

LOVE AND DEATH ON THE LONGEST JOURNEY: DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

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'Dying,' wrote Emily Dickinson, 'is a wild night and a new road.' If I had the curious task of providing an epigraph for the *Commedia*, it would be in those words. The choice might seem odd to those most taken with the majesty and serenity of certain frequently-quoted passages from the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*. I hope that I am properly grateful for these, but it is still true that no single one of them, even the most famous, is chiefly remarkable for its independent felicity. Rather, like their seeming opposites from the *Inferno*, they move in a current of passionate intellection, of perturbed and commingled imagination, which when displayed in any part of the poem affects the whole. And although by common consent the *Commedia* has as near immortal status as is to be had here, it is important that we understand that, first and last, this is a drama of mortality, whose most capacious avenues may still be windblown by nightmare. Speaking at one point of life itself, Robert Frost says that the game is 'played for mortal stakes.' He had it in mind that life-and-death issues are in question: but his dictum, read with Dante in mind, would also be a reminder that it is always mortals who are being engaged - the ones, that is, who are to their core both frail and dear.

Any amateur speaking of Dante must be uneasily aware of the continental vastness of Dante scholarship and criticism, to which one's contribution can be at best parochial. I am reminded, in fact, of a fragment of Irish chronicle which addresses a similar embarrassment. It goes,

When the rapacious throng of poets descended upon King Guaire the Generous with their outrageous demands, such as fresh strawberries at Christmas, they insisted on a bed for each poet, with a second bed beside it at a lower level, for fear they might fall out in their sleep. Lucky for the king that his brother, St MoChua, was a learned man who made the poets retreat in shame by showing up their lack of letters.¹

But for all one's instinctive fear of the sainted and the learned, I still think that we may be given access to important things in the *Commedia* by way of poetry which it has precipitated. Here, then, is a poem by the New Zealander Fleur Adcock. It is called 'An Illustration to Dante':

Here are Paolo and Francesca
whirled around in the circle of Hell

clipped serenely together
 her dead face raised against his.
 I can feel the pressure of his arms
 like yours about me, locking.

They float in a sea of whitish blobs –
 fire is it? It could have been
 hail, said Ruskin, but Rossetti
 'didn't know how to do hail.'
 Well, he could do tenderness.
 My spine trickles with little white flames.²

It occurs to me that there are several things to be said about Adcock's poem which are relevant to Dante and to my topic. The first is that it opens *vistas* - Ruskin upon Rossetti upon Dante upon Paolo and Francesca, and all this upon the poet and her lover; the second, that what is enacted from first to last is *process* - the whirled and floating lovers, the sea, the hail, the flames - all of them dancing towards Adcock's conclusion; the third, that the whole works by *interrogation*, conjecture and interlocution - 'they are', 'I can feel', 'it could', 'didn't know', 'could do'. With pedagogical predictability, I shall say something about each of these matters, but before I do so, and in part to prepare the way, I want to say a word about religion and the arts.

Put most simply, it is that they both get us in out of our depth, and that they do so because they are ways of negotiating human experiences of life itself, which experiences are in principle oceanic. It would make no sense to me if someone characterised any religion entirely in terms of its being a serviceable way of muting, or packaging, or christening life's various features - though of course I am familiar with sectaries and bureaucrats who appear to think in such terms, and God forgive me for what I think of them. Christopher Smart, the astounding religious poet of the eighteenth century, says at one point in his 'Jubilate Agno', 'For in my nature, I quested for beauty: but God, God hath sent me to sea for pearls'. In any authentic religion, you cannot have the pearls of insight or intellectual solace or of love's rondures without the engulfing sea of life's eventfulness.

In Christianity, the ritual induction we call baptism takes its name from a Greek word which means among other things 'shipwreck'. The claim is that one is washed away from one's prior stabilities and imagined securities, and drowned into a new life: and the claim is that all this is warranted and empowered solely because the Jesus in whose name it is undertaken was himself willing, for all his revulsion and terror, to go that darkest of paths, nerved only by the love which enabled him to keep faith

both with his death-requiring Father and with his death-enduring sisters and brothers.

Other religions conduct their affairs in fashions distinctive to each of them: but all of them, so far as I understand the matter, have something analogous at stake. Any religion worth the name thrusts its adherents more and more unconditionally into life's own dynamics. One may, and correctly, identify oneself as 'called apart' from certain of society's structures, and even from certain of the imperatives of our species: but genuine religion always, though sometimes enigmatically, calls one more deeply into life. 'Anything else', as Christ said of a connected matter, 'is of the Evil One.'

I am convinced that the same is true of the arts. This is not always obvious there, any more than it is within particular practices of given religions. Entrepreneurs batten on this or that work of art, this or that artist: scholiasts leak ink over the *Commedia* itself and, these days, into the Internet: careers, industries, entertainments, seductions, hucksterings, decorations, propaganda - any and all of them can be fertilised by a phrase, an allusion, even a title. Philistine millionaires parlay between themselves the work of artists who may have died in despair, and philistine academics court applause for the rectitude of their pronouncements even while they inure themselves against those whose boldness bankrolls their timidities.

All this, however, even when it is not charlatanry, has little or nothing to do with art's peculiar life. Art is in fact neither a surrogate for nor the servant of any other human practice whatever. It has, if you will, its own sacredness: it certainly has its own crystalline, uncloneable identity. Peter Porter likes to quote Mozart's reply to the questioner who asked why he wrote so much - 'because it fatigues me less than not composing'. In the same vein, one might say that there are some modes of access to exhilaration, to dismay, and to naked meaning, whose neglect leaves its neglecters fatigued. Socrates, reportedly, thought the unreflected-upon life not worth living. Any genuine artist knows that a life bereft of artistic experience is in great measure a life un-lived.

My assumption, then, is that the livest nerve in religions is analogous with the livest nerve in the arts. That this nerve is, in both cases, often numbed is nothing to the point. But, to recur explicitly to Dante, and to my earlier three headings, it is to the point, when an exposed human being is on the march, to be on guard against the trivialisation of experience - against its being construed as at heart an illustration of this or an extrusion of that, a sample or a medium or an adumbration. It may incidentally be any of these things: but essentially it is ourselves in action, is what we know and

are. And I take it that when reflection on Dante has been most apropos, and when translation has best kept faith with its original, this has always been because the speaker has held forth under provocation, a provocation in which Dante's poetry and the speaker's acknowledged experience have ignited each other. In the rueful hope that a little of this may be going on at the present moment, let me return to Fleur Adcock's poem.

I said first that, reading her and thinking of Dante, we are conscious of vistas. The moment memorialised in her poem is perhaps that most frequently remembered by others than Dante specialists. A recent review of Allen Mandelbaum's version of the *Commedia*, referring to Paolo and Francesca, glibly congratulates Dante for not getting too agitated about sexual sinfulness: by contrast, various scholars, aware of the bloody entailments of the historical episode here remembered, find the encounter as sobering as it is engrossing. Either way, though, there is no escaping the fusion of love and death in their adulterous encounter. As W.D. Snodgrass has pointed out, there is in the original a sinister pun: where English has, 'Love led us to one death', Dante has '*Amor condusse noi ad un a morte*'.³ At its prospect, Dante (in Mark Musa's translation) '...swooned as though to die, / and fell to Hell's floor as a body, dead, falls':⁴ and though this is offered as a consequence of pity, it may also be seen as a kind of contagion of mortality - the lovers' ultimate pass brings him to his present pass.

This moment in the *Inferno* may properly remind us of the two-fold vistas which the poem constantly offers - one into the past, the other into the future. Musa's glossary of persons and places mentioned in the *Inferno* offers us, among the first fourteen entries, Abel, Abraham, Absalom, Acheron, Achilles, Achitophel, Adam, Aeneas, and Aesop. I think that any habitual reader of the *Commedia* will confirm that such names betoken more than adornment. Rather, they are the outcome of an energetic, and often an urgent, address to a past which Dante quite literally sees as never done with. For him as for all of us, the present will be moved aside: but for him, as for few others, the past will not go away. And the past, for Dante, is not something with the neutrality of a climate or the elements; it is something whose fabric is made up of strands of love woven against strands of death. Take issue though we may with his estimation of particular figures or particular acts, it is difficult for me to see how we could thoughtfully take issue with him about that - unless of course we take history to be merely the tallying of impersonal forces, which would make any reading of the *Commedia* pointless.

In his book *In Radical Pursuit* Snodgrass, who holds no brief at all for religion, points out that

Like any tragic character Francesca brings to evil a persuasive dedication, an energy which entangles our deep emotions. If Dante's poem is to be a comedy, he will have to shake off her glamour; that will take much of the rest of the poem.⁵

There are those of us who, reading such a formulation, will be reminded that one rendering of what is to be eschewed at baptism is precisely the 'glamour' of evil, an enterprise to be carried through not only by the young and hot-blooded, but by those with memories - as Dante carries the memory of Paolo and Francesca long beyond the moment at which he regards them explicitly. The undeflected narcissism which marks Francesca for ever is something about which Dante becomes progressively more uneasy: But it will be a long way indeed before he is beyond its traces. As Snodgrass says, formidably and accurately,

Coming before Satan, Dante is as frozen and powerless as the vision he sees; is neither living nor dead. Yet this experience must bring him warmth and power, a new and livelier birth. This abyss of blindness must give him new sight, must clear the crusts from his eyes. This pit of numbness, total stasis, must show him that his own insurrection has taken the form of being frozen, unresponsive, half-alive. If we feel the 'honey of generation [has] betrayed' us, there are ways enough to return the betrayal. If we dare not lose the life we hate, we can still deaden it. If we feel devoured, we can always justify our feeling by devouring ourselves. If we dare not attack the powers of our life, we can still wound them by attacking what they love - ourselves...can defeat their hopes in us.⁶

At the beginning of his book on foundation-sacrifice in Dante, Ricardo Quinones makes the point that the poet writes in a milieu of impulse and violence as truly as in one which makes available rhetorical models of structure and order⁷ - a point which, by the way, should be borne in mind when one thinks of the presence of Virgil in the poem, the Virgil whose *Aeneid*, that immensely nuanced poem, has scarcely a page that is placid. Dozens of times in the *Commedia*, Dante in effect raises someone from the dead. When they are for a while brought to life, they come, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, or like the ghost of the murdered Caesar, with their sins and their grievances still lively within them, or in other cases with enthusiasms for reconciliation or illumination or outright love. They come, that is to say, with either a dark or a bright restlessness.

Something similar may be said if we gaze down Dante's other vista, that of the future. Dante's mentors, Virgil and Beatrice especially, sometimes chasten him and sometimes stimulate. And even though the

poem is, rhetorically, a report on a way gone and things seen, precisely because of the terms of reference chosen - Hell, Purgatory, Heaven - it impinges upon anyone adopting the statutory 'willing suspension of disbelief' as having to do besides with futurity. The 'Last Things' are teleological things: and gazing in the light of one report on them, we are gazing too at an agenda. That agenda may be framed in various ways, but I think that none of them will be persuasive which does not take account of the point elaborated by Rachel Jacoff, when, discussing the last canto of the *Paradiso*, she makes a contrast between the image of a book on the one hand and those of a vanishing dream, of unsealed snow, and of the scattered leaves of the Sibyl on the other. She points out that

The *Paradiso* oscillates between statements of its daring originality and confessions of its impossibility, of the ineffability of its vision and of the inadequacies of language to render it. The simultaneous sense of victory and defeat within which the poem comes into being contributes to its paradoxical effects, generating the haunting pathos that subtends the poem's astonishing accomplishment.⁸

I would add only that, since this is true, any reading of the poem which is not merely spectatorial - that is, any reading which lays itself open to something analogous to just such kinetic force in a book as, unhappily, moved Paolo and Francesca - is going to be swayed by forces which make for what is fairly called love or for what is fairly called death. The game, in other words, is played for mortal stakes, however tame the dog-eared book in one's hands may seem to be.

A poem of vistas then. From this it is natural to move to my second stress, namely that upon process, or journey. Those who know nothing else about the poem are aware that it has to do with the longest of journeys. And since, amongst metaphors for life itself, that of a journey is surely the most widespread - so much so that we barely recognise that it *is* a metaphor - the *Commedia's* being organised in such terms easily warrants attention. (This grows the stronger as we remember the extent to which Dante's primary literary stimuli, the Bible and the *Aeneid*, are prone to conceive of all serious experience in terms of journeys. Other great literary forces operate in confirming terms, even if at one remove, whether the *Odyssey* with all its hunger for home, or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with all its addiction to moves initiated or endured.)

That said, I want to say something about the demeanour of Dante as a poet-on-the-way. Here I am indebted to many who have traced the trajectory of his mind and his language, but especially to Osip Mandelstam, who

combines passion with precision when he speaks of Dante. These, from his 'Conversation about Dante', are some of the things he says.

Both the Inferno and, in particular, the Purgatorio glorify the human gait, the measure and the rhythm of walking, the footstep and its form...⁹

One would have to be a blind mole not to notice that throughout the *Divine Comedy* Dante does not know how to behave, does not know how to act, what to say, how to bow...¹⁰

In pronouncing the word 'sun', we are, as it were, undertaking an enormous journey to which we are so accustomed that we travel in our sleep. What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech is that it rouses us and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word. Then it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road...¹¹

His similes are articulated impulses...¹²

All nominative cases must be replaced by the case indicating direction, by the dative...¹³

You will have noticed that, in these excerpts, allusions to movement are directed sometimes towards the *Commedia's* tale and its protagonist, sometimes towards language's own shifts: and also that in both cases Mandelstam looks more to venture than to arrival. Such emphases tell against a reading of the *Commedia* which constantly stresses its harmonies, and its indebtedness to pre-existing paradigms, whether those of earlier epic or those of Aquinas and others.

It would be perverse to deny, and foolish to ignore, the fact that Dante loves *Gestalten*. Even if he had never written the *Convivio*, with its exposition of the four senses - the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical - it would be obvious that one part of Dante's mind is highly systematic: and I would think it equally obvious that, in the *Commedia*, the investment in system has at least this degree of theological intent, that it tends to fortify the conviction that there is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we may. Centuries of Dante scholarship have illuminated parities and congruences in the poem, and continue to do so. But Mandelstam's insights are equally important. To recouch them slightly, Dante the pilgrim is, through and through, *homo viator*, with all the exposedness and provisionality which that term carries.

In his recent *Mismapping the Underworld: Daring and Error in Dante's 'Comedy'*, John Kleiner¹⁴ relates that

...Giovanni Agnelli... the author of several articles on the infernal landscape and of the lavishly illustrated *Topo-cronografia di viaggio dantesco*, drew his beautiful maps of Hell and Purgatory during his free time at an institute for deaf-mutes,

a detail I like because it draws together the experience of command and the experience of dependency. The resulting manifold seems to me very like what shows itself many times in the *Commedia*.

Here I think, too, of the unfolding of Fleur Adcock's short poem, in which attention moves back and forth among Paolo and Francesca, the portraying Rossetti and the stipulating Ruskin, the poet defiantly thinking for herself and holding the lover by whom she is held. Her 'Illustration to Dante' - a title as apposite for her own poem as for Rossetti's work - is the more illuminating if one remembers Mandelstam's fusion of imagination, language, and the body. Donne, celebrating another loved woman, tells us that one would almost say that her body thought: for Mandelstam, there is no 'almost' about it.

In his prose, as in his poetry, he can be probingly intellectual - as in 'all nominative cases must be replaced by the case indicating direction, by the dative' - but his mind is constantly befriending his body, and many times it becomes a necessity for him to name experience, his own or someone else's, in terms for which both elements are indispensable. Seamus Heaney has said, brilliantly and accurately, that Mandelstam's Dante 'is a voluble Shakespearean figure, a wood-cutter singing at his work in the dark wood of the larynx'¹⁵, which captures well that fusion of the intellectual and the carnal which is a hallmark of Mandelstam's work and, in my view, of Dante's.

Heaney's 'singing at his work' is a powerful reminder that, in the *Commedia*, the pilgrim poet always has work in hand - not only somewhere to go, but something to do. Sometimes the work is sheer endurance, as when, in each canzone, he is thunderstruck by one spectacle or another. Sometimes it takes the form of exertion, as when, in the *Purgatorio*, he is bound on what Daniel Berrigan calls 'the discipline of the mountain'¹⁶. And sometimes, as in Canto 19 of the *Inferno*, it points both outwards and inwards, as though the poet does not know which way to turn either body or wits, but must for all that keep at it. In Musa's translation, lines 49 to 51 go,

I stood there like a priest who is confessing
some vile assassin who, fixed in his ditch,
has called him back again to put off dying,

and lines 58 to 60,

I stood there like a person just made fun of,
dumbfounded by a question for an answer,
not knowing how to answer the reply.¹⁷

At such moments - and they are many - it is easy to sense that the 'long journey' being undertaken by Dante is not only towards his celestial destination, but towards psychological, moral and imaginative destinations, and, even in translation, via exacting verbal paths. When Mandelstam, thinking of Dante, says that 'in pronouncing the word 'sun', we are, as it were, undertaking an enormous journey to which we are so accustomed that we travel in our sleep', and when he contrasts this somnambulance with poetry's vigilance and says that 'it rouses us and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word', so that 'it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road', he is, as elsewhere, making a declaration about the ontological distinctiveness of poetry - one picked up from him, most notably, by Joseph Brodsky. So he has his own agenda, but it is one fortified by his reading of Dante, on whom he wrote more impressively, probably, than on any other poet.

It is helpful, in the context of Dante as *homo viator*, *poeta viator*, to remember two other observations of Mandelstam's. The first is, 'I compare, therefore I am,' so Dante might have put it. He was the Descartes of metaphor.¹⁸ The second is, 'A quotation is not an excerpt. A quotation is a cicada. Its natural state is that of unceasing sound. Having once seized hold of the air, it will not let it go.'¹⁹ To be the Descartes of metaphor would be to be a thinker and writer whose language was always outflung, bridging chasms between different dimensions of reality, the *viator* as pathfinder and road-builder. Mandelstam's 'His similes are articulated impulses' points in the same direction, and has the additional advantage that it evokes both the thinking body and embodied thought.

As for quotation as cicada, no doubt this is true of quotation from the *Commedia* itself - witness many a use of it in religious tesseræ or mantras. But a slightly subtler point is that, for instance, the figure of Virgil himself functions in the poem as a kind of animated quotation, the *Aeneid* brought to life, the *Fourth Eclogue* brought to life. Begetter of Aeneas in his epic, he is 'that fount/ from which pours forth so rich a stream of words'²⁰ and the provider as Dante says of 'the noble style that was to bring me honour.'²¹

Dante flinches at the prospect of going, Aeneas-like, into the underworld, but then is braved by Virgil's authoritative words. And however amazing the sights he sees, however exacting the experiences he undergoes, however blessedly he is accompanied first by Beatrice and then by Mary, he never so to speak graduates from Virgil, even after Virgil crowns and mitres him.²² The prophetic identity which he makes more and more his own as the journey is pursued is one which he catches in part from the traditional Christian sense of Virgil as prophet, and prophet mediating an old world and life to a new world and life. The beloved Virgil sets him initially on his path, and braces him against the many affronts to courage and tenacity. It is because of Virgil that he does not go fatherless on his epic way, because of Virgil that he is sung forth. Virgil, too, is a cicada.

I turn now to the third of my initial suggestions, namely that as Adcock's poem works in part by interlocution - by interrogation, conjecture, and tested understandings - so does the *Commedia*. This is surely so in part because of Dante's earlier, enthusiastic exposure to the dialectics of philosophy. In the *Convivio*,²³ he says of philosophy that 'in a short time, perhaps thirty months,' he began 'to be so keenly aware of her sweetness that the love of her drove away and destroyed every other thought'. Those disposed to set philosophy at odds with poetry - and there are many, on either side of the supposed divide - might look askance at this, either because they think that Dante should have stuck to the earlier last, or because they assume that all that systematic ideation can have done him no poetical good. By contrast, I think of a remark made by the poet Charles Simic, whom nobody could accuse of standing at a distance from experience: 'For Emily Dickinson, every philosophical idea was a potential lover.'²⁴ This, I think, looks all the truer the more one grows inward with Dickinson's work, and it certainly means much more than that, for instance, Dickinson was fond of ideas and found them stimulating. It includes a sense that the mind is no more merely instrumental than we are merely instrumental, and a sense that the passions of the mind are normative passions of the self. And I take it that Simic's remark is entirely apposite when applied to Dante.

It needs no demonstrating that the *Commedia* is rich in questioning and answering: in fact it would be an understandable exaggeration to say that it is built of nothing else. One might usefully think of all this as making up crossing-over after crossing-over - from lesser insights and comprehensions to greater ones. Writers on the phenomenon of pilgrimage in the middle ages have commented on the disapproval levelled at mere

curiositas, portrayed as a mental fecklessness betokening a lack of moral seriousness. I do not know of anyone who thinks that Dante is not *un homme serieux*, but his pilgrim figure is displayed to us as becoming more morally substantial by means of his constant questioning, Theodore Roethke says, in a love-poem, 'I learn by going where I have to go', which is true of Dante also, and where he has to go is the route of learning.

One sign of this is structural: the fact that each canto in the poem has its own 'sub-agenda', its own distinctive mode of experienced reality to be investigated and displayed. Another is the array of coinages in which Dante engages, most of them having to do with various kinds of transmutation, and so instancing linguistically Mandelstam's 'being forever on the road'. Another sign is Dante's taking it as axiomatic - in the fashion of Augustine's frequent teaching or of Bonaventure's *The Journey of the Mind to God* - that the animated self is by definition a quester, whose love is tugged by Love itself. And another, perhaps the one which holds greatest appeal for those to whom Dante's theological vision is either distasteful or simply alien, is the frequency of those domestic or parochial images which mediate understandings of grander matters - every trope being a trip, so to speak.

One example is the opening of Canto Twenty-Three of the *Paradiso*:

As a bird quiet among the leaves she loves
sits on the nest of her beloved young
all through the night that hides things from our sight,

anxious to look upon her longed-for ones,
eager to go in search of food for them
(her heavy labours she performs with joy),

foretelling daybreak from an open bough,
she waits there for the sun with glowing love,
her gaze fixed on the birth of a new day --

just so my lady waited, vigilant,
intense, as she looked at that part of Heaven
beneath which the sun's movement seems so slow;

then I, who saw her poised in longing there,
became like one who wishes he had more
and lets his hope feed on anticipation.²⁵

This simile, like so many others, unfolds itself gradually, 'colouring' itself with love-talk as it goes, and moving from the birds to Beatrice to Dante himself, a run of yearning going through them all. It spans all the way from birds to sun, that sun which so often provides the pitch of time in the poem, and which is the dominant heavenly body to be itself swayed by Love in the

last line of the poem. The supposition here is that if microcosmic things are regarded with appropriate alertness they may be expected to yield tokens of the macrocosm - the nest of the world itself, as it were, being open to divinity's cosmos.

This is much, but there is more. What we have here, as at many other points in the poem, is suspense. Meaning is tautened as it is payed out in the long sentence, and, very fittingly, the last word in Musa's translation is 'anticipation'. There are obvious rhetorical precedents for this - in poetry Virgil and behind him Homer, and in prose the inescapable Cicero. But I would suggest that there is another influence at work here, namely the suspenseful practice of dialectic, the tradition of what might be called philosophical theology on horseback. In principle, all argument is dramatic, protagonal and antagonal: attention is tautened between the poles of possibility. In the lists of the mind, the onlooker's attention is engaged and charged until argument culminates in disclosure. A medieval tag, that truth is to be secured '*componendo et dividendo*' is taken by some to indicate the framing of the elements of judgement; by others it is taken to signal affirmation or denial, whereby the sheep of Being are separated from the goats of non-Being. Either way, the intellectual practice is suspenseful, the more so the further the thinker is from nominalism, which takes the spring out of everything. Titles like *Sic et Non* and *Contra Gentiles* placard for us the innate, and relished, tension of the works in question.

This militant, or athletic, demeanour in understanding is I think much to Dante's liking, and shows itself frequently in the *Commedia*. The set of mind is like that which gives rise to the expression 'attack' where acting, singing, or musical performance is in question: the audience is partly-confronted, partly enlisted, by an engagement, which pleases as it challenges. Suspense is at the heart of all this, and great performance nourishes avidities in one way even while it mitigates them in others. What we see in the *Commedia* is suspense within suspense, re-keyed, re-pitched, as the attack moves from direction to direction. Chris Wallace-Crabbe points out that Emerson called the *Commedia* 'autobiography in colossal cipher': it might also be called metaphor in colossal suspense.

In his prose-poem, 'Meditations in an Emergency', Frank O'Hara writes, 'I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love.'²⁶ The poem is laced with irony, but irony does not necessarily mean that one is kidding, and I doubt whether O'Hara is: I doubt whether any of us would be. Certainly Dante, a difficult man, would have meant it had he said it, as in effect he has. It is important to remember two things about him when the

Commedia is at issue: that he had written much that was remarkable before it, and that he found exile odious. As the exiled Ovid's *Tristia* has a redoubled poignancy when we remember that both the *Amores* and the *Metamorphoses* had preceded it, and as *Paradise Lost* is riven the more when we recall that Milton had, before the days of his blindness, written the 'Lycidas' which both culminated and terminated the pastoral tradition, any reading of the *Commedia* gains by our remembering that in *La Vita Nuova* and *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Il Convivio* and *De Monarchia* he had played up and down the whole complex register from the tender-minded to the tough-minded, and had if anything grown the more passionate in the process. If the *Commedia* is the ripe fruit of his imaginative career, it is a very emotionally complex fruit indeed.

And exile was odious. By now, thousands of millions of times it must be, Catholics have prayed to the Virgin Mary that 'after this our exile' they may be shown 'the blessed fruit of [her] womb, Jesus.' The notion of earthly life as exile is not peculiar to Catholicism: it is at least implicit in Paul's claim that our true citizenship is in Heaven, and in more or less explicit ways it tinctures the consciousness of countless other Christians, to spread attention no more widely. No doubt, for Dante, there was what might be called a bitter-sweet congruence between his being held at sword's-point from Florence and his being at life's-length from Heaven: but parities need not make for suavities, and Dante remains the master-formulator of just how bitter the bread of exile is.

Charles Singleton pointed out that the governing trope of the poem is that of crossing over from Egyptian exile to the land of promised liberty - the trope of conversion.²⁷ True as this is, it is also true that Dante carries with him some of Egypt's bitter soil - perplexities, griefs, guilts, demoralisations. These are not done with in the *Inferno*, nor in the *Purgatorio*. And one of the most telling moments in the poem for anyone thinking about love and death in humanity's long journey is that in Canto 27 of the *Paradiso*, where St Peter, giving his contemporaneous successors a very Miltonic tongue-lashing, says to Dante, 'and you, my son, whose mortal weight must bring / you back to earth again, open your mouth down there / and do not hide what I hide not from you!'²⁸

At such a moment we remember that all that comes home to Dante on his visionary journey must, somehow, be brought home to earth, and not to any earth-at-large, but to the blood-soaked terrain of Italy, where the Blacks and the Whites played out their lethal civil chess-game. Living as we do so long after the poem's composition, and so far from its earthly milieu, it is

long after the poem's composition, and so far from its earthly milieu, it is easy for us to forget that it was not written by or for any abstraction. More than that, I think that we do it little justice, and ourselves little service, by ignoring the fact that mythic or archetypal figures such as those who abound in the *Commedia* may still be offered as the mediators of terrible and unforgettable things. Here, for instance, are two very short poems which speak to our own time by figures easily taken to be out of time, but who re-consign us to our moment with more authority than is carried by any news-grab on television. First, W.S. Merwin's 'Folk Art':

Sunday the fighting-cock
loses an eye
a red hand-print is plastered to its face
with a hole in it
and it sees what the palms see from the cross
one palm²⁹

Second, by Dan Pagis, and translated by Stephen Mitchell, 'Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car',

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him i³⁰

I need not add anything to either of these poems in its own right, and I could not. What I am saying is that each in its own way establishes the pitch of attention for reading the *Commedia*, a pitch which it is vital to sustain even when ecstasy is the occasion.

These are grave matters, grave notes: but you will perhaps see why I began as I did in this paper. Emily Dickinson's 'Dying is a wild night and a new road' etches itself not only into those pages of the *Commedia* which are most conspicuously distressed, but into all where 'the game is played for mortal stakes', which turns out to be all, without exception. *Dantisti*, from my desultory reading in them, have as many quarrels with one another as are to be found among, say, Shakespeareans: though they are not yet at the point where they would habitually patronise their subject - something which one could do with Dante only by losing the note to which he is keyed - a note eerily human, and eerily divine. For Dante, dying's 'wild note and new road' is something which resonates through every mortal moment in which we savour, express, and heighten our vitality.

As my own final Dantesque fling, let me bring before you two moments from the *Purgatorio*. The first is that at the beginning of Canto 6, where Dante compares himself with a successful gambler who, getting up from the table, is crowded about by the onlookers. He himself, casting a shadow, has been identified as a mortal visitor, and now he is followed by those eager to tell their story. The second is in Canto 26, where Arnaut Daniel says (in his native Provençal), 'I am Arnaut, who weep and sing as I go'. Each of these instances shows that mingled, that mortal, condition which is Dante's constant point of reference, and for whose sake, in a sense, he has written the poem. The gambler is just that - someone dependant at every turn, small or great, upon agencies he can never command, but wooing Fata or Fortuna with a virtually erotic enthusiasm, in the teeth of a danger aptly figured as Minos, as Charon, or as Dis. The game is played for mortal stakes, but then, there are no other stakes to be had.

And then there is Arnaut, weeping and singing as he goes. What figure could be more familiar, whether we think of the blues as an art-form, of the courtship which the younger Dante himself lyricised, of the aureoled Christ in his dying, or of our own oscillating hearts? The words Dante gives to Arnaut are like some interpretative formula - the golden section in design, the $e=mc^2$ in physics - according to which everything within its sphere is to be gauged. The gauging, though, heightens our sense of its intrinsic drama, rather than lessening it. The Arnaut we gaze at, like Nietzsche's abyss, gazes back at us.

I glanced, earlier, at Dante's glad wedding of philosophy with poetry, a union which, apparently, he never saw threatened with divorce. Good for him, I say: they have never come to Punch-and-Judy status in my own life. I think, too, that Dante would immediately take the point of a question of Charles Simic's,

How many literary theorists and teachers of literature truly understand that poems are not written merely for the sake of oneself, or for the sake of some idea, or for the sake of the reader, but out of a deep reverence for the old and noble art of poetry.³¹

But I would like to make a point which I have never seen developed elsewhere, which is that, just as there is no a-priori reason why Christ should not have been a Neanderthaler or an Inuit or a New Yorker in Ten Thousand AD or someone checking you out tomorrow at the local supermarket, so there is no particular reason to suppose that the reading-off of God's word to humanity had to take the form which, in the western world, it largely did - namely, via philosophically-based theology. The

whole affair might have gone differently, so that, for instance, the figures in highest institutional esteem in the Christian communities would be artists, who got things as straight for us as we wished, but who also, for our good, kept in those tensions and crinklings to which we did not so easily give a welcome. But that, as Kipling would say, is another story.

Marianne Moore says in her customary gnomic way, 'Ecstasy affords / the occasion, and expediency determines the form.'³² This, beyond any plausible challenge, is true of religion in its many modes, and of art in its countless versatilities. What you see is *not* what you get. What you get in both cases is a thrust of summoning meaning which is no more reducible to its manifestation than it is separable from that manifestation. It is a crossing of ecstasy and expediency - a wild night, a new road.

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