *ad* 136-38; Robert Hollander, 2001-07, *ad Par.* XIII, 133-38.

distinction also captures the internal dynamic of *Paradiso* XIII, which in turn gives an insight into how the *Commedia* asks to be read. The target of Thomas's admonition, in fact, is initially errors of reading, starting with Dante's own doubt regarding Thomas' biblical quotation of 3 Kings 3:12, in *Paradiso* X, 114.[52] The theologian then warns the pilgrim against rash judgement when it comes to '[i]l sì e [i]l no che tu non vedi' (*Par*. XIII, 114) and reproaches any person 'che sanza distinzion afferma e nega' (116) and 'chi pesca per lo vero e non ha l'arte' (123). In line with the theme of the heaven of the sun, home to the *spiriti sapienti*, Thomas attacks the speculative thinkers—first the pagan philosophers that used fallacious syllogisms, then the early heretical theologians who misinterpreted the Scriptures—in the binary technical language of logic ('distinzion', 109, 116; 'al sì e al no', 114; 'afferma e nega', 116; 'aperte prove', 124). Yet at this point Thomas moves the discussion to another plane. As recent commentators notice, the 'ancor' introduces 'a shift in the object of Thomas's measured scorn, from the schooled (philosophers and theologians) to the unschooled, ordinary folk *(*'Donna Berta e ser Martino'*)*, as well as in the subject in which their misprision functions, from thoughts about the nature of things to the afterlife of one's neighbors.'[53] The admonition against rash judgment remains the same, but 'dal giudizio filosofico (su ciò che è vero o falso) si passa a quello etico, sul comportamento degli uomini (e quindi sul loro destino eterno, di salvezza o perdizione)':[54]

> Non sien le genti, ancor, troppo sicure
> a giudicar, sì come quei che stima
> le biade in campo pria che sien mature;
> ch'i' ho veduto tutto 'l verno prima

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52 The biblical passage Dante refers to is: 'there was none like thee [Solomon] before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee' (3 Kings 3:12, King James Version).

53 Robert Hollander, *ad Par*. XIII, 130-32.

54 Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *ad Par*. XIII. See also Umberto Bosco-Giuseppe Reggio, *ad Par*. XIII, 130-32; Nicola Fosca, 2003-15, *ad* 130-32

lo prun mostrarsi rigido e feroce;
poscia portar la rosa in su la cima;
e legno vidi già dritto e veloce
correr lo mar per tutto suo cammino,
perire al fine a l'intrar de la foce.
Non creda donna Berta e ser Martino,
per vedere un furare, altro offerere,
vederli dentro al consiglio divino;
ché quel può surgere, e quel può cadere.
(*Par.* XIII, 130-42).

Here the binary terms of logic 'sì' and 'no' are translated into metaphorical allusions to salvation and damnation where the distinction becomes the temporal one between 'before' ('pria', 130; 'prima', 133; 'già', 136) and 'after' ('poscia', 135; 'al fine' 138) a determining event: the two images of the thornbush budding at last into a rose and the ship sinking as it reached the shore are examples of the constant openness of possibilities in the human world of time; the same possibilities that were explored with Guido da Montefeltro's relapse into sin and Buonconte's last-minute conversion. The seeming antithesis between 'furare' and 'offerere' (140) and between the rhyming-line 'surgere' and 'cadere' (142) is overruled as it is overturned. The pivoting-point of this decisive over-turning falls on the two verbs 'può': the reason why we must not judge rashly is 'ché quel *può* surgere, e quel *può* cadere' (142). The present in the *Commedia* is on the perennial verge of existence and always alive with multiple futures: the thief and the benefactor's lives are interchangeable for as long as this world of potential remains open. And this perspective on existence is not limited to the living alone. On the contrary, it is so deeply engrained in the theological poetry of the *Commedia*, that it is at home in heaven among the blessed ('E voi, mortali,

tenetevi stretti / a giudicar: ché noi, che Dio vedemo, / non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti', *Par.* XX, 133-35). Even there, potential remains radically open.

5. The secret as narrative freedom

I wish to conclude this chapter by observing that once we begin to see the existential dimension of the present alive with multiple futures beneath the surface of the grand teleological narrative and we appreciate how deeply embedded it is within the form of the *Commedia* in the techniques of alternative endings and parallel lives, a recurrent theme comes into view, which has important implications. In all the parallel lives I have identified, Dante relates events that were only known to the characters that tell the story. There is, in other words, no historical record of the various stories that Dante tells other than the testimony provided in the fiction of the *Commedia*. This fact, so obvious as to often pass unobserved, is self-consciously brought up by the characters themselves.[55] Enticed by Virgil's offer to have Dante refresh his 'fama', Pier de le Vigne—himself a proud keeper of his lord's 'secreto'—is induced to give a posthumous account of his innocence, which he rounds off by asking the pilgrim to publish it; similarly, Buonconte da Montefeltro claims that he will finally tell the truth so that Dante may relate it to the living, whereas Guido da Montefeltro, conversely, only agrees to break his peace when he is persuaded, mistakenly, that his story will never be divulged on earth; although Brunetto does not expressly dwell

[55] Cf. Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 326: 'throughout the *Commedia* Dante makes frequent use of shockingly unexpected appearances (Guido da Montefeltro in Hell [canto 27]; his son in Purgatory [canto 5]; Cato, a suicide, in Purgatory [cantos 1–2]; Ripheus in the Heaven of Jupiter [canto 20]; and so on) to reinforce the rhetorical effect that his voyages in the world outside of history give him special access to hidden truths'; Manlio Pastore Stocchi, 'Dante Giudice Pentito', *Rivista di Studi Danteschi*, 15.1 (2015), 28-65 (pp. 29-30): 'di colpe ignote alle cronache, di virtù sconosciute, di segreti delle coscienze che solo allo sugardo onnisciente di Dio sarebbe dato penetrare […] Dante si arroga la rivelazione quando giudica dannando o assolvendo, diciamo a mo' di esempio, Brunetto Latini, Guido e Buonconte da Montefeltro, o Stazio e Romeo di Villanova'.

on the circumstances of his sin, his presence in the seventh circle seems to come as a surprise to the pilgrim; on the other hand, Statius's conversion and salvation baffles Virgil, until the Silver Age poet in the fiction explains that he only lived as a closeted Christian ('chiuso cristiano') out of fear, pretending for a long time to be a pagan ('lungamente mostrando paganesmo', *Purg.* XXI, 88-93), and that he is now safe to reveal his secret; lastly, Justinian gestures towards Romeo di Villanova's private emotions as an exile as he imagines the praise that would rain on him if only the world knew them, and Francesca's narration brings the pilgrim into the know of the decisive, but until then private, moment when the two lovers fell in love; and this is not to mention the numerous instances, beyond our limited set of parallel episodes, when the pilgrim is acquainted with a secret, intimate or affective narration of the events that he would otherwise have had no access to—one may only consider the celebrated stories of Ulysses or Ugolino.

But in the light of this chapter it will be clear, I hope, that the secret narratives are just another way in which the *Commedia* carves out for itself a creative poetic space beyond the factual exigencies of a fictional narrative that aspires to present itself as historical. To be sure, the *topos* of the tale that was secret up until its exclusive revelation is yet another trick of Dante's realism—the rhetorical strategy of presenting his journey as real so as make it the foundation of its own truthfulness—, but at the same time the secret opens up for the author a creative space for poetic invention. Mirko Tavoni puts his finger on it in his discussion of '[i]l tema dell'infamia' in the episodes of Guido da Montefeltro and Ugolino della Gherardesca. These infamies 'di segno opposto'—'una voluta e una temuta' respectively—are '[r]iservate entrambe alla propalazione in terra di un *segreto* infamante, il che ne fa un segnale di invenzione dantesca – ma invenzione-rivelazione, imposta al lettore *sub specie aeternitatis*.'[56] Insisting on Dante's creative freedom and his autonomy from the narrative exigencies of historical accuracy, Tavoni comes full circle in the passage already

[56] Tavoni, 'Guido da Montefeltro', p. 184.

quoted in part, as he reminds us that, 'Dante non è il vice di Minosse, che adempia al suo ufficio coscienziosamente sulla base delle informazioni in suo possesso. È un poeta di audacia smisurata che, nel trattare personaggi ed episodi di storia e di cronaca, pretendendo di dirne la verità *sub specie aeternitatis* [...], si riserva com'è ovvio una totale libertà, potentemente e sovranamente fantastica, nel creare i suoi propri percorsi di senso.'[57] Guido da Montefeltro's secret narrative, with its ventures into alternative endings and its reversal into a parallel life that confounds a devil and a saint, is a testament to the imaginative, creative and affective space that the *Commedia* carves out for itself between the theological and historical necessities so unwaveringly guarded, with great wrath, by the likes of the infernal judge Minos.

[57] Ibid., p. 174.

Chapter 3

The Future in/out of the *Commedia*

But surely to tell these tall tales and others like them would be to speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect.

Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*[1]

In the previous chapter I explored the role played by the *Commedia*'s alternative endings and parallel lives in the representation of the existential perspective of the living, who are 'on the perennial verge of existence', as opposed to the retrospective perspective of the dead, who are able to understand life from its endpoint. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard expresses the difference between the two perspectives clearly in his journal:

> It is quite true [...] that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards. Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends exactly with the thought that temporal life can never properly be understood precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest in which to adopt a position: backwards.[2]

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[1] Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), p. 448.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Charlottesville, VA: InterLex Corporation, 1995), IV A 164 [1843].

The *Commedia* is based precisely on the fiction that the 'position backwards' is ultimately possible; the poem can be read as the extended fantasy of an absolute endpoint from which this mess that is life can be finally 'understood backwards'.[3] At the same time, however, Dante also interweaves in the *Commedia* the experience of 'living forwards' and, as we have seen, he employs this existential perspective to counterpoint the impressions of determinism arising from the main retrospective narrative. The interweaving of the two perspectives of perfect past and open present is an important pattern in the fabric of the *Commedia*, from the poem's famous first lines:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> *mi ritrovai* per una selva oscura
> ché la diritta via *era smarrita*.
> Ahi quanto a dir qual *era* è cosa dura
> esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
> che nel pensier rinova la paura!
> Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
> ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi *trovai*,
> **dirò** de l'altre cose ch'i' v'*ho scorte*.
> (*Inf.* I, 1-9)

The incipit of *Inferno* I is emblematic of what Maria Grazia Riccobono, inserting herself in a long hermeneutic tradition, calls 'la struttura a due tempi del poema: il presente della

[3] Cf. Prue Shaw's dictum: 'We live forward, but we understand backwards' (*Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity* (New York: Liveright, 2014), p. 134). See also John Freccero on the poem's motion, which like the *terza rima*, 'proceed[s] by a forward motion that is at the same time recapitulatory', 'The Significance of *Terza Rima*', in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 258-271, p. 263.

scrittura e il passato chiuso e compiuto del viaggio'.[4] The verb tenses of *Inferno* I establish a precise fictional timeframe: the diegetic level is evoked by the past tense ('mi ritrovai', 'era smarrita', 'qual era', 'trovai', 'ho scorte', italicised), while the extradiegetic level is entrusted to the present tense ('è cosa dura', 'rinova la paura', underlined). This dual temporality has been variously interpreted by scholars who generally conceptualise it as a distinction between Dante *personaggio* (the character that journeys through the afterlife) and Dante *poeta* (the narrator's *persona* that tells the story of that journey).[5] Of course, there is some degree of continuity between the two Dantes, as Gianfranco Contini highlights in his essay tellingly titled 'Dante come personaggio-poeta'. This continuity is specifically temporal: in the story's timeframe, *personaggio* and *poeta* are the same character at two successive points in history, the one moving forward, the other looking back along the same timeline.[6] And indeed, their 'historical' aspect is what sets these verbs apart from the other present tenses in the passage. The line 'Tant'è amara che poco è più morte' (7), for instance, expresses a kind of present that is not, strictly speaking, historical; its truth-value is universal in that it does not depend on a specific moment in time. In the first half of the line, the full weight of the adjective 'amara' would be lost on us if we took it only literally and did not know

[4] Maria Grazia Riccobono, *Dante Poeta-Profeta, Pellegrino, Autore: Strutturazione Espressiva della Commedia e Visione Escatologica Dantesca* (Rome: Aracne, 2012), p. 12.

[5] Some scholars have drawn a further distinction between Dante *poeta* and Dante *autore*, the historical man writing the poem that contains the fictional character and narrator by the same name. I am adopting the tripartite terminology of Robert Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy in Dante's 'Commedia'* (Florence: Olschki, 2008). Wilson objects to the categorisations offered by Robin Kirkpatrick (*Dante's 'Inferno': Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. xii), Chandler B. Beall ('Dante and his Reader', *Forum Italicum*, 13 (1979), 299-343 (p. 309)), and Tibor Wlassics (*Dante narratore: saggi sullo stile della 'Commedia'* (Florence: Olschki, 1975), p. 113) for failing to observe the distinction between fact and fiction.

[6] See Gianfranco Contini, 'Dante come personaggio-poeta della Commedia', in *Un'idea di Dante: Studi danteschi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), pp. 33-62, p. 34, drawing a comparison with Proust. Julia Hartley critiques the assumptions behind Contini's 'outmoded reading of Proust' as follows: 'while Contini does connect protagonist and narrator, he preserves their separation by expressing their relationship teleologically in terms of a linear evolution from the status of protagonist to poetic past' (*Literary Vocation in Dante and Proust* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 2017), p. 31). For further bibliographical references, see above, Introduction, p. 34, n. 51.

beforehand the import and consequences of the 'selva' on the pilgrim and humanity's eternal destiny; the adjective 'amara', in other words, only makes full sense once we interpret it from this eschatological perspective. Similarly, the second half of the line 'poco è più morte' is making the claim that death is *always* bitter, regardless of historical contingencies. The present is used here in its so-called gnomic aspect, to express a universal truth. Something comparable is occurring in the line 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita', where the phrase indicates a very precise historical time (the year 1300 A.D., when the thirty-five-year-old narrator lost himself in the dark wood), but does so by reference to a universal truth: a human life *always* lasts on average seventy years.[7] In its interplay of tenses, then, the first *canto* of *Inferno* already establishes the poem's meticulous timeframe: hinging on two points—the *personaggio*'s diegetic past and the *poeta*'s extradiegetic present—, it takes place on two planes—history and a universal or eschatological timelessness.[8]

But then something different happens with the occurrence of the verb 'dirò' at line 9: 'dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte'. Within the network of verbs that create the poem's timeframe, the first future tense of the *Commedia* is firmly part of historical time: the time when Dante will write down his story for us is on a continuum with the time of the (fictional) journey itself, in the early XIV century. Although still on this historical continuum, the verb 'dirò' upsets the accepted division of labour between the character that lives forward and the narrator that understands backwards. This division of labour is assumed already by the early commentators' use of the terms *agens* and *auctor* to connote the two Dantes, the one partaking in the poem's action, the other in its narration, perfectly compartmentalised. And yet in promising a future action right from the start of the poem, the *Commedia* casts the *auctor* in the role of an agent projected forward. The verb unseats

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[7] For the distinction between individual and universal (or type), see the Introduction, section 4, above.

[8] On this idea, see Auerbach, 'Figura', 106-113.

him from his safe position as the retrospective assessor of the past, and throws him in the arena with those who live forward. The narrator here is no longer simply connoting his storytelling as retrospective ('quanto a dir', *now*, 'è cosa dura', 4), but projecting the act of narration into the future ('dirò'), a time over which Dante cannot display the same mastery that he claims over narratives in the past tense. The future 'dirò', in other words, is the first of a series of significant hints that the story of Dante—*poeta* and *personaggio*—is as open at the time of writing as it was during the journey.

1. *Poeta* writing into the future

As the proemial position of the verb 'dirò' suggests, future tenses play an important role throughout the *Commedia*. Dante's openness to the future is confirmed in many passages where the distinction between *personaggio* and *poeta* not only appears to be otherwise unproblematic, but is often taken as an important criterion in the interpretation of the poem. A typical example is *Inferno* XXVI. Here Dante famously meets the Greek hero Ulysses, with whom he shares a talent for rhetoric and desire for daring voyages, but whose tragic shipwreck looms large over Dante's overworldly pilgrimage. The interpretation of the canto has generally revolved around the question of the relationship between Dante's past and present 'I': given their affinities, should we consider Ulysses an alter ego of Dante's younger and more naïve self? As the canto begins, and Dante is about ot retell the tale of his encounter, the narrator exclaims the following:

> Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio
> quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch'io vidi,
> e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i' non soglio,
> perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;

sì che, se stella bona o miglior cosa

m'ha dato 'l ben, ch'io stessi nol m'invidi.

(*Infe.* XXVI, 19-24)

The sharp one-liner 'Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio' (19) seems to confirm the distinction between the *personaggio*'s pilgrimage in the past and the *poeta*'s reflection: here the same verb (*dolersi*) is conjugated first in the *personaggio*'s past tense ('mi dolsi'), then in the *poeta*'s present ('mi ridoglio'); on the one hand, we have the diegetic past ('Allor'), on the other, the extradiegetic present ('ora'). When it comes to the line 'Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio', on the one hand we have those who, like Robert Hollander, argue that 'Dante, in this passage, is fully conscious of his *previous* "Ulyssean" efforts, undertaken by his venturesome and prideful intellect, and *now* hopes to keep them under control.'[9] On the other hand, we have Lino Pertile's critique of this position and counterargument that 'those who propose a negative view of Ulysses fail to acknowledge the importance of these verses, which reveal the poet's sympathy for the Greek hero *even now* as he writes of him.'[10] Both Hollander and Pertile's interpretations are rooted in the distinction between a 'previous' Dante and Dante 'now'; both scholars work under the assumption that the present of writing ('now') has the last word on the episode; but the teleological model implicit in this *modus legendi* goes unquestioned. What would happen to these interpretations if the narrator's present were not as definitive an endpoint as they make it out to be?

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[9] Robert Hollander, *ad Inf.* XXVI, 19 (italics mine). Hollander refers to his *Allegory in Dante's 'Commedia'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 115-16. For this 'palinodic moment', see also John Freccero, 'Dante's Ulysses: From Epic to Novel', in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 136-151.

[10] Robert Hollander, *ad Inf.* XXVI, 19 (italics again mine), referring, with fair play, to Lino Pertile, 'Dante e l'ingegno di Ulisse', *Stanford Italian Review*, 1 (1979), 35-65.

This is a necessary question once we consider the fact that, just like the poem's incipit, the context of the first part of *Inferno* XXVI does precisely this: it problematises the very possibility of the 'position backwards' on which these and similar interpretations are predicated. This occurs twice in the space of a few terzinas before and after line 19. The first instance is when the terzinas following the line 'Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio' place the stress not so much on the certainty of Dante's illustrious destiny, but on its contingency and openness to failure: the positive influence of the heavens ('bona stella o miglior cosa') is surrounded by the uncertainty of hypotheticals ('se'), as the narrator, who in theory is safe and out of danger, is represented as still at risk of losing ''l ben' that his journey has earned him. But even before that, the canto uses the narrator's prophecy of Florence's ills to remind us of Dante's continuing involvement in the future:

> Ma se presso al mattin del ver si sogna,
> tu sentirai di qua da picciol tempo
> di quel che Prato, non ch'altri, t'agogna.
> E se già fosse, non saria per tempo.
> Così foss'ei, da che pur esser dee!
> ché più mi graverà, com'più m'attempo.
> (*Inferno* XXVI, 7-12)

As Robert Wilson writes in his study of prophecies in the *Commedia*, 'this prophecy stands apart from the others as it is delivered by Dante *poeta*, and may be described as extra-diegetic', which contrasts with the way prophecies are usually delivered to Dante *pellegrino*

by other characters in his fictional journey.[11] The prophetic pose expressed by the apostrophe in the future tense ('tu sentirai') and by the imperative ('esser dee') is immediately complicated by a whole host of hypotheticals, imperfect subjunctives and conditionals ('se...', twice, 'saria', 'foss'ei', 10-11)—the formal means through which Dante explores alternative endings, as we have seen in the previous chapter. The subjunctives make it clear 'that what [Dante] has dreamt has not yet happened, whilst [...] also stat[ing] unequivocally that it must occur (11).' [12] The tension between the certainty that the events prophesied must occur ('pur esser *dee*', 11) and the uncertainty of when exactly this might happen ('non saria per tempo', 10) is at the heart of these lines. This prophecy, uttered by the narrator, hangs on his conflicted wish for his city's demise as a means to soothe the anxiety of the wait.[13] The future tense that follows ('ché più mi graverà, com' più m'attempo', 12) expresses this anxiety: the narrator is not the direct object of the prophecy but, as it were, its collateral damage. The sentence in fact is not an act of prophecy as much as of poetic imagination. The way in which the narrator will inhabit that future when the time eventually comes is available to him only imaginatively. The future remains open. Read in this light, the critical debate among early and modern commentators over whether Dante is saying here that he will be weighed down more by Florence's downfall or by the thought that it may not happen is particularly telling, since, whatever answer is proposed, the debate is a reflection of the anxiety at the heart of the passage: Dante *poeta*'s own uncertainty when it comes to living forwards.[14]

These two passages are emblematic of how the critical practice of distinguishing between Dante *personaggio* and Dante *poeta* has the unintended side effect of characterising their relationship as exclusively self-reflexive; inclining us to imagine the two Dantes as

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[11] Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy*, p. 61. It should be noted that Wilson does not consider *Paradiso* XXV, 1-9 a prophecy *strictu sensu* (see note 86 below).
[12] Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy*, p. 61.
[13] See *Paradiso* XVII, 22-27 for a comparable wish.
[14] Nicola Fosca, *ad Inf.* XXVI, 12.

forever moving toward each other: the one living forwards, the other narrating backwards. Actually, the *Commedia* resists this clear-cut distinction by involving the *poeta*, time and time again, in the living forwards that is traditionally conceived as the province of the *personaggio*. Dante, in the *Commedia*, is not only the *personaggio-poeta* who was pained *then* and is pained *now* by Ulysses' fate ('Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio', *Inferno* XXVI, 19), but also the narrator who is shivering *now* at the thought of the icy lakes of hell and claims that he *will always shiver* ('Onde mi vien riprezzo, / e verrà sempre, de' gelati guazzi', *Inferno* XXXII, 71-72). He is not just the narrator who says, in the past tense, that ever since his return he *has never stopped* wishing he could hear again the celestial 'Hosanna' ('sì, che unque poi / di riudir non fui sanza disiro', *Paradiso* VIII, 29-30); or, in the present tense, that Beatrice's name *is always* on his mind ('il nome / che ne la mente sempre mi rampolla', *Purgatorio* XXVII, 41-42); but he is also the one who claims, in the future tense, that aristocratic pride *will never surprise* him, even after his otherworldly pilgrimage ('mirabil cosa non mi sarà mai' *Par*. XVI, 4).[15] The narrator, in other words, inhabits all three moments of time—past, present, and future—and he too lives forward. And why should this surprise us? If the other characters in the *Commedia* inhabit imaginatively alternative endings, as I have shown in the previous chapter, there is no reason to exclude the narrator from this activity, especially considering that he is not dead yet and therefore makes an even better candidate for the position 'living forwards'. Quite the contrary, Dante systematically unseats the narrator from his safe judging position and fully involves him and his poem in the fearsome and changing world of time and circumstance.

2. The proems of the poem

[15] See also *Purg.* II, 112-14: 'Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona' / cominciò elli allor sì dolcemente, / che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona'.

Once we begin paying attention to the future tenses in the *Commedia*, interesting patterns begin to emerge. The narrator's future occupies a strategic place in each proemial canto of the *Commedia* where it is closely bound with writing and its creative metaphors: speaking, painting, and singing. The use of the future tense says something fundamental about the processual nature of writing. We have already seen the future tense 'dirò' in the general proem of *Inferno* I (9). *Inferno* II follows suit:

> [...] 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.
> O muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;
> o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,
> qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.
> (*Inf.* II, 3-9)

The dialectic at work here is the familiar one between the time of the action (diegesis) and the time of writing (extradiegesis). The latter, however, is not expressed by the present tense, as one might expect from the *personaggio-poeta* division of labour, but by the future: the future tenses 'ritrarrà' (6) and 'si parrà' (9) indicate writing as the activity that will happen from now on. The narrator does use the present when he asks for help with his writing ('or m'aiutate', 7),[16] but for the act of writing itself he employs the future tense. This choice of tense is another important piece in the puzzle that shows the narrator as involved in the future. It expresses what I imagine is no more than common sense for any writer.

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[16] Robert Hollander, 'The "Canto of the Word" (*Inferno* 2)', *Lectura Dantis Newberryana*, ed. by Paolo Cherchi and Antonio C. Mastrobuono (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), II, pp. 98-100.

Writing is a progressive activity that takes place over time, therefore it must, by its very nature, partake in the future. The duration of the activity and its partaking in the future are two sides of the same coin. Saying that something has a duration is tantamount to saying that it requires extension into the future. Language offers a clue into this aspect: the English noun 'writing' derives from a gerund (suffix '-ing') which stresses the aspect of duration; the Italian 'scrittura', analogously, derives from a Latin future participle (suffix '-*ura*') and emphasises the future-bound aspect of the activity. The time of writ*ing* is indeed the future.

It is no surprise, then, if the character of the narrator is deeply implicated into the future, especially when his writing comes under the spotlight. The future tense appears also in the proems of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* where it affects the usual dialectic between the *personaggio*'s past and the *poeta*'s present:

> Per correr miglior acque alza le vele
> omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
> che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele;
> e canterò di quel secondo regno
> dove l'umano spirito si purga
> e di salire al ciel diventa degno.
>
> (*Purgatorio* I, 1-6)

In this proem, extradiegetic time is expressed, as usual, in the present tense, when the narrator's 'ingegno' (2) '*alza* le vele' (1), and '*lascia* dietro a sé' (3) the cruel sea that has already been written about. This present tense, however, is set in counterpoint not with the past of Dante's journey, as again one might expect, but rather with the future ('canterò', 4), the narrator's activity no longer retrospective, but forward-looking. *Paradiso* takes this one

step further by doing away with the present tense altogether:

> Veramente quant'io del regno santo
> ne la mia mente potei far tesoro,
> sarà ora materia del mio canto.
> (*Par.* I, 10-12)

Here again the emphasis is on futurity. The adverb 'ora', in line 12, does not simply mean the moment 'now', but the stretch of time 'from now on'. The present it appears to, but does not really, indicate is in fact absent from this terzina: the only two verb tenses are simply the remembered past ('quant'io del regno santo / [...] *potei* far tesoro', 10-11) and the future-oriented activity of writing ('*sarà* ora materia del mio canto', 12). The narrator thus straddles the present, with one foot in the journey he has brought to an end and the other in the writing he has yet to do.

The noun 'canto' is similarly arched, its connotations ambiguously poised between the technical term for the poem's chapters (*canti*) and the progressive activity of singing a song (*canto*).[17] It is a significant ambiguity, as it represents the *Paradiso* at once as somehow already existing, independently of time, in the author's design, and as requiring time to unfold through the metaphorical act of singing—two perspectives that bear on questions of realism and authority that are always of paramount importance in the *Commedia*. Dante is counterpointing the text as object that occupies a space, with the activity of writing that

[17] Commenting on 'canto' and its cognates in *Convivio* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Margaret Bent notes that '[it] is some- times hard to determine which of three possible levels Dante might be talking about: music as we understand it; musical terms as metaphors or analogies for poetry; undifferentiated terminology common to both and transferable between them' ('Songs Without Music in Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia*: *Cantio* and related terms', in *'Et facciam dolçi canti': Studi in onore di Agostino Ziino in occasione del suo 65° compleanno*, ed. by Bianca Maria Antolini, Teresa M. Gialdroni, and Annunziato Pugliese (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2004), I, pp. 161-181, p. 166).

takes time. This distinction can be approached in a number of ways, depending on whether we look at the text from the perspective of the writer or the reader, as a mental project or as a material object. We could equally say, for instance, that at the time of writing this canto, the *Commedia* is envisaged as a complete book in the writer's mind, and yet its writing will take place over time. Or we could take the reader's perspective and say that the *Commedia* is a defined material object (*that* manuscript or, later, *that* print book), and yet reading it will take place over time.[18] This very ambiguity of Dante's 'canto'—both complete, independent of time, and unfinished, still in progress; both ideal and material—gives a little taste of Dante's ambivalence on the risks and advantages of bringing the future into his poem. When Zygmunt Barański asks 'why does he bother to use [the form of the *canto*] instead of an open-ended and continuous structure like that of the *romans*?',[19] a possible answer is precisely the power of the term 'canto' to anticipate the complete poem in these ways. Barański suggests as much when commenting on the first occurrence of 'canto' and 'canzon' in *Inferno* XX (a canto which also expressly thematises the future in its portrayal of false prophets, as we shall see):

> Di nova pena mi conven far versi
> e dar matera al ventesimo canto
> de la prima canzon ch'è d'i sommersi.
> (*Inf.* XX, 1-3)

As Barański writes, '[t]he precision with which [Dante] affirms that we are about to read "il ventesimo canto / de la prima canzon" also reveals for the first time that this first *canzone*

[18] The distinction between the text in the writer's mind and the material manuscript is also alive in these lines in the secondary connotations of 'mente' (10) and 'materia' (11).
[19] Zygmunt G. Barański, 'The Poetics of Meter: *Terza rima*, "canto", "canzon", "cantica"', in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. by Theodore J. Cachey Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 3-41, p. 9.

will have its numerical counterpart or counterparts elsewhere in the text. Up to this point, the poem provides no clue that it is to have such an unexpected and original design.'[20] If this is 'the twentieth *canto* of the first *canzon*, then the reader can reasonably expect more *canti* and *canzoni* to follow. Indeed, representing the *Commedia* as a complete work by highlighting a part to hint at the whole, helps establish the poem as an intellectual and material unit. Prefiguring its unity is especially significant in the face of the adverse material conditions of its composition and transmission; it is a first step toward managing its interpretation as a complete work.[21] In the proem of *Paradiso*, this perspective is counterbalanced by the melic connotations of 'canto' which turn the emphasis on the writing-in-progress. The advantage is that Dante can now stress, once again, the incompleteness and openness to the future that plays such an important role in the *Commedia*, not least in the characterisation of the narrator that has yet to write the work. These forms of the future thus help represent the poem and its writing, paradoxically, as both complete and in progress, both future-proof and future-facing. The last time Dante picks up the word 'canto' in its technical connotation at the end of *Paradiso* V ('nel modo che 'l seguente canto canta', 139), he underlines once more, with his etymological wordplay between noun ('canto') and verb ('canta'), the two aspects of his writing that have interested him ever since the proems: the complete text and the act of writing it.[22]

As Barański argues, then, while Dante uses the term 'canto' in the conventional poetic sense of 'song', he also overwrites it with a new technical meaning ('chapter'). A similar case can be made about the narrator's use of the future tense in the proems. These futures— 'dirò dell'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte' (*Inf.* I, 9), 'che ritrarrà la mente che non erra'

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[20] Barański, 'The Poetics of Meter', p. 6.

[21] On Dante's representation of the material unity of his work in the context of Medieval material culture, John Ahern, 'Binding the book: Hermeneutics and Manuscript Production in *Paradiso* 33', *PMLA* 97 (1982), pp. 800-809. On his frustrated desire to see it implemented, Elena Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), 'Epilogue'.

[22] On 'the etymological figure' 'canto'/'canta' see also Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 190.

(*Inf.* II, 6), 'e canterò di quel secondo regno' (*Purg.* I, 4), 'sarà ora materia del mio canto' (*Par.* I, 12)—play a conventional role: the narrator is introducing the work's subject-matter, in a tradition that spans from classical epic to academic writings such as this thesis. The programmatic future is even a trademark of many of the *Commedia*'s most well-known embedded tales: the verb 'dirò' is used by Virgil (*Inferno* II, 50), Francesca (*Inferno* V, 126), Ugolino (*Inferno* XXXIII, 15), and Buonconte (*Purgatorio* V, 103). Now, programmatic statements about the content of the work are nothing remarkable. What is more remarkable is the narrator's systematic use of the future tense. In Latin epic poetry circulating in Dante's times, in fact, narrators generally favour the present, to the point where tense becomes an indicator of genre, distinguishing epic from other forms of poetry. Thus Virgil's narrator sings the epic *Aeneid* in the present ('*Arma virumque cano*', I, 1), but the didactic poetry of the *Georgics* in the future ('*canere incipiam*', I, 5); Ovid's narrator uses the present in the *Metamorphoses* ('*fert animus* [...] *dicere*', I, 1), but the future in his didactic *Fasti* ('*Tempora* [...] *ortaque signa canam*', I, 1-2); and the narrator of Lucan and Statius's epics stick to the present ('*Bella* [...] *civilia* [...] *canimus*', *Pharsalia* I, 1-2; '*Magnanimum Aeaciden* [...] *refer*', *Achilleid* I, 1-3), while Horace's lyric persona feels free to sing in the future tense ('*te canam*', I, x, 2; '*Quid dicam*', I, xii, 13 & 25; etc.). There are of course exceptions in this summary distinction—the most compelling of which will be discussed in a moment—,[23] but the fact remains, as classicist Matthew Leigh states, that 'employment of the future tense by the narrator in Latin epic is extremely rare and occurs in specific stylised contexts.'[24] Conversely, the future tense is altogether more popular in genres where the first-person

[23] Virgil's 'second proem' halfway through the *Aeneid* is the most notable one: 'dicam horrida bella / dicam acies actosque animis in funera reges' (VII, 41). Though not in a proem, Virgil, *Aeneid* X, 791-93 and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X, 300, are in the future tense. Dante alludes to the latter ('Dira canam; procul hinc nate, procul este parentes') in *Inf.* XXX, 37-39 (see commentaries by Guido da Pisa, Berthier, Poletto *ad loc.*). My examples are limited to the poem's available to Dante, and thus excludes notable proems in the present by Silius Italicus and Valerius Flaccus.

[24] Matthew Leigh, *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 325. See his Appendix 3 on 'The Future Tense in Latin Epic Narrative', pp. 325-329.

narrator is part of the story, and there is a significant degree of overlap between the implied and historical author: I am thinking here specifically of Classical lyric and elegiac poetry, but the definition equally applies to the *Commedia*.[25] In traditional epic, the story takes centre stage and the primary narrator recedes in the background, omniscient and disembodied; in lyric poetry, and in the *Commedia*, an embodied and affectively involved narrator is the protagonist (or at least half of it). Epic narrators eschew the future tense because it draws unwanted attention to them as historical authors, with wishes, fears, desires, however disguised or fictionalised; in contrast, Horace and Ovid employ the topical 'future of literary immortality'[26] in their odes and elegies because it affords them the opportunity to reflect openly on the embodied activity of writing and their personal literary aspirations, thematising the craft of writing that epic chooses instead to obscure. Lino Pertile already noticed the separation between embodied characters and disembodied narrator that the *Commedia* subverts: 'Unlike Homer and Virgil who always say "he," never "I," and unlike Ulysses and Aeneas who went to Hell but did not write the stories of their own journeys, the protagonist and the narrator of the *Comedy* are one and the same.'[27] Indeed, in the *Aeneid*, Virgil employs the future tense 'lyrically' precisely when he wants to draw attention to an internal narrator and his embodied and affective involvement in the story he is telling: this is the case of Aeneas's own narration of the fall of Troy, a tale which the hero begins, reluctantly and painfully, precisely with a future tense: '*incipiam*' (*Aeneid* II, 13). Already one may argue from such instances that this is the kind of embodied narrator that provides a model for Dante-*poeta*; there is also, however, a further influence. Considering the epic tradition, it is not by chance that when Statius opens his *Thebaid* with

[25] See Horace, *Odes* I, i, 36; and Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* I, 8, to limit examples to the proemial poems in each work. See R.O.A.M. Lyne, *Collected Papers on Latin Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) for further 'proud public, publishing futures' where the narrator is a fictionalised version of the author (p. 350).
[26] Leigh, *Lucan*, p. 326.
[27] Lino Pertile, 'Introduction to *Inferno*', *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 67-90, p. 67.

meta-literary reflections of his own, he brings into the epic proem the very future tense that his precursors ruled out. Statius taps into a relationship between the narrator's future and meta-literary themes that had long been established in other genres. As classicists have long noticed, the 'proem to the *Thebaid* and indeed the whole of the first book exhibit a self-conscious concern with the poetics of opening'.[28] All is sparked by the rhetorical question '*unde iubetis / ire, deae?*', where do you order me to start from? Over the first forty-five lines of the poem, Statius proposes a dazzling array of possible beginnings:

> [...] gentisne canam primordia dirae,
> Sidonios raptus et inexorabile pactum
> legis Agenoreae scrutantemque aequora Cadmum?
> [...]
> atque adeo iam nunc gemitus et prospera Cadmi
> praeteriisse sinam: limes mihi carminis esto
> Oedipodae confusa domus,
> [...]
> undarum terraeque potens, et sidera dones.
> tempus erit, cum Pierio tua fortior oestro
> facta canam: [...]
> quem prius heroum, Clio, dabis? [...]
>
> (*Thebaid* I, 4-6, 15-17, 31-33, 41)

[*Shall I sing* the origins of the cruel people, the Sidonian rape, the inexorable

[28] K. Sara Myers, 'Statius on Invocation and Inspiration', in *Brill's Companion to Statius*, ed. by William J. Dominik, Carole Elizabeth Newlands, and Kyle Gervais (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 31-53, p. 32. Gianpiero Rosati makes a similar case about the epistolary preface of Statius's *Silvae*, which Dante, however, did not have access to, since they were only discovered by Poggio Bracciolini in 1417.

> pact of Agenor's law, and Cadmus searching the seas? [...] *I shall let* instead the sorrows and happy days of Cadmus be bygones. The limit of my song *shall be* the troubled house of Oedipus [...]. [O, Domitian!] A time will come when stronger in Pierian frenzy *I shall sing* your deeds. [...]. Clio, which of the heroes *will you offer* first?]

The proem of the *Thebaid* is an extraordinarily rich text and has been closely studied;[29] my analysis will focus exclusively on its significance in the study of Dante, on which, I think, a little more can be said. Dante must have taken note of how Statius 'conspicuously avoids a strong first-person presence by giving preference to conditional, interrogative and negative statements where his poetic program is concerned', thus underlying the narrator's uncertain relation to the open future.[30] Statius's tentative futures are in stark contrast with the triumphalist certainty displayed by Virgil in the prophetic futures of *Aeneid* VI, a point memorably addressed by W. H. Auden:

> No, Virgil, no:
> Not even the first of the Romans can learn
> His Roman history in the future tense.
> Not even to serve your political turn;
> Hindsight as foresight makes no sense.
>
> (W. H. Auden, *Secondary Epic*, 1-5)[31]

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[29] For a recent bibliography, see William J. Dominik, Carole Elizabeth Newlands, and Kyle Gervais, eds, *Brill's Companion to Statius* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015). For the historical Statius's influence on Dante, see Peter Heslin, 'Statius in Dante's *Commedia*', therein, pp. 512-526.

[30] Donka D. Markus, 'The Politics of Epic Performance in Statius', in Anthony James Boyle and William J. Dominik, eds, *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 432-468, p. 441.

[31] From W. H. Auden, *Homage to Clio* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960).

Statius's many concurrent beginnings question the very notion that the future tense can ever represent a single predetermined future, a point that cannot have escaped Dante and his sensitivity to alternative narratives.[32] The poet of the *Commedia* must have taken note of how Statius's 'multiple beginnings' in the future tense 'self-consciously [focus] our attention on the actual process and practice of narration and "the unavoidable *difficulty of beginning*"' not just his epic, but any writing;[33] and thus give a taste 'of the infinity of choices that were made in that text'.[34] The author of the *Commedia* himself is no stranger to problematising beginnings:[35] Teodolinda Barolini has written about the ways in which the first cantos of the *Commedia* create 'multiple beginnings, so that each beginning undermines the absolute status of the previous beginning', thereby exorcising the problem of starting.[36] The *Commedia* shares the same apotropaic goal as the *Thebaid*, but follows a different tactic. Through false starts and delays, interruptions and new starts, Dante spreads out the proliferation of beginnings of Statius's proem across the space of several cantos, thus foregrounding the narrative and meta-literary implications that are so central to Statius's proem. Dante's own use of 'the future for the creation of a text' in the proems of the

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[32] On the future tense in Virgil, see Sara Mack, *Patterns of Time in Vergil* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978). Robert Wilson takes Auden's *Secondary Epic* from Mack's book (*Prophecies and Prophecy*, p. 200). I am more sympathetic to Virgil's future than Auden is, as my brief discussion of the passage from *Aen.* VI in the previous chapter hopefully demonstrates. For Virgil's less triumphalist voice: Adam Parry's seminal 'The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*', *Arion*, 2.4 (1963), 66-80; R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Further Voices in Vergil's 'Aeneid'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); and Gian Biagio Conte, *Virgilio: L'epica del sentimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), available in English as *The Poetry of Pathos: Studies in Virgilian Epic*, trans. by Stephen J. Harrison (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[33] K. Sara Myers, 'Statius on Invocation and Inspiration', p. 32. The quotation and italics are from Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 46.

[34] David Foster Wallace's words are taken from Bryan Garner and David Foster Wallace, *Quack This Way: David Foster Wallace & Bryan Gardner Talk Language and Writing* (Dallas: RosePen Books, 2013), p. 28.

[35] See Guglielmo Gorni, 'La teoria del "cominciamento"', in *Il nodo della lingua e il verbo d'amore: Studi su Dante e altri duecentisti* (Florence: Olschki, 1981), pp. 143-186; Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine 'Comedy': Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), ch. 2, and her earlier essay on the *Vita nova* '"Cominciandomi dal principio infino a la fine" (*V. N.* XXIII, 15): Forging Anti-Narrative in the *Vita Nuova*', in *La gloriosa donna de la mente: A Commentary on the 'Vita Nuova'*, ed. by Vincent Moleta (Florence: Olschki, 1994), pp. 119-140.

[36] Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 22.

Commedia, as Matthew Leigh defines the kind of programmatic future we are discussing here,[37] remains as an indication that this is a trick out of Statius's book. The Latin poet's influence on the proems is unmistakeable: the character Virgil alludes to Statius's proem in conversation with its fictionalised author ('tu cantasti le crude armi', *Purgatorio* XXII, 55),[38] and Dante may have cited it as early as the Latin incipit of the *Commedia*, reported by Boccaccio:

> Ultima regna *canam* fluvido contermina mundo,
> spiritibus que lata patent, que premia solvunt
> pro meritis cuicunque suis...

The author of this Latin proem chooses classical epic's 'expected verb of singing' ('*cano*'),[39] but conjugates it in the future tense ('*canam*'), thus following Statius rather than the more obvious authority of Virgil and Lucan. Although the question of the incipit's authenticity is, of course, still unresolved, the occurrence of the future tense is unquestionably in line with the practice of the vernacular *Commedia*.[40] If the author of the proem is not Dante, they truly captured his spirit.

How to interpret the parallels between Statius and Dante's proems? Characteristically of his relationship with the classics, Dante spins Statius's future to suit his own agenda.[41] The *Thebaid* narrates the power struggle between the brothers Eteocles and

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37 Leigh, *Lucan*, p. 327.

38 As noted by a number of commentators from Francesco da Buti (*ad Purg.* XXII, 55-63) to Nicola Fosca (*ad* 55-60). See Bosco Reggio, *ad* 55-57: 'Cfr. «*Fraternas acies*» e «*gentisne canam primordia dirae*» [*Theb*. I, 1 and 4]' (italics mine).

39 Myers, 'Statius on Invocation and Inspiration', p. 33.

40 See most recently Saverio Bellomo, 'Il sorriso di Ilaro e la prima redazione in latino della "Commedia"', in *Studi sul Boccaccio*, XXXII (2004), 201-235.

41 See Roberto Mercuri, 'Dante nella prospettiva intertestuale', in *Dante: For Use, Now: Atti del Convegno internazionale su La presenza di Dante nella poesia contemporanea nordamericana*, ed. by Annalisa Goldoni and Andrea Mariani (Rome: Euroma, 2000), pp. 75-92.

Polynices over the city of Thebes, a theme which, according to classicist K. Sara Myers, is anticipated in the poem's multiple beginnings: 'the competing authority over the very nature and direction of the poem at its commencement suggests a parallel between the poetics and themes of the narrative'.[42] In the *Commedia*, on the other hand, the structural use of the future tense complicates the narrator's retrospective authority (the 'position backwards'), by drawing attention to his embodied presence and implicating him personally in the 'position forward' that constitutes the existential perspective expressed in the poem. Statius's dilemma as to what to write is thus especially significant to Dante as an author who dramatises the tentative, progressive, open-ended experience of writing in a moral universe of freedom.

When associated with writing, then, the future tense has two obvious advantages. On the one hand, it works in agreement with Dante's teleological masterplot, as it envisions the complete poem before its completion and thus gives the impression that there already is an end from which the poem will be judged. By planting evidence of the journey's predetermined conclusion early on, it supports the validity of the retrospective interpretation of Dante's making. In parallel with this teleological working, however, the future serves another, less expected purpose. It tempers the hegemony of the masterplot by contextualising the *poeta* within the universal existential condition of those living forward and thus involving him in the hermeneutic limitations attached to it. It declares, in other words, the narrator's participation in Kierkegaard's caveat that 'temporal life can never properly be understood precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest in which to adopt a position: backwards'. Whether as an attempt to control the poem's reception, or simply as the wishful thinking of an author who suspected, correctly, that he would never see his work bound in a single volume, the strategy of writing in the future tense is inseparable from the workings of the *Commedia*'s masterplot. Dante's use of the future of

[42] Myers, 'Statius on Invocation and Inspiration', p. 32.

writing constitutes, as always in the *Commedia*, a gamble. The future we have discussed so far, involves the writing of the *Commedia*, and thus coincides with the poem's conclusion. This kind of future is fictionalised and self-enclosed within the text itself. But there is another future, a more unpredictable future that knocks at the poem's door and demands entrance. It is the future outside the text about which the author is in the dark, a future that concerns and fascinates him throughout the poem. The problem arises as early as the first occurrence of the future in the proem's programmatic future of writing, and inevitably takes the shape of a question: what if the real future outside the text breaks Dante's promise? Considering the author's own literary career, this is more than just a possibility.

3. Unfinished writing

At the time of writing the *Commedia*, Dante had already made promises, and it had not always paid off. The number of his works that are left unfinished are a simple demonstration of precisely what can go wrong with the future of writing; Dante himself is aware of the risks. The first book of *Convivio* promises fourteen *canzoni* and as many additional books (*Convivio* I, i, 14), but as far as we know it delivers only a total of four before it is abandoned. In that work, Dante also anticipates 'un libello ch'io intendo di fare, Dio concedente, di Volgare Eloquenza' (v, 10), where the incidental 'Dio concedente' concedes, in one of many such concessions throughout Dante's career, that future writing does not always go to plan. And indeed, the *De vulgari eloquentia* realises the *Convivio*'s promise only in part, while failing to fulfil a few promises of its own: notably, when the treatise is abandoned in the second of the four books originally planned. Even as late as the second book of the *Monarchia*, Dante is acknowledging the tentative nature of writing in the future tense (II, i, 6):

> Hec equidem duo fient sufficienter, si secundam partem presentis propositi prosecutus fuero, et instantis questionis veritatem ostendero.
>
> [These two things will be sufficiently accomplished when I have brought to completion the second part of my present project and shown the truth of the question we are now considering.]

Prue Shaw's translation, cited here, is worth taking a second look at. Notably, Shaw translates the cautious hypothetical adverb '*si*' into the temporal 'when', making a certainty out of what was to Dante only a possibility. Further, she translates the open futures 'prosecutus fuero' and 'ostendero' ['I *will* have brought to completion', 'I *will* show'], respectively, into past perfect and present continuous tenses ('I *have* brought to completion', 'we *are* now *considering*'), to similar effect. This is a telling choice: it shows the translator's awareness of the fact that the book was eventually brought to completion, its promise fulfilled. It is for this reason, I think, that Shaw places author and reader in the same boat, enjoying each other's company in a common present ('*we* are *now* considering'), even though Dante is notably isolated in the singular future tense 'ostendero', the uncertain future of writing still ahead of him. Thus, affected perhaps by the prophetic tone of the passage, the translation performs a little teleology of its own as it imposes the knowledge of the end of the *Monarchia* on earlier parts of the text. In so doing, it attributes to Dante a confidence that is not exactly philological, and which the author learned the hard way not to claim for himself.

Expressions of caution are also present in the most famous promise of future writing in Dante's other works: the ending of the *Vita Nova*.[43] A book containing the unfinished *canzone* 'Sì lungiamente' (*Vita Nova* XXVII) and the sonnet with alternative beginnings 'Era venuta ne la mente mia' (XXXIV), the *Vita Nova* is the first of Dante's works to reflect on the uncertainties of writing.[44] The promise of future writing contained in its last chapter is worded as tentatively as the ones in the other works:

> io vidi cose che mi fecero proporre di non dire più di questa benedetta infino a tanto che io potesse più degnamente dire di lei. E di venire a ciò io studio *quanto posso* [...]. 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 [...].
>
> (*Vita Nova* XLII, 2)

The passage offers a series of disclaimers and reminders of the contingent nature of this and all promises, which could be variously interpreted as humble, falsely modest, matter-of-fact, or wise. These take the shape of the phrases 'quanto posso' and 'io spero', the

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[43] Jennifer Rushworth writes convincingly of the relationship between the promise of future writing at the end of the *Vita Nova* and its hermeneutic implications, in her *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 126-161: '*Vita nova* is notably open-ended, coming to a close with a promise of future writing' (p. 135).

[44] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* [...] draws attention to the metonymic relation between these lyrics within the *Vita Nova* and the *libello*'s own 'unfinished'-like macrostructure. H. Wayne Storey offers an interesting reading of the interrupted 'Sì lungiamente' as a false start, the trace of a narrative trajectory that could have been but 'is no longer tenable': 'Because of its narratological status as a fragmented text, necessarily interrupted by the story the *Vita Nova* has to tell, 'Sì lungiamente' is subsequently defined by its poetic representation of a narrative trajectory no longer tenable in the context of the *libello*. Instead, its role in the *libello* is, narratively speaking, a place to which the poet's story can never return' ('Early Editorial Forms of Dante's Lyrics', in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey (New York: Fordham, 2003), pp. 16-44 (p. 33)).

hypothetical clause 'se piacere sarà' and its optative variation 'piaccia a colui'. With the benefit of hindsight, scholars have been tempted to identify the promised work with virtually all of those that have come down to us, but as Jennifer Rushworth's text-centric approach reminds us, 'this other work, *qua* promise, is not reducible to a prescient announcement of the *Commedia*.'[45] Following Rushworth's approach further, we can point out that unlike all other promises of future writing in Dante's works, the one in the *Vita nova* appears at the book's very end. This creates a mimetic coincidence between the book's temporal framework and the time outside the fiction, whereby fiction imitates life: the book starts in the present-tense and purports to be a linear, retrospective narrative; as we read on, we gradually catch up with the narrator's past, and once we near the end of the *Vita Nova* we come to the same position of its writer, at work on the last few sentences. It is at this point that by promising future writing at the end of the book, the last chapter anticipates by a few words, as mimetically as possible, the act of moving into the future beyond the book's end: 'the *libello* comes to a conclusion, but the author projects its story beyond the bounds of the narrative.'[46] The play of tenses in the passage captures precisely this movement from past-tense retrospective narrative ('apparve', 'io vidi', 'mi fecero', and the imperfect subjunctive 'potesse'), to the present tense of writing ('io studio', 'posso', 'ella sae'), to the future tense 'sarà' and the other future-oriented constructs that gesture beyond the end of the text.[47] From this text's mimetic perspective, the future is, simply, what happens after writing and reading the text itself.[48]

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[45] Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning*, p. 140 and bibliographical references.
[46] Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 130.
[47] For an impassioned analysis of the moods and tenses of this passage, see Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, pp. 133-138. Harrison notes how the future tense, typically of Dante's ambivalence when it comes to this time, simultaneously serves a teleological purpose: 'the new life is projected along a linear, teleological axis that grants it direction as well as a determinate, if deferred, closure' (p. 135).
[48] Singleton on 'visione' as a term referring to the future (as opposed to 'imaginazione'); quoted in Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 8, who says the distinction is incorrect.

This is a rare case in which Dante uses the future of writing to point beyond and outside the fiction in which it is contained. The proems of the *Commedia* ostensibly use it in the same way, but their position within the work has a markedly different effect. While in the *Vita Nova* the future of writing is mimetically located at the end of the book, waiting to give way to a future work, in the *Commedia* it is anticipated strategically at the beginning of the poem and of each cantica, thus making the future coincide with the text itself. Through their placing in the proems, the future tenses of writing create the illusion that there is, somehow *a priori* of it having been written, a story to be told in the near future, with a planned form and a proper endpoint, or at least their design—wishful or controlling—in the writer's mind: and that story is none other than the *Commedia*. It is only by locating the future of promised writing at the beginning of the ideal work or material book, that the *Commedia* can hold the illusion that the future—the only future that counts—lies in the content of its fiction, tamed and self-contained; not, crucially, in the other future of what lies beyond the text, unrestrained and uncontrollable.[49] This simple editorial choice, comparable to ones Dante experimented with as early as the *Vita Nova*, helps him limit the future to the confines of his poem, while blurring the more problematic future beyond it.

It will be clear, by now, that the relationship between futures and ends which we are tracing is essentially double-edged. In the teleological master narrative of the *Commedia* the futures are a source of fascination and fear. The future becomes both a means of envisioning, imagining, inhabiting, or controlling definitive endpoints, and a threat to their very possibility. If the future allows Dante to take a peak beyond the poem's reach, then it also, by that very act, undermines the conclusiveness of all ends, since it makes it possible for them to be always one step removed. As long as we are able to use a future tense, we also always raise doubts over the end's ability to have the last word. The representation of

[49] It should be noted that Dante does imagine future works, following in the wake of the *Commedia* (*Paradiso* I, 34-36 and XXX, 34-36). Unlike in the *Vita Nova* however, these imaginary works are by other authors.

the future in the *Commedia*, therefore, is inevitably problematic, precisely in that it exposes the blind spots and fault lines of the poem's teleological workings. It is no wonder that the issue of the future has preoccupied Dante scholars for such a long time, under the guise of the question of prophecy and prophets.[50] In the reading offered here, this question is but a special case of the *Commedia*'s wider concerns with what lies beyond the masterplot's reach. Dante appears to be keenly aware of the problems inherent in the future, as he dramatizes them by embroiling in futurity first the pilgrim, then the narrator, and lastly his text.

4. Vulnerable narrator, vulnerable text

The poet of the *Commedia*, author of at least two unfinished treatises, a sonnet with two beginnings and an interrupted *canzone*, writing in exile and circulating his writing in batches—should it surprise us that he represents his poem as vulnerable to the future? In the address to the reader of *Paradiso* V, Dante calls upon his readers to envision precisely 'the event of a sudden interruption of the canticle':[51]

> Pensa, lettor, se quello che qui s'inizia
> non procedesse, come tu avresti
> di più savere angosciosa carizia;
> e per te vederai come da questi
> m'era in disio d'udir lor condizioni,
> sì come a li occhi mi fur manifesti.
>
> (*Par.* V, 109-114)

[50] For a recent review of the subject, see Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy*.
[51] Elena Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 156. Lombardi discusses the triangulation of desires between the pilgrim, the souls and the reader at pp. 156-57. On premature endings, see also Charles Martel, in chapter 2 of this thesis.

The address to the reader draws on the topos of desire for further knowledge ('di più saver angosciosa carizia', 111, 'disio d'udir', 113) that often drives the plot forward and thus plays such an important part in the teleological poetics, and erotics, of *Paradiso*. As seen in the first chapter, Dante's desire for knowledge engenders a question, which engenders knowledge, 'nel processo ascensionale ("al sommo pinge noi di collo in collo" [*Paradiso* IV, 123-132]) del pellegrino verso la conoscenza suprema'.[52] Within this context, there is a precise hierarchy in the pseudo-simile of these lines: Dante's invite to the reader 'to imagine what he would have felt had Dante the narrator stopped at this point', as Leo Spitzer points out, is cited with the aim to help 'suggest his own, Dante's, at this point almost anguished feeling of curiosity that must be satisfied.'[53] It constitutes, in other words, the pseudo-simile's familiar element to the foreign element of Dante's thirst for knowledge. The possibility of the poem's interruption is given as a known quantity, conceivably part of the everyday experience of both the poet and his contemporaries, whom the 'veiled threat of narrative interruption', as Barolini calls it, concerns in equal measure.[54] The readers may be counted upon to entertain a scenario where the poem is unfinished or its manuscript transmission incomplete; all the more so, if they are familiar with the precarious material culture of the time, not to mention its author's track-record and well-publicised circumstances.

Moreover, the two elements of the pseudo-simile are the *personaggio*'s journey and that of the *poeta*, once again blurring the line between the two when it comes to the desire to move forward. In the *Commedia*, of course, *personaggio* and *poeta* 'undertake separate

[52] Lino Pertile, *La punta del disio: Semantica del desiderio nella 'Commedia'* (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2005), p. 24. See also chapter 1 of the present thesis.
[53] Leo Spitzer, 'The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*', *Italica*, 32.3 (1955), 143-65, pp. 151-52.
[54] Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 190. See also Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning*, p. 147, on 'the possibility of resistance of any form of closure'.

journeys within the poem: the journey of the character from the dark forest to the Empyrean heaven [...]; and the journey of the narrator through the one-hundred cantos of the poem, from canto 1 of the *Inferno* to canto 33 of the *Paradiso*. The first journey lasts one week; the second, to the best of our knowledge, took at least a dozen years (circa 1307–20)'.[55] The parallels extend to the fact that both journeys are represented as vulnerable to the uncertainties of the future. The vulnerability of narration is evoked also at the beginning of this same canto, where Dante, incidentally, plays twice on the equivocal meaning of 'canto' as both metaphorical song and chapter of the *Commedia* (at lines 16 and 139).

> Sì cominciò Beatrice questo canto:
> e sì com'uom che suo parlar non spezza
> continuò così 'l processo santo.
> (*Par.* V, 16-18)

Treading 'the margin between fiction and textuality', this terzina seems to entrust the fictional Beatrice with beginning the 'canto': the chapter of the book that contains her as a character.[56] The demonstrative 'questo' seems to confirm this interpretation, as it appears to be written from the perspective of the *poeta* and his reader, not hers. Underlining this

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[55] Pertile, 'Introduction to *Inferno*', p. 67. Barolini often notes the compresence of the two journeys in the ambiguous expressions of 'alto passo' (*Inferno* II, 12; XXVI, 132) and 'corso' (*Inferno* XV, 88): 'The text is also [...] a voyage' (*Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 22).

[56] Lombardi notices the conflation of roles between Beatrice and Dante in the attribution of the masculine 'uom' to the lady (*Imagining the Woman Reader*, ch. 4). Teodolinda Barolini discusses the dynamic in *Undivine 'Comedy'*, pp. 188-89, making a similar point about gender. Barolini seems to share in practice Margaret Bent's opinion that the word 'canto' here 'refers unambiguously to the unit of a *canto*' ('Songs Without Music', p. 179, n. 38), whereas Barański, 'Terza Rima', is more cautious. In their commentary *ad Par.* V, 16-18, Bosco and Reggio register the aesthetic discrepancy between fiction and reality by commenting that '«canto» o «materia del canto» appartiene alla struttura del poema e stona se riferito come didascalia al discorso di Beatrice.'

promiscuity between narrators and characters, extradiegesis and diegesis, textuality and fiction, is the threat of broken narrative expressed by the line 'e sì com'uom che suo parlar non spezza' (17), evoked here only to be negated, but evoked nonetheless. Interruptions of this kind haunt the *Commedia*'s storytelling, often in the softer forms of hypotheticals and negations. Thus, Thomas Aquinas is represented as toying with the possibility of interrupting his explanation:

> Or s'i' non procedesse avanti piùe,
> 'Dunque, come costui fu sanza pare?'
> comincerebber le parole tue.
> (*Par.* XIII, 88-90)

Interruption is here suggested benignly, in the subjunctive mood of hypotheticals ('s'i non procedesse', 88), as a way to stimulate the pilgrim into dialogue. It is a rhetorical interruption. What if the speech were to end before its proper end? Aquinas indicates that he has not quite reached the end of his spiel, but is truncating it in the middle, for suspense. As ever in the *Commedia*—readers of this chapter are familiar, by now, with the ambiguity of this dynamic—, this kind of suspense works teleologically as desire for the revelation that lies ahead in the text; but it also evokes, however briefly, the real risk of premature ends and the threat they pose to writing. In *Paradiso* XXX, it is the narrator that summons this ghost, when he boasts that the continuative act of his singing/writing ('cantar', 30) has never been interrupted before. (A boast that nobody, to my knowledge, has called out as the lie it is).[57] Dante then declares that this time he must give up on his attempt to describe Beatrice's beauty:

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[57] I am referring here, of course, to Dante's sonnets with alternative beginnings, his interrupted *canzone*, and the last chapter of the *Vita Nova*; not to mention, if we are taking his statement as open

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

Of course, the *Commedia* continues for three more cantos beyond this interruption, which is routinely interpreted as rhetorical, on a par with Aquinas's dialectical move, a hyperbole or a ploy to create suspense—a suspense whose substance is, nevertheless, once again, the genuine possibility of interruption.[58] This risk is more often evoked in connection with the *personaggio*'s journey, as exemplified by the broken bridge in *Inferno* XX, or the episode in *Purgatorio* IV when the beginning of the actual journey is constantly delayed. One need not look further than the first two cantos of *Inferno* to find multiple threats to the poem's beginning: the 'lonza', the 'lupa', the pilgrim's 'viltade'.[59] But even in those cases, the threats to the journey can have verbal repercussions. In *Inferno* VIII-IX, for instance, when the journey itself seems to be threatened with a premature end, as the pilgrim and his guide are locked outside the city of Dis, unable to continue on their journey, the possibility of interruption exerts its pressure on Virgil's very words and cuts off his speech:

to interruptions in general, the unfinished *De Vulgari* and *Convivio*. Hollander understands the passage as limited to the theme of Beatrice, and still ponders on the 'marked deviation from singing of Beatrice in *Convivio*'. See Robert Hollander, '*Paradiso* XXX', *Studi Danteschi*, 60 (1988), 1-33 (p. 11, n. 26).

58 On the passage, see Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, pp. 241-244.

59 Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, pp. 21-47.

«Pur a noi converrà vincer la punga»,
cominciò el, «se non... Tal ne s'offerse.
Oh quanto tarda a me ch'altri qui giunga!».
I' vidi ben sì com'ei ricoperse
lo cominciar con l'altro che poi venne,
che fur parole a le prime diverse;
ma nondimen paura il suo dir dienne,
perch'io traeva la parola tronca
forse a peggior sentenzia che non tenne.
(*Inf.* IX, 7-15).

Scholars have noticed how this passage is engineered to show Virgil's limits as a guide in the new poetic universe of the *Commedia*. It is not by chance that the pagan poet's fallibility is emphasised rhetorically by a failed future tense. 'Pur a noi converrà vincer la pugna' (7): Virgil's sentence begins combatively, stressing 'necessity' through the future 'converrà', and employing Latinisms virtually synonymous with the martial epic he is identified with ('vincer la punga'). And yet the epic march of the sentence is cut short in an ellipsis, exploiting interruption for dramatic effect: 'se non...' (8). The brief suggestion that things might go differently is enough to wreck the sentence, the world of possibility it introduces to the same 'history in the future tense' that Auden maligned, effectively throwing in disarray the previous sentence's carefully constructed rhetoric. It is a clash of poetics as much as worldviews, with prophetic future tenses beset by the new existential future of the *Commedia* and the uncertainties and interruptions it brings into the poem's universe. Virgil quickly springs to cover up the silence, but cannot refrain from being affected emotionally by this tentative temporality that allows for hesitation and delay. He sighs and even drops the first-person plural 'a noi' for the solitary singular 'a me' ('Oh quanto tarda a me ch'altri

qui giunga', 9). Uncertain, dismayed, isolated: when Virgil's speech is left vulnerable to the new future, it begins to take on very dark hues in the pilgrim's imagination.[60] The void left by 'la parola tronca' (14) fills the pilgrim with fear, the sentence's continuation growing worse in his imagination than it was originally meant ('perch'io traeva la parola tronca / forse a peggior sentenzia che non tenne', 14-15). The episode is by no means unique in the *Commedia* rhetorically,[61] but offers a limpid example of the risks of interruption and it is all the more interesting for having Dante as its embodied protagonist, affectively involved in the business of filling in the gaps and envisioning a future after the interruption.

This reading of the *Commedia* as a text threatened by interruption was first made by one of the poem's most responsive early readers, Giovanni Boccaccio, an author himself concerned with the future reception of his works.[62] In the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, Boccaccio reflects, with 'his own innate talent for narrative', on the difficult circumstances of the *Commedia*'s composition:[63]

> Ma, sì come noi veggiamo le gran cose non potersi in brieve tempo comprendere, e per questo conoscere dobbiamo così alta, così grande, così escogitata impresa [...] non essere stato possibile in picciolo spazio avere il suo fine recata; e massimamente da uomo, il quale da molti e varii casi della Fortuna, pieni tutti d'angoscia e d'amaritudine venenati, sia stato agitato.[64]

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[60] For a reading of this passage's 'anacoluthon' and Dante's 'pessimistic fantasy', see Justin Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 106.

[61] Nicola Gardini reflects on this passage in his *Lacuna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), p. 46 and dedicates a chapter to instances of *reticentia* in the *Commedia* (pp. 46-55). With his usual insight, Contini calls Dante 'lo scrittore, i cui silenzî, le cui reticenze, le cui oscurità e ambiguità sono ferree quanto tutto il resto' (Gianfranco Contini, 'Cavalcanti in Dante', in *Un'idea di Dante*, pp. 143-157, p. 143).

[62] See most recently, Elena Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader*, 'Epilogue'.

[63] Martin McLaughlin, 'Biography and Autobiography in the Italian Renaissance', in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. by Peter France and William St Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 37–65, pp. 47-48.

[64] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori, 1974),

Writing an ambitious poem such as the *Commedia* takes a long time, as Boccaccio testifies; all the more so for a poet in Dante's situation. Showing the ways in which both the author and his poem were once vulnerable to time, in chapter XXVI Boccaccio proceeds to relate two 'accidenti intorno al principio e alla fine di quella [la *Commedia*] avvenuti' that nearly prevented the poem from reaching its conclusion ('il suo fine'). The first accident is exile (''l gravoso accidente della sua cacciata, o fuga che chiamar si convegna...'), which forces Dante to abandon the first seven cantos in Florence as he wanders throughout Italy in perpetual insecurity ('...per lo quale egli e quella ogni altra cosa abandonata, incerto di se medesimo, più anni con diversi amici e signori andò vagando'). Through a suspenseful narration, Boccaccio tells us that the interruption was only resolved when Dante's protector, marquis Morello Malaspina was sent the cantos and, led on by the *plaisir du text*, entreated Dante to pick up where he left off so as to avoid leaving the work unfinished ('che gli piacesse di non lasciare senza debito fine sì alto principio'). The second accident is the loss of the last thirteen cantos of *Paradiso*, as death catches the poet before he can finish his work ('prima nol sopragiugnesse la morte che egli tutta publicare la potesse'). Even if apocryphal, the accident is telling: it responds to Dante's concerns, while giving us an insight into what could be plausibly believed to be the material conditions of the *Commedia*'s composition and transmission, and thus testifies to the vulnerable and fleeting nature of manuscript culture in the age of Dante. Moreover, Boccaccio plays once more with the idea of a teleological end, which, though absent (*qua* materially lost), guides the poem from the start: indeed, Iacopo and Pietro Alighieri feel compelled to reconstruct their father's text based on what is left of the poem in an attempt to 'supplire la paterna opera, acciò che imperfetta non procedesse'. Their attempt to not let the *Commedia* remain

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ch. XXVI.

unfinished confirms the fundamental ambiguity in the relation between the poem and ends. The teleological *Commedia* is perceived to both demand and already contain the proper end.

This idea of the proper end is the recurring theme in Boccaccio's narrative. The term 'fine' has already quietly appeared in the quotations of the last few pages, but Boccaccio refers to this chimeric entity a few more times in his account of Dante's writing. Although the end is at this point only imaginary ('lo 'mmaginato fine'), it is somehow due to the poem ('il debito fine', twice) and inherent in it ('il suo fine').[65] This is, in other words, a necessary end that guides the text teleologically from its inception. Crucially, the end is invoked once more, when Boccaccio applies it not to the poem, but to its author's life:

> Ma la Fortuna, volgitrice de' nostri consigli e inimica d'ogni umano stato, come che per alquanti anni nel colmo della sua rota gloriosamente reggendo il tenesse, assai diverso fine al principio recò a lui, in lei fidantesi di soperchio.[66]

The master of narrative that he is, Boccaccio conceives of Dante's life in the same narrative terms as his fiction: as though infringing an aesthetic principle, Fortune is said to bring 'assai diverso fine al principio' of the poet's life. Thus, Boccaccio blurs the line between the poet and the poem, the narrator and his narrative, in a manner attuned to the ways in which the *Commedia* embroils the *poeta* in the perilous and open-ended journey of writing. In Boccaccio's depiction, of course, Fortune and premature ends do not threaten the pilgrim of the afterlife—his journey is fictional after all—, but rather the *Commedia*'s embodied author and his fragile material writing.

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., ch. VI.

5. Future's messes in the *Inferno*

Representing the future, then, is a problem for this most teleological of poems. Bringing it into the work stresses everything that is yet unfinished about the *Commedia*, from the pilgrim's journey, to the poet's life, to the poem's writing. The future helps express the forward-oriented perspective of the living, as we have seen, but also endangers the poem's meaning, if not its very existence. Tampering with the future in the *Commedia*, however, ends up creating its own set of issues. This is most evident in the first cantica, where the end of the work is still distant and nightmares of futurity weigh heavy on Dante's imagination, at times strangely deforming, with their gravitational pull, the fabric of the poem. The future plays an active role in the punishment of a number of sins, most notably in the rather straightforward *contrapasso* of the soothsayers of *Inferno* XX: guilty of gazing impudently into the future (like Anfiarao who 'volse veder troppo avante', *Inferno* XX, 38), the soothsayers have their heads twisted backward and are thus deprived of the ability to look ahead ('e in dietro venir li convenia, / perché 'l veder dinanzi era lor tolto', 14-15). For people who used to rely on the ability to foresee for their living, it is quite a punishment to have one's gaze averted from the future—a condition that the canto takes literally, through its virtuoso avoidance of future tenses. Having described the soothsayer's fate, the narrator draws attention to himself as he calls on the reader to imagine what he must have felt at their distorted sight:

> Se Dio ti lasci, lettor, prender frutto
> di tua lezione, or pensa per te stesso
> com'io potea tener lo viso asciutto,
> quando la nostra imagine di presso
> vidi sì torta, che 'l pianto de li occhi

le natiche bagnava per lo fesso.

(*Inf.* XX, 19-24)

Commentators have noted the pilgrim's involvement in the scene, with some going as far as Jacopo della Lana in speculating that Dante must have been once 'inviluppato in questo peccato di divinazione'.[67] Leaving speculation aside, one can simply point out how the pilgrim participates affectively in the punishment he is witnessing, unable to help himself from crying with the sinners (Dante: 'com'io potea tener lo visa asciutto', 21; the soothsayers: ''l pianto de li occhi / le natiche bagnava', 23-24).[68] He is soon rebuked for his pity by Virgil: 'Ancor se' tu degli altri sciocchi?' (27).[69] Given Virgil's words, it is perhaps surprising that Dante's compassion is not contained to the *personaggio*'s past, however, but spreads to the *poeta*: not only does the narrator step onstage with his address to the reader, but he also drops the impartial description of the damned in the third person for a first-person plural involving readers, sinners, and the narrator himself ('nostra imagine', 22). Perhaps Virgil's lesson was not so conclusive after all. The gravitational pull of the future drags the poet into the *Inferno*: indeed, as Benvenuto da Imola is only the earliest to suggest, if Dante is involved in soothsaying it is not necessarily as astrologer, but rather as '*autor*': witness the *Commedia* ('sicut patet in libro isto').[70]

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[67] Jacopo della Lana, *ad Inf.* XX, 19-24. Robert Hollander *ad Inf.* XX, 19-24 proposes a more normative interpretation, stating that the point of the address to the reader may be 'that Dante was wrong to weep for these creatures'.

[68] For the pilgrim's participation in the punishments he witnesses in the *Purgatorio*, see Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[69] For a discussion of Virgil's rebuke as mitigated by paradox, see chapter 1.

[70] Benvenuto da Imola *ad Inf.* XX, 19-24 speaks clearly here of *autor* and the *libro* he is writing: 'praesens negotium tangebat autorem ipsum, qui [...] voluit praedicere aliqua futura, sicut patet in libro isto'. See also Robert Hollander, 'The Tragedy of Divination in *Inferno* XX', in *Studies in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1980), pp. 131-218. Teodolinda Barolini also draws a parallel between soothsaying and textuality: 'their attempt to read the future in God's "magno volume" (*Par.* XV, 50) is an attempt to reach a vantage from which they, like God, "Colui che mai non vide cosa nova," will never see a new thing. And so, these sinners, who would have obliterated by foretelling all the

This is not the only instance of punishments involving the future, and the future involving the narrator. In *Inferno* X future tenses are abounding. The canto of the heretics hosts the Epicureans who rejected the (eschatological) future by questioning the immortality of the soul; fittingly, it opens with a future-tense prophecy of the resurrection of the body. The sepulchres in which the heretics lie, as Virgil explains, 'Tutti *saran serrati* / quando di Iosafàt qui *torneranno* / coi corpi che là sù hanno lasciati' (*Inferno* X, 10-12). This is the last endpoint imaginable, at the end of both history and all possible interpretations. Halfway through the canto, a second more personal endpoint, closer to home, is afforded by one of the earliest prophecies of Dante's exile, Farinata's menacing prediction that the pilgrim will soon experience in person what it means to never return to his city: 'Ma non cinquanta volte *fia* raccesa / la faccia de la donna che qui regge / che tu *saprai* quanto quell'arte pesa' (79-81). Farinata's obscure words of a dark future trouble Dante. Realising this, Virgil uses the last future tenses of the canto, referring to another significant step in the pilgrim's journey: his anticipated encounter with Beatrice, in the garden of Eden, and her clarification of the prophecies he will hear ('quando *sarai* dinanzi al dolce raggio / di quella il cui bell'occhio tutto vede, / da lei *saprai* di tua vita il viaggio', 130-132). The anticipation turns out to be inaccurate, given that the task is left to Cacciaguida—but such are the risks of writing in the future tense.[71]

This list of fast-approaching futures, each providing an important endpoint from which to understand the past, is a perfect example of how the *Commedia* employs the future teleologically. In contrast with this optimistic usage, at the heart of this very canto lie the disturbing encounter with Cavalcante, his over-reading of Dante's use of tenses, and Dante's ensuing doubts about the idiosyncratic ways in which the damned experience

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new things before they occurred […] are reduced to being one more instance of the new on the poet's narrative path: "Di nova pena mi conven far versi" (*Inf.* XX, 1)' (*Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 58).

[71] Other short-term anticipations of the plot in the future tense are 'Però a la dimanda che mi faci / quinc'entro satisfatto sarà tosto' (16-17) and 'da la cintola in sù tutto 'l vedrai' (33).

temporality. In the picture Farinata paints, futures and presents are mutually necessary in making life intelligible (just as they are in the wider canto). But as Farinata explains to the pilgrim, the damned, or on a more restricted interpretation, the heretics, are not able to see their relation.[72] Before judgement day, the damned experience time as those who have 'mala luce' (100): they are far-sighted, aware of the future, but blind to the present. After the end of time, however, the future will cease, and with it its power to illuminate the present. The blindness of the damned will be absolute, then: 'tutta morta / fia nostra conoscenza da quel punto / che del futuro fia chiusa la porta' (107-08). In the metatextual nuance of the terzina, nothing can be known after the last full stop.

This account of far-sightedness is described as limited to the damned, but it offers an interesting counterpoint in a canto largely devoted to predictive futures. Even more interestingly, the entire conceit of the 'mala luce' seems to arise as a justification of Dante's exchange with Cavalcante Cavalcanti, when the pilgrim is misunderstood in his explanation of his son Guido's absence from the otherworldly journey. When Dante replies to Cavalcante saying 'Da me stesso non vegno: / colui ch'attende là, per qui mi mena / forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno' (61-63), Cavalcante famously reads too much into Dante's use of the past tense 'elli ebbe':

> Di subito drizzato gridò: «Come?
> dicesti "elli ebbe"? non viv'elli ancora?
> non fiere li occhi suoi lo dolce lume?».
> Quando s'accorse d'alcuna dimora
> ch'io facea dinanzi a la risposta,

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72 Accrediting the idea that the idea of the 'mala luce' 'si direbbe poeticamente "inventata qui"' in *Inferno* X, Pasquale Stoppelli notices that Ciacco does show knowledge of the present when he refers to 'tal che *testè* piaggia' (*Inferno* VI, 69) ('La talpa dei bestiari e la "mala luce" dei dannati', in *Studi di letteratura italiana: In memoria di Achille Tartaro*, ed. by Giulia Natali and Pasquale Stoppelli (Rome: Bulzoni, 2009), pp. 51-65, p. 59.

supin ricadde e più non parve fora.

(*Inf.* X, 67-72)

The phrase 'elli ebbe' seems to consign Guido to the past tense of storytelling, a time that is self-contained and most unlike the open-ended present of the living. As in the case of Dante's dark over-reading of Virgil's ellipsis in the previous canto, the uncertain future left open by Dante's hesitation is immediately and pessimistically filled in by Cavalcante. And yet the pilgrim has not said anything, because, in the fictional timeframe of the *Commedia*, he could not possibly know about Guido's death. We of course know that Guido died at the end of August 1300, and as such could not straightforwardly be featured among the dead according to the *Commedia*'s timeframe. Centuries after it dismayed Cavalcante, Guido's superficial absence from the poem continues to mystify readers. 'Scomparso nell'angolo morto (meno di cinque mesi) a ridosso del viaggio immaginato,' as Gianfranco Contini writes, Dante's former friend 'è sottratto alla sentenza finale, sottratto anche alle profezie', thus impervious to the two most common forms of conclusive judgement in the *Commedia*. As such, Guido 'semivive in un intervallo o limbo sospensivo del gran rapporto sull'oltretomba, che ruota attorno all'evitata sua fine terrena.'[73] Dante's obstinate erasure of any endpoint whatsoever—be it of divine judgment, of prophecy, or of any other account of Guido's death—causes his friend to vanish in the poem's most remarkable blind spot. The historical Dante, author of the *Commedia*, could not but know of the fate that awaited Guido right around the corner of his fiction; and his reader cannot but know that Dante knew. Until an explanation comes to restore the *Commedia*'s time-space continuum (109-114), the pilgrim's hesitation opens a rare wormhole in the poem. As Robert Wilson puts it, 'it is almost as if, in some strange way, Cavalcante has asked Dante *personaggio* why he refers

[73] Gianfranco Contini, 'Cavalcanti in Dante', in *Un'idea di Dante*, pp. 143-157 (p. 143).

to Guido from the viewpoint of Dante *uomo*.'[74] Thus, under the gravitational pull of Dante's knowledge of what lay ahead in his character's future, the texture of the poem is warped, and the pilgrim blinks. In this *contaminatio* of roles, the fictional *personaggio* is briefly given an insight into the perspective of the historical *uomo* outside the fiction, the boundaries between the two Dantes more porous than ever.[75]

If the future outside the fiction has this effect on the poem, cutting it out altogether is no less problematic. *Inferno* XXXIII—the canto of Ugolino—is neatly divided into two halves. The first, more famous, part (1-78) is devoted to Ugolino's first-person narration of his and his sons' tragic incarceration and death in the Torre della Muda. This half relies on the conventions of oral storytelling by an embodied, diegetic narrator: in Ugolino's suspenseful tale, the future of promised narration 'dirò' (15), discussed above, is enhanced by a whole host of future tenses related to the performance of storytelling: 'parlar e lagrimar *vedrai* insieme' (9) and 'come la morte mia fu cruda, / *udirai*, e *saprai* s'e' m'ha offeso' (20-21); additional forward-looking elements are offered by Ugolino's prognostic dream.[76] In this skilful narrator's speech, the future goes as planned. Ugolino is perfectly able to fulfil all his promises; and, if his last infamous *reticentia* means what we fear, then so are his children, when they exclaim in the future tense: 'Padre, assai ci *fia* men doglia / se tu mangi di noi' (61-62).[77] In this oral performance of storytelling, then, the embodied narrator seems to have narration under control.

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[74] Robert Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy*, p. 165.

[75] For a rational (all too rational?) scrutiny of the tenses in the episode, see John Freccero, 'Epitaph for Guido: *Inferno* X', *Religion & Literature*, 39.3 (2007), 1-29.

[76] On the relation of oral and written storytelling, Barolini comments 'The writerly context that has absorbed the originally oral "canto" is denoted by the adverb "suso"; the poet refers to the children whose names are registered "above," in the written text' (*Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 247, n. 49).

[77] On the question of cannibalism, first proposed by Iacopo della Lana, see Robert Hollander's bibliographical note 'Ugolino's Supposed Cannibalism: A Bibliographical Note and Discussion,' *Quaderni d'italianistica*, 6 (1985), 64-81. The strongest case in favour of this option are in Marianne Shapiro, 'An Old French Source for Ugolino?', *Dante Studies*, 91 (1974), 129-147, and Ronald B. Herzman, 'Cannibalism and Communion in *Inferno* XXXIII', *Dante Studies*, 98 (1980), 53-78. See

Set in counterpoint with Ugolino's oral narrative, the second, less celebrated half of *Inferno* XXXIII features another tale based on promises and futures. Frate Alberigo only embarks on his narration of his treacherous life and strange *pre-mortem* damnation with the aim of getting Dante to clear the tears that freeze over his eyes. Dante swears an equivocal oath ('Se vuo' ch'i' ti sovvegna, / dimmi chi se', e s'io non ti disbrigo, / al fondo de la ghiaccia ir mi convegna', 115-117), knowing perfectly well that he must journey to the bottom of lake Cocytus regardless as a stage in his pilgrimage. This half-lie persuades Alberigo to fulfil his side of the pact (118-120), even throwing in the story of Branca Doria's fate as a bonus (129-147), hoping thus better to entice Dante into obliging him ('perché tu più volentier mi rade / le 'nvetriate lagrime dal volto', 127-128). Once the tale is over, however, Alberigo's third and final request does not have the expected outcome, as Dante reneges on his word:

«Ma distendi oggimai in qua la mano;
aprimi li occhi». E io non gliel'apersi;
e cortesia fu lui esser villano.
(*Inf.* XXXIII, 148-50)

Commentators debate over Dante's uncharacteristic mercilessness and its epigrammatic justification, often relating this episode to that of Bocca degli Abati in the previous canto, whom the pilgrim similarly abuses. Dante's broken promise here appears to be part of the canto's concern with treachery, the sin punished in this ninth circle. It is the manifestation of Dante's continuing interest in the incongruences between presents and futures in the

more recently, Saverio Bellomo's review of the question in 'Il canto XXXIII dell'*Inferno*', in *Lectura Dantis 2002-2009, omaggio a Vincenzo Placella per i suoi settanta anni*, ed. by Anna Cerbo, Mariangela Semola (Naples: Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", 2011), pp. 1369-1386.

Inferno, explored in cantos X and XX. Narrative promises, kept or broken, certainly play an important role in this discourse and the canto brings it even further. Through Frate Alberigo's words, Dante introduces in the poem the unprecedented theological idea that the sin of treachery punished in the Ptolomaea is so serious that the souls of those who commit it are immediately plunged into hell, while their bodies remain on earth, controlled by a demon (121-147; 154-157).[78] In stark contrast with the *Commedia*'s distinctive soteriology, strikingly characterised by the tales of last-minute damnations and redemptions of the various Montefeltros and Manfredis, this theological novelty appears idiosyncratic, suspending for a fearful moment the poem's radical embrace of possibility as the cornerstone of human existence and morality. Frate Alberigo explains this dismaying new information thus:

> sappie che, tosto che l'anima trade
> come fec'io, il corpo suo l'è tolto
> da un demonio, che poscia il governa
> mentre che 'l tempo suo tutto sia vòlto.
> (*Inf.* XXXIII, 129-132)

As soon as a soul commits treachery, they are sent to hell. Thus they are stripped not only of their body ('il corpo suo l'è tolto', 130), but also of their time (''l tempo suo', 132). Their body, although nominally belonging to them, is taken from them; similarly, their time on earth, although still perceived as theirs, continues without them. But if 'their body' and

[78] Maurizio Fiorilla writes 'non è ancora [...] del tutto risolta la questione della possibile *auctoritas* presente dietro l'idea dell'eccezionale castigo inflitto ai dannati della Tolomea, contrario alla dottrina cristiana che lascia a tutti uno spazio per il pentimento fino all'ultimo', before reviewing the sources traditionally proposed and suggesting a further possible intertextual reference ('"Et descendant in inferum" *Inf.* XXXIII, 109-57 e il salmo 54', *L'Alighieri*, 27 (2006), 133-139, p. 135).

'their time' go on without them, how can they be said to be 'theirs'? Therein lies the passage's tragic irony. One's time, as the repetition of 'suo' communicates, is as dear to one's person as is one's body; and yet both are here shown to be vulnerable to alienation through any of life's violences: sin and *pre-mortem* damnation, in this case, but also more generally chance, accident, coercion, exile. We saw how Boccaccio uses the possessive as richly in the expression 'suo fine', which he employs in the *Trattatello* to highlight the discrepancy between the death that Dante wished for and deserved, and his exile; between the poem's intended conclusion and its near loss. Analogously, Frate Alberigo's phrase ''l tempo suo' compels the reader to reflect on the vital yet fragile relationship between what we cherish as 'our time' and the fact that it is only considered 'ours' affectionately through a wishful fiction and by some lucky coincidence, and at any rate only until something happens that demonstrates how this is not the case. Voiced by a character who discovered for himself the rift between his fictional and his actual future, Alberigo's phrasing begs the question: was that time ever his? Was that body ever his? The damned soul is only able to speak of 'his time' and 'his body' because, for whatever reason, he still cherishes the fiction that his own time and body belong to him, even when his very presence in hell points to the grotesque absurdity of that very fiction. In any case, what his expressions 'corpo suo' and 'tempo suo' express is that alongside the real future lies a more personal future, that can be affectionately called one's own, a future that is imagined and wished for, as inseparable from one's self as his, your, my body.

It is that personal future that the damned are stripped of so brutally in *Inferno* XXXIII. Dante must have been aware of the effect that the theological invention of *pre-mortem* damnation would have had on his readers. It is unmistakeable: as Emilio Pasquini writes, 'Se ne meravigliano [...] tutti i commentatori antichi'. The various explanations of this dilemma offered by early commentators all have something in common: 'insistono sul suo carattere di *fictio* (Pietro, Graziolo, Benvenuto ecc.) o sull'arbitrio insito nel porre un

limite alla misericordia divina (Lana, Anonimo fiorentino, Guido da Pisa etc.)'.[79] In other words, commentators find jarring the passage's theological violence to personal lives and possibilities ('falso, e contro natura e fede, che partita l'anima dal corpo il corpo per alcuno modo si governi e viva', states unflinchingly L'Ottimo). When they explain the violence away, unanimously, they stress the fact the '*auctor*' is only speaking 'poetizzando' (Jacopo della Lana), 'immaginando' (Anonimo Fiorentino), '*figurative*' (Benvenuto da Imola), this is a '*locuti[o] poetic[a] colorat[a] auctoris hujus*' (Pietro Alighieri), or even better a '*poetica narratio seu fictio*' (Guido da Pisa); in our words, just a narrative poem, a fiction. If early commentators rebel to what they see as an arbitrary narrative-theological novelty, modern commentators find it suspicious in its very intentions. As Barbi notes, Dante's invention has an obvious practical advantage: 'permette a Dante di segnar note d'infamia su uomini viventi ancora nel 1300, senza ricorrere sempre alla forma delle predizioni (cfr. *Inf.* XVII 68, XIX 79-87, XXVIII 55-60, 76-90) o delle imprecazioni (cfr. *Inf.* XVII 72, XIX 52-57, XXX 76-78, XXXII 69) fatte dai dannati rispetto ai vivi'.[80] This explanation however creates problems of its own. Why not resort here also to the proven method of predictions and imprecations? Why risk for this episode the *Commedia*'s representation of human existence as on the perennial verge of redemption or salvation?

I do not mean here to speculate about authorial intentions, but merely to register the author's sheer conspicuousness in this narrative decision. Dante's overbearing presence offer a decisive clue. In *Inferno* XXXIII, we find a distorted image of what the universe of the *Commedia* would be like if the desire for self-enclosed futures and definitive endings under the author's control had its way. Cutting the future out of characters' lives, in

[79] Emilio Pasquini, 'Il canto XXXIII dell'*Inferno*', *Letture classensi,* 10-11 (1982), 191-216, p. 213, n. 55. Jacopo della Lana even evokes Manfredi's last-minute salvation through an allusion to *Purgatorio* III: 'Questa allegoria non è altro a dire se non che su nel mondo, largo modo, elli si puonno giudicare dannati; vero è che *la misericordia di Dio è tanta, ed ha sì ampio lo suo abbracciare, che* d'ogni peccato si può *tornare* a penitenzia e non essere per quello perduto'; clearly echoes *Purgatorio* III, 121-123: '*ma la bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia, / che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei.*'

[80] Michele Barbi *ad Inf.* XXXIII.

practice, produces a dystopian theological vision, which erases moral freedom and consigns the poem's universe to an arbitrarily deterministic hell. It would be ridiculous to argue that *Inferno* XXXIII is somewhat less or more a part of the *Commedia* or closer to/further from Dante's artistic vision—this whole thesis is after all a critique of the very desire to arbitrarily subordinate one part of the work to another—, but it is nonetheless arguable that this episode exposes in its inescapable consequences the drive to control interpretations by controlling ends; the very drive, in other words, that is at the heart of the *Commedia*'s dominant narrative. If you stick to the masterplot to the very end, this is what you get: a dystopian universe where humanity is stripped of its affective and personal dimension, deprived of its future and damned before death, its moral freedom made void—all in the name of a definitive, controlling end.

In *Inferno* X, XX and XXXIII we thus have three episodes where the future is represented as problematic, if not an outright nightmare, within the poem's plot. Most importantly, all three episodes embroil Dante himself in the question of the future, severely testing, once again, the compartmentalisation between *personaggio* and *poeta*. In *Inferno* X, Farinata's explanation of far-sightedness in hell is elicited by the extreme compression of the poem's timeframe, whereby the *personaggio* seems to share the *poeta*'s knowledge regarding Guido's death. In *Inferno* XX, the *personaggio* is rebuked for his pity for the soothsayer's punishment and their attempt to know the future, yet the *poeta* does not appear to have learned the lesson. Lastly, when in *Inferno* XXXIII Frate Alberigo introduces the narrative-theological invention of *pre-mortem* damnation—a caricature of the masterplot in its extreme implications—, the *personaggio* seems to perform the episode's theological brutality, as he breaks his promise to Alberigo and thus makes himself complicit in sabotaging the continuity between presents and futures. In these episodes, then, *Inferno* thematises the dark side of the future in general; but it also, more specifically, gives a taste of its destabilising consequences for Dante and his poem. Whenever it is conjured up, the

future ends up putting pressure on the building-blocks of the *Commedia*: its fictional timeframe, its masterplot, the division of labour between *poeta* and *personaggio*.

6. The ageing author

Future tenses of promised writing, risks of precarious transmission, threats of unfinished works, infernal nightmares of futurity—these are as many reminders in the *Commedia* that alongside Dante the masterful author with an assured grip on his fiction and its interpretation, there is another Dante, preoccupied with the very future that he indefatigably strives to tame. This is the vulnerable Dante that this chapter is concerned with, and whom we begin to see more and more of as the *Commedia* progresses. Manuele Gragnolati has written about the pilgrim's embodied experience of the afterlife, arguing that alongside the traditional reading of the *Commedia* as *itinerarium mentis in Deum*—the allegorical journey of the soul to God famously advocated by Charles S. Singleton—, the poem can also be read as 'a journey of the body'.[81] The pilgrim's own body, as Gragnolati shows, 'goes through several stages of transformation as he moves through the otherworld', from the 'heavy, mortal body' of *Inferno*, to the progressively lighter body of *Purgatorio*, made ever lighter by the purifying 'experience of pain' as Dante climbs the mountain.[82] In *Paradiso*, significant episodes mark the body's transformation and the progressive strengthening of its faculties, through Dante's repeated efforts, failures and renewed attempts to experience the trans-human reality of heaven with his mortal body.

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[81] Manuele Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 168 and see pp. 168-178 for his account of the journey of the body. For the *itinerarium mentis*, see Charles S. Singleton, 'The Allegorical Journey', in *Dante Studies: vol* 2. *Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 3-14. John Freccero, writes about Dante's 'corpo lasso' in *Inferno* I, 28 as the 'sudden incarnation, the presence of a body on this journey of the mind' which 'marks Dante's poetic originality' (Freccero, *Poetics of Conversion*, p. 33).
[82] Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife*, p. 170.

The journey culminates in the last cantos of *Paradiso*, where the pilgrim appears to have gained the augmented faculties of the resurrected body and is finally 'granted the vision of the mysteries of the universe and the Trinity'.[83] The pilgrim's journey of the body, then, is one of increasing strength and faculties, a quintessentially teleological progression towards the fullness of experience that characterises the resurrected body of the blessed.[84]

The *poeta*'s journey of the body is a different matter. It proceeds in parallel with that of the *personaggio*, yet its arc is not ascending and the end toward which it moves is far from glorious. As Pertile writes, 'we are given to understand along the way' that the journey of the narrator 'is in a sense a far more difficult undertaking, a task that costs him "hunger, cold *and* vigils" (*Purgatorio* XXIX, 37–38)'.[85] Pertile quotes a passage when the narrator dwells on his own embodied presence for the first time; indeed this is one of the very few details in the poem that give us an insight, however indirect, into Dante's appearance in general:[86]

O sacrosante Vergini, se fami,
freddi o vigilie mai per voi soffersi,
cagion mi sprona ch'io mercé vi chiami.
(*Purg.* XXIX, 37-38)

83 Ibid., p. 178.

84 In his *Amor che move: Linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013), pp. 139-161, Gragnolati revisits the conclusion of *Paradiso* as non-linear and anti-narrative, by placing further emphasis on the ways in which the return of the body, both of Dante and the blessed, resists sublimation, 'non si dissolve ma continua a essere parte integrante della gloria' (p. 161).

85 Pertile, 'Introduction to *Inferno*', p. 67, quoted above (italics his).

86 In *Inferno* XVI, 106-108 we learn that Dante was wearing a 'corda intorno cinta'; in *Purgatorio* XXXI, 68, Beatrice admonishes him to lift his 'barba', although most commentators take this to be a synecdoche for his chin ('chin up!'), tinged with a reproach of immaturity, rather than a reference to facial hair. On the question of Dante's beardedness, see R. A. Shoaf, 'Dante's Beard: *Sic et non* [*Purgatorio* XXXI, 68],' in *Magister Regis: Studies in Honor of* Robert E. Kaske, ed. by Arthur Groos et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), pp. 171-177 and bibliographical references therein.

'Hunger, cold, and vigils': Dante's travels test him physically in the otherworld as much as after his return, whether he ascends through the afterlife or meanders through Italy's courts. Here his plights are portrayed as implicitly redeeming and 'productive', they have a purpose ('per voi [sacrosante Vergini]', 37), and give him reason to call on the Muses for help (38). Yet Dante is not always so confident in the meaning and productivity of his exilic wanderings. Already in *Inferno* XXVI the narrator expressed his mixed feelings about a future he feared and anticipated in equal measures, as we have seen:

E se già fosse, non saria per tempo.
Così foss'ei, da che pur esser dee!
ché più mi graverà, com'più m'attempo.
(*Inf.* XXVI, 10-12)

The verb *attemparsi*, a common word in modern-day Italian meaning 'to grow old', is Dante's neologism. It refers to the aging that will weigh the narrator down as time goes on. Its construction (*ad* + *temporem* + reflexive form) is a trademark of the *Commedia*: it links *attemparsi* to the family of 'verbi parasintetici [i.e., made by prefix + noun] [...] riflessivi, o più esattamente medi, cioè riferiti al soggetto, di cui perciò movimentano metaforicamente la descrizione ontologica, senza propriamente cadere nell'azione' (Contini lists as examples the likes of 's'inmilla', 's'interna', 's'insempra', etc.), which form Dante's 'grammatica delle metamorfosi'.[87] In Dante's hands, *attemparsi* becomes a verb worthy of Heidegger: transforming oneself into something which rushes towards time. This metamorphosis,

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[87] Gianfranco Contini also notices how these neologisms often occurs as rhyme-words, as in this case: 'la posizione in rima, punto accusato del ritmo, quando non addirittura in rima finale di terzina, esalta la portata del neologismo' ('Un esempio di poesia dantesca (Il canto XXVIII del *Paradiso*)', in *Un'idea di Dante*, pp. 191-213 (p. 200)).

however, does not have an aim, much less a glorious one. Compare it to the analogously constructed *infuturarsi* used by Cacciaguida in the renowned prophecy concerning Dante's exile in *Paradiso* XVII:

> poscia che s'infutura la tua vita
> vie più là che 'l punir di lor perfidie
> (*Par.* XVII, 98-99)

Here the future that Dante envisions is textbook teleological. Dante's life 's'infutura' (98), will advance further into the future than the punishment of those who have been cruel to him. With a firm footing in the future, Dante will have the teleological vantage point, which will enable him to have the last word and make sense of his sufferings. Later in the canto Dante recreates the same dynamic, as he expresses the fear that he might be despised by posterity: 'temo di perder viver tra coloro / che questo tempo chiameranno antico' (*Paradiso* XVII, 119-120). As Piero Boitani writes, the expression 'implies a keen sense of the future on Dante's part, and also gives the future a very peculiar connotation, that of an age which looks as it were mainly to the past'.[88] The roles have changed slightly, but the teleological dynamic remains the same, this time with posterity in the position to judge over Dante's life after his death. With 'm'attempo', however, time affords no such advantages. In *Inferno* XXVI, temporality shows instead its dark side, it does not exalt Dante's body but weighs him down with age ('graverà', 12). The verb is used much to the same effect by Cacciaguida in a further point of contact between the two cantos:

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[88] Piero Boitani, 'Those who will call these times ancient: The Futures of Prophecy and Poetry', in *Medieval Futures: Attitudes to the Future in the Middle Ages*, ed. by John Anthony Burrow and Ian P. Wei (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), pp. 51-65, p. 52. A further instance of this dynamic occurs in very similar terms in *Purgatorio* XXIII, 91-111 where Forese prophesies: 'Tempo futuro m'è già nel cospetto, / cui non sarà quest'ora molto antica' (98-99).

Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale.
E quel che più ti graverà le spalle
sarà la compagnia malvagia e scempia
con la qual tu cadrai in questa valle;
(*Par.* XVII, 58-63)

Part of the reason why the poetry of the first terzina is so poignant and memorable is that Dante chooses to express exile, helplessness and the experience of being on the receiving end of charity through the use of concrete terms rather than abstractions. Salty bread, walking up and down a stranger's stairs are as many descriptions of what exile means in everyday life, and the phrase 'graverà le spalle' (61) carries a little of this loaded literality into the following terzina. From a dramaturgic point of view, however, this justly celebrated passage does nothing new. By the time Dante is told of 'lo scendere e 'l salir' (60) that awaits him, we have seen him practice these steps about 56 times in the poem, and in roughly that order. The verb *scendere* (and *discendere*) occurs 41 times in *Inferno*, 24 in *Purgatorio* and 29 in *Paradiso*; the verb *salire* (and *risalire*) respectively 10, 42 and 14 times. Unsurprisingly, most descending takes place in *Inferno* and most ascending in *Purgatorio*, and Dante does more of it than any other single character or other subject. However, whereas the pilgrim's ascending and descending steps have a precise goal in sight, their trajectory after the end of his otherworldly journey loses this teleological optimism. The journey will be equally corporeal, as the concrete language states plainly, but in this case it will follow the natural course of any journey on earth, where time is more ungrateful and the immediate end in sight is not so welcome: rise and fall. The imaginative universe of the *Commedia* pivots on this earthly end; and the pilgrim himself shows an acute awareness of

the kind of world that awaits him after the conclusion of his journey. In *Purgatorio* XX the pilgrim refers to his return to earth cautiously with the lines 's'io ritorno a compiér lo cammin corto / di quella vita ch'al termine vola' (*Purgatorio* XX, 38-39): his return may be uncertain ('s[e]'), but the journey's brevity, speed and conclusion are painfully clear. Further, in the garden of Eden, when Beatrice urges the pilgrim with the famous lines 'così queste parole segna a' vivi / del viver ch'è un correre alla morte' (*Purgatorio* XXXI, 53-54), she is once again complicating the passage's prophetic tone, addressing Dante and perhaps including him in the kind of journey that, unlike comedies, promises no happy ending. Even if the pilgrim were somehow immune to the old tale of mortality, his exile will await him with its own special violence:

> Ben veggio, padre mio, sì come sprona
> lo tempo verso me, per colpo darmi
> tal, ch'è più grave a chi più s'abbandona;
> (*Par.* XVII, 106-108)

The terzina is reminiscent of the line 'che più mi graverà, com' più m'attempo'. While Dante saw himself rushing towards time in *Inferno* ('m'attempo'), time here rushes towards him ('sprona / lo tempo verso me'). It does not bring Dante benefits, but a heavy blow, more imminent now that it relinquishes the future tense ('che più mi graverà') in favour of the present ('ch'è più grave').

7. Between vulnerability and performance: *Paradiso* XXV

The narrator's time-worn body is last seen in the address to the reader of *Paradiso* XXV:

Se mai continga che 'l poema sacro

al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,

sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro,

vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra

del bello ovile ov'io dormi' agnello,

nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra;

con altra voce omai, con altro vello

ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte

del mio battesmo prenderò 'l cappello;

però che ne la fede, che fa conte

l'anime a Dio, quivi intra' io, e poi

Pietro per lei sì mi girò la fronte.

(*Par.* XXV, 1-12)

The famous *incipit* of the canto in which the pilgrim is examined on the cardinal virtue of Hope—"'Spene", dissi'io, "è uno attender certo / de la gloria futura"' (*Paradiso* XXV, 67-68)—presents the future in all the ambiguity that we have traced throughout the *Commedia*. The meaning of the passage is inseparable from the tone we read into it. Do we voice it triumphantly, emphasising the *gravitas* of the biblical references and elevated rhetorical construction, and the cosmological vastness involving heaven and earth?[89] Or do we voice it more cautiously as the delicate hope of an ageing and emaciated man, placing the emphasis rather on hypotheticals and subjunctives and the fact that this (pseudo-?)prophecy is voiced by the narrator on earth, much like the opening of *Inferno* XXVI and

[89] For the biblical intertext in *Paradiso* XXV, see Giuseppe Ledda, 'L'esilio, la speranza, la poesia: Modelli biblici e strutture autobiografiche nel canto XXV del *Paradiso*', *Studi e Problemi di Critica Testuale*, 90.1 (2015), 257-277.

unlike all other prophecies?[90] The *incipit* alternates these major and minor chords. It appears to make a prophecy through the future indicatives of the third terzina ('ritornerò poeta', 'prenderò 'l cappello'), but modulates it through the subjunctives on which they are conditional ('Se mai continga', 'vinca la crudeltà'); a movement which is anticipated within each of the first two terzinas (from hypothetical ['Se mai continga'] to present indicative ['sì che m'ha fatto']; from subjunctive ['vinca la crudeltà'] to past historical ['ov'io dormii'] and present ['li danno guerra']).[91]

Reading the *incipit* after Dante's death, it is impossible to suspend one's knowledge that, even if these lines were meant to be prophetic, they failed; one of very few such failures in Dante's oeuvre.[92] We may never know (we can only imagine) whether the 'molti anni' spent in exile did render Dante as 'macro' as he paints himself (3), and whether age altered his 'voce' and 'vello' (7);[93] what we do know is that he never returned to Florence,

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[90] From these very details, Robert Wilson rules out the possibility that this is a prophecy: 'I do not consider *Par.* XXV, 1-9, prophetic or predictive. It is expressed in the form of the conditional, and represents, at best, Dante's future hope. It is also expressed by Dante *poeta*, who, as we have seen, does not prophesy directly' (Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy*, p. 205, n. 19). Albert Russell Ascoli reflects that the Dante described here is '"human, all too human". Dante's coronation […] is posited as radically contingent, subject to the contraints of history' (Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, p. 402).

[91] Claire Honess and Matthew Treherne discuss the shift in mood in the first terzina: 'if the return to Florence imagined here is hypothetical ('Se mai *continga*...'), the divine agency in the poem's composition is presented as unassailably true ('al quale ha posto mano...'), as the move from subjunctive to indicative mood confirms' ('Introduction' to *Se mai continga...: Exile, Politics and Theology in Dante*, ed. by Claire E. Honess & Matthew Treherne (Ravenna: Longo, 2013), pp. 7-10, p. 8).

[92] Robert Wilson writes how Dante prefers obscurity and ambiguity to the possibility of incorrect prophecy, especially when it comes to *ante eventum* prophecies such as this one. An example of failed prophecy is offered by both *Epistle* VI and *Purgatorio* XIII, 91-111: 'The detail about mourning is shared by both texts. The letter predicts the imminent attack on Florence by Henry VII, so that, in this instance, Dante's prediction in his letter was not realised, since Henry ended his six week siege of the city in October 1312 and withdrew his army, never to return.' (Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy*, pp. 96-97). Note that the epistle too resorts to one of Dante's disclaimers about futurity: '*si praesaga mens mea non fallitur*'.

[93] On the subject of Dante's leanness, Giuseppe Ledda ponders whether it should be considered autobiographical or part of a prophetic persona based on 'il modello della magrezza apostolico'. Ledda preserves the ambiguity in his answer: 'Nel caso di Dante questi elementi topici assumono poi un intenso valore di vissuto autobiografico' (Ledda, 'Modelli biblici e autobiografia', p. 261, n. 1

he was never poet laureate as he wished. From this perspective at least, a more cautious reading of *Paradiso* XXV seems justified: Dante's hypotheticals and subjunctives, showing the vulnerability of his text, proved more truthful than his prophetic future.

Yet in a sense Dante did return to Florence as poet laureate.[94] Not just in the shape of 'the words of his poetry' and thus 'only in a metaphorical sense', as Claire E. Honess has argued, but, as it were, in person and in a way that seems to respond to *Paradiso* XXV.[95] Whereas the earliest depictions of Dante in manuscripts, panels or frescos represent him as 'giovanile, sereno, chiaro d'incarnato' and wearing his recognisable cap, two iconographic innovations begin to appear in the second half of the XV century: Dante not only appears more mature and gaunt, as he already did in such early XV-century manuscripts as Strozzi 174 and Riccardiano 1040, but also wears the laurel that alludes to his poetic coronation.[96] The earliest of such representations is perhaps the greatest one: the fresco painted by Domenico di Michelino in the Duomo of Florence in 1465 for the bicentenary of Dante's birth. Here Dante appears at the centre of the frame, gaunt and laureled, holding his *Commedia*, surrounded by hell to the left, purgatory in the background, and the spheres of heaven above him. In the right side of the composition lies Florence showing its walls to the poet, who stands outside the gates. Behind the city walls, the skyline is dominated by the Duomo that contains this very fresco where Dante is represented. Through this *mise en abyme*—the fresco of Dante in the Duomo containing the fresco of Dante in the Duomo—the poet is both outside and inside the city: outside, because we see him standing out of the city walls; inside, because we know the painted Duomo inside the gates to hold the poet's portrait. Thus the painting preserves the ambiguity of *Paradiso* XXV and all of Dante's futures, remaining fateful to the poet's own uncertainty when using the future tense at the

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and bibliographical references therein).

[94] For a forceful argument in favour of the interpretation that Dante intended the *incipit* of *Paradiso* XXV to mean his wish to be poet laureate, see Ledda, 'L'esilio, la speranza, la poesia', p. 262.

[95] "Ritornerò poeta...": Florence, Exile, and Hope', in *Se mai continga...*, pp. 85-103, p. 102.

[96] Anna Maria Francini Ciaranfi, 'Iconografia', in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*.

time of writing. As Catherine Keen notes, 'return' in this episode is 'understood to bring not closure, but change and rebirth, extended indefinitely towards the future.'[97] The 'resilient validation of the spiritually, politically and poetically transformative nature of Dante's experience of banishment from Florence' that Keen writes of, coincides, specifically, with Dante's laureation and ageing, both performed by his poetry in the future tense and performing the two complementary sides of it, authorial mastery and authorial vulnerability. Robert Hollander comments that 'it is notable that Dante, on both occasions on which he considers the prospect of his own laureation (see *Par.* I, 26, 'coronarmi'), imagines the wreath, not as being bestowed upon him by some benevolent figure, but as being taken by himself.'[98] As the last five centuries of Dante iconography demonstrate, his *Commedia* gained him the poetic laurel, but also left trace of the arduous and uncertain journey of its writing.

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[97] Catherine Keen, 'Florence and Faction in Dante's Lyric Poetry: Framing the Experience of Exile', in *Se mai continga...*, pp. 63-83, p. 82.
[98] Robert Hollander, *ad Par.* XXV, 1-9. See also Daniele Mattalia, *ad Par.* XXV, 9.

Epilogue

Dante's Narrative Pluralism

[B]ut must I now become reconciled to the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line?

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*[360]

In their search for historical truth on the man and author, Dante's biographers are especially aware of the fact that they must constantly contend with his talent for proposing and exploiting teleological narratives. Some conclude that contesting Dante's self-narrative is no longer possible, and even suggest adhering to it;[361] but all accompany their statements with methodological caveats that are relevant for readers of Dante in general. Giorgio Inglese puts the matter clearly when he writes: 'i riferimenti autobiografici, rilevantissimi nell'opera dantesca […], dev[ono] essere pur sempre mess[i] a confronto con gli intenti di stilizzazione, e persino di idealizzazione, propri della strategia letteraria entro la quale essi sono proposti'.[362] The teleological trajectory, with its exemplary narrative arc and inspiring message, is precisely an instance of such a stylised and idealised narrative. On the heels of this realisation, Inglese decides to write a less linear, more pluralistic narrative of Dante's life; *one possible biography* among the various equally possible alternatives—as valid as Dante's dominant one. '[P]iù che tentare l'ennesima ricostruzione lineare - di tenore romanzesco -

360 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Campbell, 1995 [1981]), p. 190.
361 As Gorni writes, '[L]'assenza, quasi provvidenziale, di documenti ha conferito un valore astratto, astorico ed esemplare, all'esperienza del poeta, modello ed eroe italiano moderno' (Guglielmo Gorni, *Dante: Storia di un visionario* (Bari: Laterza, 2009), p. 27. On adhering to Dante's self-narrative: 'Un seule possibilité semble se présenter: s'appuyer sur l'autobiographie dantesque' (Jacqueline Risset, *Dante: Une Vie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), p. 9); 'la soluzione migliore per cogliere il segreto di un artista è tentare di ripercorrerne il cammino, ponendoci per così dire dal suo punto di vista' (Emilio Pasquini, *Vita di Dante: I giorni e le opere* (Milan: BUR, 2007), p. 10.
362 Giorgio Inglese, *Vita di Dante: Una biografia possibile* (Rome: Carocci, 2015), p. 11.

della vita di Dante', writes Inglese, 'mi è parso conveniente proporre una combinazione non troppo coerente fra elementi certi, probabili o solo plausibili'.[363] The lines are drawn: on the one hand, the influence of the linear narrative, novelistic plotting, and fictionality proposed by Dante; on the other, a methodological open-mindedness about a lack of coherence and of pre-established design.[364]

In the present thesis, I have taken a similar approach to Dante's *Commedia* from a literary perspective. I fully acknowledge the importance of Dante's teleological masterplot in the textual construction of the *Commedia*, with its ideological, literary, and ethical projects. At the same time, however, I have tried to consider the masterplot for what it is: an artefact on a par with any other part of the text and thus equally demanding of critical scrutiny. In my analysis of alternative narratives therefore, I have resisted the impulse to subordinate them to teleology, showing how this impulse is produced by the teleological masterplot itself with its man-made hierarchy of *before* and *after*. I have tried, in other words, to take the *master* out of the *masterplot*, and study it just as any other existing *plot*.

The picture of the *Commedia* that emerges from this thesis questions three important assumptions underlying Dante's teleological masterplot. Firstly, the oxymora and long-range paradoxes explored in the first chapter question 'the interpretive assumption [...] of "total coherence" in the *Commedia*'.[365] In this respect, I agree with those scholars who argue that not everything is resolved in the *Commedia* but that paradox is part of the poem's design.[366] The previous chapters have shown this in practice, by focusing variously

363 Ibid. Gorni agrees: 'Bisogna rassegnarsi al fitto mistero, che obbliga a emettere ipotesi, nient'altro che ipotesi, sulla vita, sulla cronologia delle opere e sul loro stesso canone' (*Dante: Storia di un visionario*, p. 27).
364 On this point, see also Zygmunt G. Barański, 'The "New Life" of "Comedy": The *Commedia* and the *Vita Nuova*', *Dante Studies*, 113 (1995), 1-29 (p. 20).
365 Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 45. Ascoli is alluding here to Gianfranco Contini's dismissal of 'l'illusione della cosiddetta lettura totale' of the *Commedia* ('Filologia ed esegesi dantesca', repr. in *Un'idea di Dante: Saggi danteschi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), pp. 113-142 (p. 114)).
366 See most recently, Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, 'From Paradox to Exclusivity:

on how God's justice is represented as inflexible and yet his mercy is portrayed as infinite; how figuring heaven is said to be an impossible task and yet the experience of its paradoxes is performed for the reader; how the poem's narrative necessity can coexist in the text with the freedom of centrifugal and parallel narratives; and on how the poet's prophetic persona coexists with that of a man vulnerable to time and circumstance. As these and other instances demonstrate, paradox and contradiction are not only very much at home in the poetic universe of the *Commedia*, they are structural components of it. Dante's desire for coherence does not overrule his respect for the theological, moral, and narrative otherness that a dominant narrative risks sacrificing.

This respect for otherness extends to Dante's relationship with his readers, with whom the interpretation of his poem ultimately rests. The precise nature of this relationship is open to debate.[367] Some scholars characterise it as authoritative and controlling, as they draw attention to Dante's assured command of the narrative, and emphasise the ways in which the text 'manipulate[s] the reader' and 'manages our [...] reactions'.[368] The gendered term *masterplot*, as used here, is meant to make fun of this very

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Dante and Petrarch's Lyrical Eschatologies', in *The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-Modern World: Petrarch and Boccaccio between the Middle Ages and* Renaissance, ed. by Igor Candido (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

[367] 'Dante appeals to the reader ("lettore") more frequently than any other classical or medieval author' (Elena Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2012), p. 215). On the *Commedia*'s addresses to the reader: Erich Auerbach, 'Dante's Addresses to the Reader', *Romance Philology*, 7 (1954), 268–78 and *Literary Language and its Public in Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Ralph Mannheim (New York: Pantheon, 1965); Leo Spitzer, 'The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*', *Italica*, 32 (1955), 143–65; William Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 37-80.

[368] Teodolinda Barolini, *Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 16, and the rest of ch. 1. Although not always agreeing with Barolini's method and rhetoric, other scholars share her view of the author's control of his text's reception: see, for instance, Albert Russell Ascoli's account of Dante's construction of his authorial *persona* in *Dante and the Making of the Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Heather Webb's case for the ways in which the *Commedia* makes the reader participate in the narrative through gestures and posture (*Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

portrait with its connotations of dominance, superiority, and a particular brand of macho *bravura*. It parodies what the rampant success of the teleological narrative model in the reception of the *Commedia* has made its author look like.[369] Dante does exert unprecedented control over his poem and its reception, but does not shy away from representing his own failings. In fact, as the last chapter shows, the *Commedia* and its narrator systematically remind readers of their vulnerability, an aspect of Dante's self-representation which demands serious critical consideration. By exploring Dante's vulnerability further, in the face of an over-authoritative image of the poet, readers will be able to appreciate the ways in which his relationship with his reception is more open-ended and generous. In this light, the *Commedia*'s openness to the future can be read as evidence of how the poem 'remain[s] in some ways incomplete, or [...] unfulfilled'; the many paradoxes and moral quandaries in the poem often make the *Commedia* an 'undecidable text' which bestows 'solely upon [the reader] the (in)decisions of interpretation'.[370]

Lastly, this thesis demonstrates how Dante's masterplot, although dominant in the reception of the *Commedia*, is far from uncontested within the text. In the body of the thesis, I have identified three alternative narrative models, afforded respectively by paradoxes, alternative endings and parallel lives, and the problem case of the future—these are far from the only ones. In line with this thesis's pluralistic understanding of Dante and

[369] On the gender problem in relation to 'narrative authority', feminist scholar Alison Case finds 'a larger gendered pattern, in which self-conscious narrative mastery is coded as a masculine attribute, while credibility for female narrators tends to be associated with unself-consciously embodying or reflecting social truths' ('Gender and History in Narrative Theory: The Problem of Retrospective Distance in *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 312-321 (p. 320)).

[370] Robert Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy in Dante's 'Commedia'*, p. 121; and Elena Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves*, pp. 4, 11 (see also her 'Introduction', pp. 3-19). Cf. also Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati's discussion of the *Commedia* as a 'multi-stable image' involving the reader's interpretation in 'Dante after Wittgenstein: 'Aspetto, Language, and Subjectivity from *Convivio* to *Paradiso*', in Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati, and Jürgen Trabant, *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), pp. 223-247.

of the poetic universe of the *Commedia*, I believe that other narrative models can, and should, be explored. It would be this work's proudest accomplishment if, alongside the notions of Dante's *plurilingualism* and *pluristylism*, an idea of Dante's *narrative pluralism* could come to play a key role in contemporary and future readings of the *Commedia*.

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