

I

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Narrative Structure

The *Commedia* is the story of a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, which Dante says he made during Easter week 1300, when he was thirty-five. The poet finds himself lost in a dark wood on the evening of Maundy Thursday; his journey begins at dusk on Good Friday and ends six days later in the Empyrean, where God resides with the angels and the blessed. The purpose of the journey is to rescue the poet-character and bring him to moral perfection; the poet will then recount his journey with the aim of transforming the lives of his readers and of the entire world.

Dante: Character, Narrator, Author

The hero and true engine of the *Commedia* is the poet-character, protagonist, narrator, and author of the story. This is one and the same person, the poet Dante – as he explicitly declares at *Purg.* XXX, 55–66 – simultaneously at two different stages of his life: the stage of actual experience (the present of the narrative); and the stage of re-living that experience through the retelling of it (the present of the narration). The former takes place in Easter week 1300; the latter in an imprecise time, but one that certainly lasts ‘many years’ (*molti anni*; *Par.* XXV, 3) beginning in 1306, though the possibility that the *Commedia* may have been conceived and begun in some form before Dante’s exile, as suggested by Boccaccio, cannot be categorically excluded.

One of the striking features of the *Commedia* is that, from its very beginning (*Inf.* I, 4), it not only tells a story, but it also makes the recounting of it part of the story itself. The narrator often comments on his present efforts to adjust his language to his experiences as poet-character, ‘so that the telling may not be diverse from the fact’ (*sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso*; *Inf.* XXXII, 12). He also inserts warnings to the reader, observations on the story’s development, and comments on his own states of mind at the time of the narrative. Thus, in addition to being influenced by the reactions of Dante-character, the reader’s responses are shaped by Dante-narrator who

interrupts the narration to address the reader. These interruptions are far from rare – about twenty can be counted, but there are many more if we adopt a broader definition of the phenomenon. They can be as short as one line (*Inf.* XXII, 118) and as long as twenty-four (*Par.* XIII, 1–24). They occur at critical points in the narrative, when the expressibility, credibility, or interpretation of an event, sight, or statement is at stake. The narrator intervenes, calling the reader's attention to what is about to happen or has just happened, and in so doing creates suspense (as is the case at *Inf.* VIII, 94–6) or heightens the significance of the action. This dialogue has a didactic role but its chief purpose is to involve the reader in the character's experiences. Thus the narrator becomes another character, who is and is not the same as the protagonist, whose story he authenticates while bringing it closer to the reader.

To these two Dantes, some scholars add a third – Dante the author and man – who is responsible for every word the other two say and every move they make. According to this further distinction, the author Dante Alighieri is the only real person involved in the operation, whereas Dante-traveller and Dante-narrator are both characters created by him. Most importantly, the standard narratological distinction that applies to all first-person narratives is made in the *Commedia* as well. In the narrated story, the character becomes the narrator only after completing his journey, whereas, from the perspective of the actual poem (the plot), character and narrator coexist, but the narrator knows everything about the journey from its very inception, while the character needs to progress through the journey to acquire the same understanding of himself and the world as the narrator. This is a valid structural distinction, but it cannot be forced systematically upon the story without falling into substantial contradictions. Character, narrator, and author are indeed intertwined and often overlapping in the *Commedia*, but we cannot always treat them as one; nor can we assume that they are perfectly discrete. It is a structural ambiguity which the poet fully exploits.

Dante: Pilgrim and Exile

The poet-character performs another function in the *Commedia*, one that is intrinsic to the 'journey of life' metaphor. In Christian culture, life is understood, and experienced, as a journey back home, 'for here', Paul writes, 'we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come' (Hebrews 13:14). Life is a state of exile in a land that was not meant for us. In this alien land we are pilgrims returning home, and our desire for fulfilment is the sign of a profound homesickness, the yearning for our lost paradise. The journey in the middle of which Dante suddenly finds

himself lost at the beginning of *Inferno* is this universal journey from the human to the divine (*Par.* XXXI, 37–8); and it is because of this that Dante-character is referred to as ‘the pilgrim’. However, there is something unique about the themes of journey and exile in the *Commedia*. When he wrote the poem, Dante was in exile from Florence, and it is to this double exile, from Heaven and from Florence, that we owe the poem. Sadly, while Dante-pilgrim reaches his heavenly home and beholds God, as an exile in life, he never saw his beloved Florence again. Thus, the theme of his desire for God, essential in the narrative of *Paradiso*, often mirrors the poet’s longing for Florence.

Virgil and Beatrice

At the outset, Dante introduces two other fundamental and in different ways astonishing characters, both historical and yet both devised to interact with Dante-character, conferring on him the emotional and intellectual depth that makes his adventure plausible and compelling. The first is Virgil and the second Beatrice. Virgil is clearly the poet of the *Aeneid* – not a philosopher, an angel, or saint, but the pagan poet of the Roman empire and medieval classicism, who will lead Dante to Eden and Beatrice. But the lady who descends from Heaven to Hell to deploy the most venerated poet of the Latin tradition, saying to him ‘I am Beatrice who bid you go’ (I’ son Beatrice che ti faccio andare; *Inf.* II, 70), who is she? There is something preposterous about this young, recently dead Florentine bidding Virgil to rescue her lover from the dark wood. The least that one can say is that, in imagining this story, Dante is immensely ambitious and self-confident. Only a reader of the *Vita nova* would know that the Beatrice of *Inferno* II is the same lady whose soul ascends to Heaven in the earlier work (*Vn* XXIII [14]). Such a reader would probably assume that the *Commedia* is Dante’s promised work in honour of Beatrice (*Vn* XLII, 2 [31, 3]). But could Dante count on anyone knowing the *Vita nova* in the first two decades of the fourteenth century? And if not, how could he promote Beatrice to the role of heavenly guide, a role higher even than Virgil’s?

Structure and Poetry

The autobiographical basis of Dante’s multifaceted identity in the *Commedia* – character-poet, singer of Beatrice, exile longing for home and universal peace, pilgrim to the heavenly Jerusalem, intellectual in pursuit of truth, prophet of the regeneration of Italy and the empire – gives the poem’s structure its extraordinary intensity and coherence.

There was a time when ‘structure’ was a rude word in Dante studies. Benedetto Croce, Italy’s most influential philosopher, historian, and literary critic of the twentieth century, treated the structure of the *Commedia* as a necessary evil, ‘the framework upon which the luxuriant vegetation of poetry is clambering, decorating it with pendulous boughs, festoons, and flowers’.¹ Dante’s journey, with its physical and moral topography and its ethical-political-theological themes should be ‘respected as practical necessity, while we go in search of poetry elsewhere’ (p. 99). Croce was convinced that there is much poetry in the *Commedia*, but, as with all poetry, it is exclusively lyrical and is to be found in isolated characters, episodes, and passages that have little to do with the story of Dante’s journey or its doctrinal content. For Croce, the poetry of the *Commedia* consists of ‘the poetic representations in which the poet’s multiform passion is condensed, purified and expressed’ (p. 100).

While believing that a sharp distinction between structure and poetry is impossible, this chapter attempts to identify the ‘structure’ of Dante’s great poem and show how essential it is in the generation of its ‘poetry’.

The Three Otherworldly Kingdoms

Hell and Paradise, and to some extent Purgatory, already existed in the medieval imagination. Building on that existence, Dante maps out the three realms as an explorer charts a new continent; he gives them physical contours, psychological identities, and names. The three realms have – and this is new – parallel structures but distinct characteristics. Hell is a huge conical cavity extending to the centre of the earth; it is divided into the Ante-Inferno and nine concentric circles, sloping down towards the bottom. The damned are punished according to the gravity of their sin from the top to the bottom – the closer to the bottom, the graver the sin. Purgatory, topographically Dante’s original creation, is a tall conical mountain arising from the ocean; it comprises the shore and Ante-Purgatory plus seven terraces and the Earthly Paradise. The penitents wait on the shore and lower slopes for a prescribed time and then enter Purgatory proper, where they purge themselves of their sinful dispositions in order of gravity from the bottom of the mountain to the top – the closer to the top the lighter the fault. Paradise consists of nine concentric translucent spheres rotating about the earth, plus a tenth heaven, the Empyrean, the domain of absolute rest outside time and space, which contains everything and is contained by nothing. The blessed appear to Dante in the sphere that influenced them most in their lives, from the sphere of the Moon to that of Saturn according to the degree of their blessedness – the closer to God the more intense their bliss. Thus there are ten major

partitions in every realm, a structural symmetry that is matched by the highly symmetrical organization of the poem. This symmetry is not presented as an arbitrary choice, but as an objective requirement of the subject matter itself, a mirror of the reality of the afterlife. The three kingdoms and the symmetrical ways in which they function are the product of a unified, harmonious plan, which is presented as the work of God, witnessed by the pilgrim and related by the narrator.

The Poem: Form and Structure

Dante's claim is astonishing; however, the form in which he makes it renders it unique. The story is told in a 'comedy' (comedia, *Inf.* XVI, 128; XXI, 2; for a discussion of Dante's decision to term his poem a 'comedy', see chapter 5) or a 'sacred poem' (*Par.* XXIII, 62; XXV, 1), divided into three books called *cantiche* (canticles) – *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* – which are in turn subdivided into *canti* (cantos). As there are thirty-four cantos in *Inferno* (the first serves as general prologue) and thirty-three each in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, their total is one hundred, a perfect number signifying the perfection of the universe and the poem. The cantos are made up on average of just under fifty interlocking units of three hendecasyllables each, called *terzine* or tercets. Each tercet consists of three lines of eleven syllables, for a total of thirty-three syllables per tercet. These numbers are not accidental. Three is the number of the Trinity, thirty-three the age of Christ, and the thirty-fourth of His life was the year when He died (*Conv.* IV, xxiii, 10).

This elaborate framework is highly self-conscious; once the poet has entered it, it cannot be modified in any major way; it can only be realized. In the poem, therefore, two interdependent movements or *journeys* co-exist: the journey of the poet-character from the dark wood to the Empyrean; and the journey of the poet-narrator from *Inferno* I to *Paradiso* XXXIII. The critical question is which came first: the idea of the journey; or the one hundred-canto structure? Most probably the great framework came into being gradually, as the vision of the journey gained clarity in the poet's mind. However, it is also reasonable to assume that it was only through the frame that that clarity was reached. It is no surprise then if, for Croce, the existence of the frame has 'a repressive effect on poetical inspiration' (p. 93). For us, however, it is the only form that an encyclopaedic, 'sacred poem to which both heaven and earth have set their hand' (il poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra; *Par.* XXV, 1–2) could take, and in this form the frame or 'theological romance' (p. 65), as Croce calls it, is as inspired as the most passionate of its lyrical segments.

Textual and Narrative Units: The Canto

The canto – the word generally means ‘song’ – is the fundamental textual and metrical unit used to organize the story; and the way Dante employs it in relation to his subject matter is crucial to the narrative structure.

What strikes and intrigues the reader is the flexible length of the canto, from a minimum of 115 lines (*Inf.* VI and XI) to a maximum of 160 (*Purg.* XXXII). A difference of some forty lines can be extremely significant in narrative terms: it allows for ample creative freedom while the canto remains true to its form. Canto V of *Purgatorio* offers an interesting example of Dante’s compositional strategy. The canto tells of the pilgrim’s encounter with souls who died violently, repenting just before dying. After two public figures, Iacopo del Cassero and Buonconte da Montefeltro, have told the stories of their deaths (46–129), a third voice arises unannounced, the voice of a woman who condenses her life into six lines that are a masterpiece of suggestive restraint. The speaker is the mysterious La Pia, possibly Pia de’ Tolomei from Siena. This episode prompts two observations. First, since Buonconte ends his speech on line 129, there was no compelling reason for adding a third figure; second, having decided to add a third figure, the poet had available much more space than the little he actually employed for the portrait of Pia. He could have used eighteen lines as he did with Iacopo in the same canto, or twenty-four as he did with another Sienese woman, Sapia, in *Purgatorio* XIII, 106–29. Instead, Dante concentrated Pia’s biography into three lines, demonstrating that he uses the structure as it suits him and not vice versa.

This is even more apparent in *Purgatorio* XXXIII. Here Dante employs six precious lines (136–41) to inform us that, had he more space available, he would tell us more about the sweetness of the waters of Eünoè, but since all the sheets prepared for the second canticle are now full, ‘the bridle of art’ (lo fren de l’arte; 141) does not let him go farther. This is obviously a pretext. The poet could as easily have used those six lines to sing of the water; or, had he genuinely felt that six lines were not enough, he could have added six more, bringing the total for the canto to 151 lines, a reasonable length in the second canticle. In the event he did neither. Dante’s narrative choices are determined by his desire to achieve a specific poetic effect rather than by the canto’s length; his ‘art’ helps him attain his creative goal rather than constrain him.

There are many other ways in which the canto establishes continuities and contrasts between segments, characters, and episodes of the same or different canticles. A network of intratextual references, signalled by the repetition of the same word, image, rhyme, or structure enriches the *Commedia* with

unsuspected and deeper meanings. Some episodes are illumined retrospectively by later passages. Thus only by completing the journey can the protagonist of the story – and the reader with him – gain the knowledge that the narrator has from the beginning; and only a second reading will begin to release the riches that otherwise remain buried under the surface of the text.

There is no space here to delve into the variety of effects achieved by this kind of intratextuality; one of the most prominent is the ‘vertical’ correspondence between the same cantos in different canticles to signal important topics or transitions in the journey. The three cantos VI concentrate on political issues in Florence, Italy, and the Empire; the three cantos IX signal a narrative and theological transition in all three realms and canticles; the cantos XIX of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and the XXVII of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* are largely about the Church and the popes, one of Dante’s foremost concerns; the final cantos, and the last sections of the three realms, echo each other by analogy or contrast: Cocytus, Eden, the Empyrean; three-faced Satan and triune God; finally, the last line of each canticle ends with the word, ‘stars’ (stelle).

Textual and Narrative Units: The Canticle

Inferno

At first sight the *Commedia* appears to be organized in a simple fashion, in which, textually and narratively, the canto works as the fundamental unit, and no action started in a canto remains unconcluded at the end of that canto. This is true of the first six cantos. The first two are introductory (one of Virgil, the other of Beatrice), the third tells of Ante-Inferno, and the last three are devoted, respectively, to the first three circles of Hell. Even canto VII, in which Dante describes the fourth and fifth circle, seems perfectly finished when we read its last, forward-looking line: ‘we came at last to the foot of a tower’ (‘Venimmo al piè d’una torre al da sezzo’). Thus, if we had only the first seven cantos of *Inferno*, we might assume that Dante planned to organize the first canticle following the order of the seven capital vices, starting with lust and ending with pride. The canticle would have been less complicated and much shorter – ten cantos, perhaps twelve on the model of the *Aeneid*’s twelve books.

However, in the first eighty-one lines of canto VIII, Dante does something unexpected. He relates a series of thrilling events that happened just *before* he and Virgil reached the foot of the tower mentioned at the end of canto VII: namely, the arrival of the angry ferryman Phlegyas, their crossing the Styx on his boat, and their violent and morally problematic interaction with Filippo Argenti. This section of canto VIII is an amplification of the short segment

devoted to wrath in VII, 100–30, so it could well be an addition that Dante, after seven cantos, might have deliberately devised to break the linearity and predictability of his narrative strategy up till now. However, there are other significant changes at this juncture that affect the shape and size of the canticle, and may reflect Dante's deliberate adjustments to his original plan. The question is how to interpret these adjustments. Were they made in the normal course of the composition of the poem, or do they signal an interruption of that process and its resumption at a later date with a substantially different working plan in mind?

The latter explanation would prevail if we could independently verify a story told by Giovanni Boccaccio and based on the first lines of *Inferno* VIII: 'continuing, I have to tell that long before we were at the foot of the high tower' (Io dico, seguitando, ch'assai prima / che noi fossimo al piè de l'alta torre). The critical word is 'continuing' – 'seguitando'. To explain this word, in his biography of Dante and commentary on *Inferno*, Boccaccio tells how Dante started the *Commedia* in Florence before his exile and, after a long interruption, resumed his writing in Lunigiana (a region between Tuscany and Liguria) in 1306, when the original draft of the first seven cantos was brought to him there: hence the word 'Continuing'. This story would explain the subsequent introduction of the episode of Filippo Argenti, as well as other anomalies that affect the narrative at this point. However, as Boccaccio himself acknowledges, it is difficult to see how Ciaccio, in VI, 64–72, could prophecy events that took place in 1302 – namely, after Dante's exile from Florence – if Dante had written the first seven cantos before that exile.

Be this as it may, our problems are not finished. Once they are inside the walls of the city of Dis, Dante, and Virgil enter the sixth circle where the heretics, and specifically the Epicureans, are punished in their open, burning graves. This is puzzling. After the first five, we were expecting another capital sin; instead, we find a sin that does not belong to that series, the sin of those 'who make the soul die with the body' (che l'anima col corpo morta fanno'; X, 15). Sensing his readers' puzzlement, Dante has Virgil explain the doctrinal (and structural) change in the next canto (XI, 13–90). Hell, Virgil says, is divided into two major regions, Upper and Lower Hell, respectively outside and inside the walls of the city of Dis. Outside are the sins of incontinence, inside the sins of malice – a distinction which Dante borrows from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The incontinent fail to rein in their passions or desires for earthly goods (circles two to five); the malicious offend and injure others either by force (the violent, circle seven) or by fraud (the fraudulent, circle eight, and the treacherous, circle nine) – distinctions Dante borrows from Cicero's *De officiis* (I, 13). This sounds clear, but then

where do we place circle six with the heretics? In his explanation, Virgil does not assign circle six to violence, and yet it would appear in line with the rule of *contrapasso* ('counter-penalty'; *Inf.* XXVIII, 142) that those who 'kill the soul with the body' should see their soul live forever and burn in a tomb where they expected it to lie dead and non-sentient.

This is not the only structural issue arising once we move inside Dis. The change in the moral organization of Hell has a spectacular effect on its physical structure. Whereas in Upper Hell sins and circles were coterminous, in Lower Hell the circles are partitioned into subcircles, and these become the new narrative units. Circle seven is divided into three *gironi* or rounds, in which three types of violence are punished: against others (tyrants and murderers, immersed in the Phlegethon, the river of boiling blood); against oneself and one's property (suicides and spendthrifts); and against God (blasphemers), nature (homosexuals) and art (usurers). Consequently, circle seven occupies cantos XII to XVII. Circle eight, known as Malebolge (Evil Ditches or Pouches), is subdivided into ten concentric ditches (*bolge*) where ten varieties of fraudulent sinners are found: panders and seducers; flatterers, simoniacs (corrupt prelates); astrologers and sorcerers; barrators (corrupt public servants); hypocrites; thieves; false counsellors; schismatics; and falsifiers, the latter in their turn subdivided into alchemists, impersonators, counterfeiterers and false witnesses. These sinners are portrayed in cantos XVIII to XXX. Finally circle nine, named Cocytus after the frozen lake in which the treacherous are punished, is partitioned into four areas (Caina, Antenora, Ptolomea, and Judecca, for treacherous deeds perpetrated against, respectively, relatives, party or country, guests, and lords and benefactors) and described in cantos XXXII to XXXIV. In short, Dante devotes twenty-three cantos (XII to XXXIV) to the last three circles of Hell; the difference with the first five circles, occupying cantos IV to VIII, is staggering.

However, although the circles treated in the last twenty-three cantos are only three, the categories of sinners are seventeen – or twenty-two if we count the subdivisions of subdivisions. Thus sins in Lower Hell get on average the same amount of space as circles in Upper Hell, and quite often textual and narrative units are coterminous. This happens especially in the case of notable figures and episodes, such as Pier della Vigna (XIII), Brunetto Latini (XV), the simoniacs (XIX), Ulysses (XXVI), and Guido da Montefeltro (XXVII), though individual portraits are by no means the privileged focus of Dante's narrative. In fact, Dante appears to be equally interested in introducing interruptions and interferences between different places, episodes, and topics. To give a few examples: Geryon rises from the dark pit at the end of canto XVI (124–36) and 'docks' on the edge of circle seven at the beginning of the next canto (1–33); Dante's encounter with the

usurers takes place while Virgil is negotiating with Geryon (XVII, 34–75); the episode of the Malebranche in the ditch of the barrators, one of the most lively and complex in the poem, takes place across two and a half cantos (XXI–XXIII, 57); while the meeting with Ugolino is artfully split into two parts (XXXII, 124–39 and XXXIII, 1–90), so that canto XXXIII may begin with a horrific close-up of Ugolino: ‘La bocca sollevò dal fiero pasto’ – literally, ‘the mouth, (he) lifted it from his savage meal’. It is hardly possible to determine what came first to the poet’s mind, the characters with their stories or the environment from which they emerge. Probably, there was no fixed process, and sometimes characters pre-existed the definitive design of their environment, while at other times the environment gave rise to the characters.

In canto XXXI, we come to the pit of the giants, and Antaeus takes Virgil and Dante in his hand – Phlegyas had ferried them on his boat, while Geryon had carried them on his back – and sets them down on the bottom of Cocytus. Finally, at the centre of the earth, planted in the middle of Cocytus, bat-like Lucifer/Satan, flapping his wings, tries in vain to lift himself out of his eternal prison: in an exquisite example of negative reciprocity affecting both moral and physical structures, the wind he generates keeps Cocytus frozen and him imprisoned. In his three mouths he chews forever the three worst traitors: Judas who betrayed Christ; and Brutus and Cassius who betrayed the Roman empire in the person of Julius Caesar. Here, hanging on to Satan’s body hair, Dante and Virgil clamber down towards his legs. When they reach his hips, at the centre of the earth and of the universe, they turn upside down and continue their journey in an upward direction. Climbing up a dark and rough underground passage, they emerge on the other side of the globe ‘once more to see the stars’ (a riveder le stelle; XXXIV, 139).

Purgatorio

The second stage of the journey, Purgatory, is morally, and hence structurally, simpler. It begins as Dante and Virgil emerge on the shore of the island of Mount Purgatory, in the southern hemisphere, at a place diametrically opposite to where they entered Hell. The souls of Purgatory repented of, and received forgiveness for, their sinful deeds before dying. They now purge themselves of the bad inclinations that drove them to sinning. Unlike the damned, who are fixed in their earthly individuality, they move forward together, in peace with themselves, with each other, and with God. They suffer physical pain, of course. Yet their suffering is accepted and internalized; its very existence ensures that it will end, giving way to the joy of Heaven. This is why they are so eager to submit to it. What they feel with

greatest intensity is their distance from God. This sense of separation and exile transforms their ascent into a pilgrimage towards their heavenly home. Dante climbs the mountain with them, pausing at night. A pilgrim among pilgrims, he understands and shares their memories of the past and their longing for the future.

In Ante-Purgatory, the excommunicates and the late repentant wait at the foot and on the low slopes of the mountain until they feel ready to enter the process of purification (III to IX). The structure of Purgatory proper is based on the traditional ordering of the seven capital vices. When the penitents enter it (X), they are made to progress through its seven terraces spending more or less time on each according to the degree of their need in respect of each sinful inclination. The seven faults are therefore rectified from the bottom to the top of the mountain according to their decreasing gravity. As Virgil explains at the centre of *Purgatorio* (XVII, 70–139), the first three (pride, envy, and wrath) are a perversion of love, or love turned to wrong objects; the fourth (sloth) consists of laggard or insufficient love for goodness; the last three (avarice, gluttony, and lust) represent excessive love for earthly goods. On the summit of the mountain is the Earthly Paradise, the place where Adam and Eve were innocent and happy, and where, after their fall and ensuing expulsion, human history began. The process of purification takes place gradually along the axis that unites the three crucial points in the history and geography of the world and of the human race: the centre of the earth, now occupied by the monstrous body of Lucifer; Earthly Paradise, the place of original sin in the southern hemisphere; and, at the antipodes from it, Jerusalem, the city of redemption. In Eden, Dante rejoins Beatrice, the lady he loved, while she lived, and betrayed after she died in 1290.

It should be noted that the structural parallel between Mount Purgatory and the other two realms is more apparent than real. If, on the one hand, the cone of Mount Purgatory seems to fit into the conical cavity of Hell, on the other, its three principal divisions hardly match those of either of the other two realms. The shore of the mountain (I–III), with its distinctive liminal atmosphere, has some parallels with *Inferno* III – just as the souls of the damned arrive at the river Acheron and are met by Charon, so the penitents, as they land on the shore of Purgatory, are met by another old man, Cato – but Ante-Inferno does not match Ante-Purgatory (III–VIII), nor is there anything like either in *Paradiso*. In fact, whereas in Lower Hell the narrative and textual divisions coincide and are sharply demarcated, Ante-Purgatory with its slow, long, and fluid ascent of the mountain, its ritualistic passages, its pervasive sense of wonder, and its double, elegiac nostalgia for both earth and Heaven, exudes a totally different feel. Undoubtedly, the three cantos IX

share some common features, but the correspondence is superficial rather than substantive. *Inferno* IX signals the entry into the city of Dis and the sixth circle, the first of Lower Hell; *Purgatorio* IX signals the entry into Purgatory proper; *Paradiso* IX marks the end of the planetary space over which the earth still casts its shadow, and the transition to the fourth heaven, that of the Sun. The elaborate ritual at the gate of Purgatory with, among other notable things, the angel keeper tracing seven Ps on Dante's forehead signifying the seven sinful inclinations that the ensuing climb will have to erase, has no equivalent elsewhere in the poem. There is a contrastive correspondence between the cantos IX of *Inferno* and *Paradiso*, but *Purgatorio* is not included in it. The reason for this exclusion is that *Purgatorio*'s moral system is based on the seven capital vices, and, although in Purgatory the seven virtues opposed to these vices play an important role, it is not on these virtues that Paradise is ordered. As for Hell, the capital sins appear at the beginning, but Dante abandons that scheme in IX. If we believe that Dante wrote the poem in the order in which Dante the character proceeds in his journey, then we must deduce that he started *Inferno* following the model of the seven capital vices, abandoned that model at canto IX, but resumed it in *Purgatorio*, utilizing it fully from canto IX to XXVII. There is another compelling reason why Purgatory proper cannot have a parallel in either *Inferno* or *Paradiso*, and it is entirely structural. Dante's Purgatory is founded on the centrality of love 'as the seed of every virtue and of every action deserving punishment' (sementa . . . d'ogni virtute / e d'ogni operazion che merta pene; XVII, 104–5). But love is central to the entire poem, and Dante gloriously underscores this by placing the verbal enunciation of its centrality at the textual centre of both *Purgatorio* and the *Commedia*: an integrated, moral, and structural construct of this kind cannot by definition have parallels.

Dante's journey in Purgatory, contrary to that in Hell, is an ascent. After their encounters with Cato and Casella on the shore, and with Manfred at the foot of the cliff, Dante and Virgil's progress is marked by their climb first to the door of Purgatory and then from there to Eden. The task is physically exhausting, though less so as they get closer to the top. The narrative appears spatially and temporally structured in harmony with Christian liturgy, and the subject matter is evenly distributed. The first eight cantos tell the events of the first day; night falls at the beginning of IX, Dante falls asleep and has his first dream (1–33); the following nine cantos (X–XVIII) are dedicated to the events of the second day, Dante falls asleep at the end of XVIII and has his second dream at the beginning of XIX (1–33); nine cantos later (XIX–XXVII), at the end of the third day, Dante falls asleep and dreams for the third time (XXVII, 94–108). It can hardly be a fortuitous coincidence that, in

XXVII, after three days, three dreams, and three times nine cantos, Virgil takes his leave, announcing the coming of Beatrice's 'beautiful eyes' (XXVII, 137, the same eyes he saw full of tears in *Inferno* II, 116) for, as is explained in the *Vita nova*, Beatrice is intimately associated with the number nine, which symbolically confirms her miraculous status (XXVIII, 6 [19, 6]). Indeed Dante marks the ritualistic nature of the three dreams by opening the account of each with the same temporal formula: 'In the hour when' (Ne l'ora che; IX, 13; XIX, 1; XXVII, 94).

The three dreams are also perfectly spaced topographically, as the first takes place just before the gate and the first terrace of Purgatory, the second on the central and fourth terrace, and the third on the seventh and last. This even distribution of both textual and narrative spaces is underscored by the poets' regular ascent from terrace to terrace (cantos X, XII, XV, XVII, XIX, XXII, XXV, and XXVII). This becomes even more remarkable if we consider the pattern's regularity within each terrace. This pattern consists of seven narrative components: (1) arrival and general impression of terrace; (2) examples of virtue contrary to the vice treated on terrace; (3) penitents reciting a prayer, except on the terrace of sloth; (4) focus on individual penitents; (5) examples of vice punished; (6) removal of a P from Dante's brow by angel of reciprocal virtue; (7) angel singing the beatitude contrary to the purged vice. This structural grid is internally diversified by changing penance, prayer, and beatitude on each terrace, and also by the various ways in which the examples of virtues and vices are conveyed: carvings in marble for pride, disembodied voices for envy, ecstatic visions for wrath, and so on. There are also digressions (on Italy, VI, 76–151; on love, XVII, 91–139) and characters who play an extended role in Dante's journey, such as Sordello (VI–VIII) and Statius (XXI–XXII), who accompanies the pilgrim all the way to and through the Earthly Paradise. In conclusion, the structural order of *Purgatorio* contributes significantly to creating the shared sense of elegiac calmness and joy-in-suffering that is the hallmark of the second realm.

The last six cantos of *Purgatorio* (XXVIII–XXXIII) are hardly purgatorial, but they are not joyful, either. They give an account of the Earthly Paradise, a pivotal segment in the narrative, for it is here that the private story of Dante's salvation through Beatrice is firmly linked to the public theme of Dante's potential salvation of the world through the *Commedia*. It is also here that Beatrice – a Beatrice as hard on Dante in Eden as she was tender with Virgil in Limbo a mere week earlier – takes over from Virgil as Dante's guide. Structurally speaking, the first canto (XXVIII) presents Eden as a perfect *locus amoenus* or idyllic environment inhabited solely by the attractive and mysterious Matelda, while the last (XXXIII) reflects and draws conclusions on what happens in between. The four central cantos

describe a surreal and partly enigmatic sequence of events orchestrated in three parts: (1) as Dante stands on one bank of the Lethe, an allegorical procession, personifying the books of the Bible, slowly advances on the other side; in the middle of the procession is an empty chariot (the Church) drawn by a griffin (Jesus Christ) (XXIX); (2) standing upon the chariot within a cloud of flowers scattered by singing angels, Beatrice appears; overwhelmed by love and fear, Dante turns to Virgil, but Virgil is gone, and Beatrice, far from comforting and reassuring her 'friend' (*amico*; *Inf.* II, 61), denounces and rebukes him for straying from her after her death; mortified and deeply ashamed, Dante confesses his guilt; dragged by Matelda across the Lethe, he drinks of its waters and joins Beatrice on the other bank (XXX–XXXI); (3) after an allegorical representation of the redemption, an apocalyptic dramatization of the degeneration of the chariot/Church follows from the time of the Roman persecutions to its imminent, sacrilegious kidnapping by the king of France (XXXII). When all this is over, echoing Virgil's promise of a liberating greyhound (*veltro*) in *Inferno* I, 100–11, Beatrice prophesies the coming of a heavenly avenger (mysteriously alluded to by the number 515, which in Roman numerals is DXV, the designation by which the celestial envoy is normally known; XXXIII, 43–4), who will kill those responsible for the corruption of the chariot/Church; she then charges Dante with remembering what he has seen and relating it for the benefit of the world 'that lives ill' (*che mal vive*; 70).

Beatrice's return to Dante at Easter-time 1300 re-enacts the wedding of Christ with the Church, as signified by the griffin drawing the chariot to the great tree of Adam which is revived by its touch. Modelled on the sacred narrative of the Song of Songs, this ritual gives meaning to Dante's individual story and to the history of the human race as a whole. As a result, Dante's soul is healed and renewed; his life, and potentially the life of every human being on earth, turns from tragedy to comedy. After being immersed in the waters of Lethe, which wash away his memory of sin, Dante now drinks from the other Edenic river, the *Eünoè* – the poet's invention – which revives in him the memory of his good deeds. He is now 'pure and ready to mount to the stars' (*puro e disposto a salire a le stelle*; XXXIII, 145).

Paradiso

On leaving Eden, Dante, now guided by Beatrice, finds himself almost instantly in Paradise. Theologically speaking, the journey should be completed, for, as the pilgrim will later be told, 'everywhere in heaven is Paradise' (*ogne dove in cielo / è paradiso*; *Par.* III, 88–9). Dante is now *in patria*: he has

reached our true celestial homeland. Consequently, he should be capable of seeing God and the blessed immediately, embracing the whole of Heaven in one timeless instant. However, if this were indeed the case, what is the poet to do? How is he to portray a ‘reality’ that, not being subjected to the laws of time and space, is so radically different from what he has experienced and described so far? He could stretch his account of the ultimate bliss over the thirty-three cantos assigned to *Paradiso* by the poem’s structure – a difficult, though not impossible, task for a poet of Dante’s calibre. However, such a description would neither match the structure of the other two canticles nor respect the traditional spatial organization of Heaven; above all, it would not correspond to Dante’s poetic intuition of Paradise.

Dante’s stroke of genius was to conceive of, and depict, the pilgrim’s experience of Paradise as still on his journey to God (what was termed *in statu viae*), namely, not as achieved fulfilment, but as a quest for fulfilment. In short, while affirming the theological notion of a true, inexpressible Paradise situated beyond time and space, Dante declares that, for his visit, Paradise made itself accessible to him in a gradual manner – one heaven at a time – just as the preceding two realms did. Thus, instead of appearing immediately and all together in the Empyrean, where they effectively reside, the souls of Paradise appear in the heavenly spheres most associated with their earthly lives, each perfectly, albeit differently, blessed according to his or her individual capacity to see God and partake of His bliss: in the Moon souls who were forced to break their monastic vows (II–V); in Mercury, seekers of glory (V–VII); in Venus, those inclined towards carnal love (VIII–IX); in the Sun, seekers of wisdom (X–XIV); in Mars, martyrs and crusaders (XIV–XVIII); in Jupiter, righteous rulers (XVIII–XX); and in Saturn, contemplatives (XXI–XXII). In the Fixed Stars, after witnessing the triumphs of Christ and Mary, Dante is examined on the three theological virtues by saints Peter, James and John, and he meets Adam (XXII–XXVII); while in the Primum Mobile he gazes at the nine angelic orders orbiting the dazzling point that is God (XXVII–XXIX). In the Moon, and to a lesser extent in Mercury, the pilgrim is still able to make out the evanescent features of the blessed; from Venus onward, however, the light that enfolds them is so bright that he cannot penetrate it. Only in the Empyrean does he see the blessed properly, with their resurrected bodies and individual features, in the glory of the celestial rose (XXX–XXXIII). This is also where Dante’s journey ends as he reaches, in the last four lines of the poem, the supreme vision of God.

This accommodation of the heavenly ‘reality’ to human faculties makes Paradise poetically viable as a continuation of the pilgrim’s journey. Nevertheless, the subject matter remains challenging, for the experience of ‘passing beyond the human’ (*trasumanar*; *Par.* I, 70) is neither perceivable

nor describable in the physical terms of the journey's first two stages. The three principal narrative ingredients of the poem so far – the journey, the otherworldly landscapes, and the ever-changing individual souls with their particular stories and physical features – can no longer be seen. Gone are the lengthy and dramatic transitions between regions of *Inferno*, or the exhausting climbs of *Purgatorio*: Dante and Beatrice now ascend from heaven to heaven effortlessly and almost instantly. The landscapes are gone too, though the blessed produce some breathtaking light-and-sound spectacles for the benefit of the pilgrim: the dancing and singing crowns of philosophers and theologians in the Sun (X, 64–81 and 139–48; XII, 1–21); the cross of Mars (XIV, 91–139); the eagle of Jupiter (XVIII, 94–114; XIX, 1–12); the golden ladder of Saturn (XXI, 25–42); not to mention the river of light (XXX, 55–81) and the celestial rose (XXX, 82–132; XXXI, 1–24) in the Empyrean. Individual souls are few and become fewer as we ascend from heaven to heaven; moreover, after the dematerialized images of the Moon, they appear as blazing lights which can only be differentiated from one another by the intensity of their splendour. But it is particularly the lack of stories that marks the structure of *Paradiso*. Storytelling is very rare and, when it features, it is allegorical – the kind of allegory Dante elsewhere calls ‘a beautiful lie’ (*Conv.* II, i, 4), as is the case with the romance of Francis of Assisi and Lady Poverty. Yet, in theory, Dante could have told as many edifying and comforting stories in *Paradiso* as he told frightening ones in *Inferno*. Instead, he narrates Francesca's fall from innocence, but says nothing about Cunizza's repentance. Interestingly, he recounts the charming story of the good deed that saves the emperor Trajan in *Purgatorio*, and not in *Paradiso* where Trajan's soul is found. In *Paradiso*, historical, philosophical, scientific, and theological presentations replace the characters who, with the variety of their real-life experiences, animate *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.

Nevertheless, *Paradiso* reserves its centre to earthly, rather than heavenly, concerns. Cantos XV, XVI, and XVII constitute a textual space devoted to the poet's complicated relationship with his beloved and detested city. XV looks back to the Florence of 150 years earlier, a model city, small but beautiful and pure, poor in money but rich in peace and goodness; XVI is about the good old Florentine families in contrast with the Florence of Dante's times, large and still growing, socially diverse but chaotic and insecure, wealthy but greedy, restless, and corrupt; XVII is about Dante's future exile, but also the vindication of his political stand, his duty and mission as poet, and his ultimate glory. As emerged from Farinata's and Brunetto's allusions to Beatrice (*Inf.* X, 130–2; XV, 88–90), Dante had originally assigned to his beloved the role of clarifying in *Paradiso* the prophecies of his exile. However, by the time the poet reached the third

canticle, his need to affirm, albeit indirectly, the dignity of the Alighieri family as descendants of an imperial knight, as well as to confer authority to his searing indictment of contemporary Florence, became so overwhelming that he replaced the figure of Beatrice with that of his great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida. Having lived in the city during the first half of the twelfth century, Cacciaguida could legitimately stigmatize the city's current corruption, and having died fighting in the crusades, he had the authority to invest Dante with his prophetic mission. Thus, while Beatrice, a Florentine through and through, is exceptionally excluded from this autobiographical space, Cacciaguida, effectively Dante's *alter ego*, comes to play a fundamental role in the structure of *Paradiso* and, ultimately, of the whole poem.

However, what pervades *Paradiso*, giving it its special poetic and structural identity, is a new tension towards God as the source of all goodness, beauty, and truth – a desire for God that, not only because of their temporary dislocation, affects the blessed too. The concept of desire is central to the great Christian metaphor of earthly life as exile from and journey towards the heavenly homeland. Dante refers to desire several times in *Purgatorio*, but he develops the notion fully and originally in *Paradiso*, where it acts as a fundamental structuring principle, propelling Dante towards the Emyrean, while concurrently necessitating a series of important deferrals in his ascent. Desire is twofold in Paradise: there is desire as longing to see God face to face, and desire as appetite for knowledge. The latter is articulated by means of questions and doubts often explicitly formulated by Dante. Indeed, when desire is of an intellectual nature, the terms *dubbio* (doubt) and *disio* (desire) appear interchangeably. These two approaches to the Godhead correspond to two distinct forms of contemplation: the intellectual and the affective. Dante the narrator appears to favour a form of active approach to the beatific vision through knowledge, placing first, in Beatrice's words (XXVIII, 109–11), the act of vision ('l'atto che vede') and second that of love ('quel ch'ama'). However, the pilgrim's experience is lived through, and poetically portrayed, in affective terms. In fact, the two strands are strictly intertwined in the narrative as expressions of the same psychological tension, and Beatrice, as Dante's lover and teacher in Paradise, is their synthesis and embodiment.

The narrative structure of *Paradiso*, with its constant interweaving of the didactic with the affective, is an instrument perfectly attuned to Dante's quest for a God of knowledge and love. The heavenly journey is conceived and realized as an exhilarating progression that is both physical and psychological, and affects the pilgrim's eyes as much as his mind and heart. As Dante soars higher and higher, his heart is caught between

opposite emotions. Each new step gives him what he longs for, yet it leaves him unsatisfied and anxious as his desire is at the same time fulfilled and intensified. Each doctrinal explanation (the spots on the moon in II; free will in V; the inscrutability of God's justice in XIX; predestination in XX–XXI), each appraisal of his earthly concerns (the history of the Roman empire in VI; the social, political, and moral degeneration of Florence in XV–XVII; the popes' greed in XXVII) is a stepping stone towards enlightenment. It is only by exercising his need to know that his desire to possess will be satisfied; hence the joy of knowledge is constantly expressed, outside the pilgrim, by an increase of light and, inside him, by an increment of his ability to withstand and penetrate that light. Light is indeed the external manifestation of this internal process. It, too, like desire, increases as the pilgrim ascends, and, as with desire, as soon as the pilgrim grows strong enough to take in the objects of his vision, those objects become more and more luminous. Light constantly surpasses (*sobranza*) the pilgrim's power to see (XXIII, 31–6), so much so that occasionally he feels blinded by it (XXV, 118–21 and XXVIII, 16–18). To the progressive intensification of light – the *sobranzare* (surpassing), the *trasmodarsi* (transcending) of the object, by which Dante is in turn *soprato* (surpassed) and *vinto* (defeated) – corresponds his adjustment to it through the process by which he *sormonta* (exceeds), with the help of ever-increasing grace, his own capacity to see. This is the long and highly dramatic 'struggle of the feeble eyelids' (*battaglia de' debili cigli*; XXIII, 78), and it matches, indeed it visually expresses, the internal, psychological drama of Dante's ever-increasing desire for God.

What we find throughout *Paradiso* is an expectation, more and more urgent, to come face to face with the ultimate goodness. It is a visionary tension, which already brings somehow a measure of reward, and yet acts as the constant reminder that fulfilment is still farther ahead. Dante's narrative strategy is to anticipate and simultaneously delay the final vision. Occasionally, God appears in reduced epiphanies, in fleeting manifestations, as in the cross of Cacciaguida in XV, or in the heavenly writings of the eagle of Jupiter (XVIII–XIX), or in the triumphs of Christ and Mary (XXIII). In fact, His appearance is put off till the very end of the poem, and even there, when Dante comes for a split second face to face with Him, we do not see God in His human likeness, but vertiginous geometric shapes that remind us of His mystery. Dante's quest is for a Deity beyond the anthropomorphic – a truly transcendent God, who can be approached only by pushing farther and farther the frontiers of poetic quest and experimentation. This narrative strategy has an inevitable theological consequence. *Paradiso* as a poem is all, and can only be, on this side of the journey's ultimate goal. It is the story of an

approximation to a vision and a bliss that remain unsaid and unrevealed, for the pilgrim's true state of bliss can only begin where *Paradiso* as narrative ends, in the silence that follows the poem's last line: 'the love that moves the sun and the other stars' (l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle; 145).

Otherworldly Inhabitants

The account of Dante's journey is punctuated and enriched by his encounters with the inhabitants of the otherworld. These belong to two different categories: the functionaries (jailors and warders in Hell; angels in Purgatory and Paradise); and the human shades – damned, penitent, blessed – located, according to their deserts, where Dante 'finds' them, in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Though ultimately impotent to stand in the way of God's will, functionaries and human shades have minds of their own; they interact with one another and with Dante and his guides, often telling their stories, but also obstructing, deceiving, assisting, instructing, squabbling, provoking anger and fear, compassion and contempt, pity and cruelty, gratitude and resentment. They are an essential element in the poem's narrative structure, providing variety, demarcating territories, creating suspense, inspiring questions.

Functionaries

The functionaries are the staff of the otherworld: mythological creatures and monsters, but also Christian devils and angels, appointed to take care of the management of the areas assigned to them; from Charon to Satan, they can facilitate or occasionally hinder the visitors' progress. Virgil has no problem in dealing with the classical figures. In Upper Hell, a short formula or a gesture is enough to quieten Charon, Minos, Cerberus, Plutus, and Phlegyas. In Lower Hell, Virgil can be contemptuous and sarcastic, as with the Minotaur (XII, 16–21) and the giant Nimrod (XXXI, 70–5), but also civilized and diplomatic, especially when he needs the cooperation of the infernal officers, as with Chiron the centaur (XII, 89–96), Geryon (XVII, 97–9), and Antaeus (XXXI, 115–29). In general he appears in control of the situation. However, there are two episodes in which his authority is seriously challenged. Not by chance, the challengers in both cases are Christian devils.

In canto VIII, 82–130, the devils who guard the city of Dis slam the door in Virgil's face, refusing to let in the two visitors. In one of *Inferno's* most entertaining scenes, Virgil returns to Dante downcast but still determined to prevail. In fact, while he can shield Dante from the petrifying gaze of the Medusa and the Furies, he makes no headway with the devils, and only an

angel from Heaven can open the gate, rebuking the insolent demons for their resistance to God's will (IX, 61–105). The second episode occurs in the fifth ditch of Malebolge, where the barrators are punished under the watchful eyes of the Malebranche (Evil Claws), a band of spirited devils with deliciously scary, vernacular names (Malacoda, Scarmiglione, Alichino, Calcabrina, Cagnazzo, Barbariccia, Libicocco, Draghinazzo, Ciriatto, Graffiacane, Farfarello, and Rubicante). Clearly enjoying their job, these devils play a game of cat and mouse with their wards, whom they keep under boiling pitch (XXI–XXIII). When Virgil and Dante appear on the scene, they get uncontrollably excited at the prospect of having them, too, as their playthings; their leader Malacoda (Evil Tail) can hardly restrain them. When they tell Virgil that a bridge to the sixth ditch is still intact, Virgil believes them, but soon, finding no bridge and frantically wanting to escape the Malebranche's grappling hooks, he is obliged to scramble on his backside down the bank, holding Dante tight in his arms. Hardly a dignified escape for 'the lofty poet' (*l'altissimo poeta*; *Inf.* IV, 80)! In the battle of wit and deception, a barrator-like Ciampolo turns out to be a better match for the Malebranche than wise Virgil. The two incidents have significant implications for Virgil, though his inability to deal with the crafty devils may well be meant to signify integrity and uprightness rather than weakness and gullibility. What is undeniable is their structural function, placed as they are one on the borderline between Upper and Lower Hell, and the other just half way through Malebolge, where all the bridges are down from the time of the earthquake that occurred when Christ died on the cross.

Exceptional in Hell, angels are at home in Purgatory where they have a variety of roles, from piloting the boat that brings the penitents to the mountain (II, 27–9) to chasing away the serpent from the valley of the Princes (VIII, 25 and 106), to guarding the gate of Purgatory proper (IX, 104), and etching the Ps on, and erasing them from, Dante's brow. They have loftier, though less structural roles in Eden, where they appear as 'ministers and messengers of eternal life' (*ministri e messagger di vita eterna*; XXX, 18), greeting Beatrice with flowers and sacred invocations, singing psalms (XXX, 82–4), and even pitying poor Dante when Beatrice is too hard on him (XXX, 94–6). In Paradise, where they are permanent dwellers, angels appear as dazzling lights without individual features. As movers of the heavenly spheres, they are responsible for governing the universe and directing the influence of the stars over human affairs (*Par.* II, 127–9). Dante sees them as nine sparkling circles rotating around the blinding light of the point that is God (XXVIII, 1–39 and 88–129). Closest to God is the swiftest and most ardent circle of the Seraphim, who are associated with the *Primum Mobile*; the other angelic orders follow the sequence of the Heavens from the Fixed Stars,

associated with the Cherubim, to the Angels, associated with the Moon. They fly incessantly from God to the blessed as bees to flowers (XXXI, 4–18), and sing and fly around the Virgin in the Empyrean (XXXI, 124–38).

Residents

The human shades are the ‘residents’ of the otherworld: inmates in Hell; penitents in Purgatory; and blessed in Paradise. They are introduced, with varying degrees of detail, as Dante comes across, observes, or interacts with them. There are anonymous crowds, such as the neutrals (*Inf.* III, 22–69); individuals that are mentioned only by name (‘Euripides, Antiphon, Simonides, and Agathon’; *Purg.* XXII, 106–7) or with some brief, emblematic qualification (lustful Cleopatra, *Inf.* V, 63; Caesar in arms with griffin-like eyes, *Inf.* IV, 123); individuals who make a short appearance (Lano from Siena, *Inf.* XIII, 115–23); finally, individuals who tell their own stories or whose stories are told by others. The great characters of the *Commedia*, especially *Inferno*, belong to this last category.

Occasionally, characters interact with each other: violently in Hell (Master Adam and Sinon in XXX, 100–29); calmly and compassionately in Purgatory (III, 79–93; VIII, 64–6, etc.). In some rare cases they become involved with Dante’s journey. Virgil and Beatrice are macroscopic examples; however, Sordello, Statius, and St Bernard, too, leave more than a momentary impression on the pilgrim’s progress. Conversely, Filippo Argenti’s attack on Phlegyas’ boat is an attempt to obstruct Dante’s progress, and Virgil’s exceptionally violent reaction to it is meant to underscore Filippo’s arrogance. Dante-character is not excluded from this type of physical interaction with the damned. He unwittingly causes great pain to Pier della Vigna when, following Virgil’s bidding, he breaks a twig from the great thorn that is Piero (*Inf.* XIII, 31–3). But there are also occasions when Dante seems to be intentionally cruel, as with Bocca degli Abati (XXXII, 103–5). Primo Levi notes this kind of ‘useless violence’ on the part of the pilgrim. The example he offers is one in which, at Dante’s request, Friar Alberigo tells his story and then Dante, breaking his promise, refuses to clear the friar’s eyes of the ice that locks them shut so that he is unable to weep (*Inf.* XXXIII, 109–50).²

These incidents are exceptional and they occur, understandably, in *Inferno*. Close contact is rare in Purgatory and is prompted by affection. Virgil and Sordello embrace most eagerly in the name of their common birthplace (VI, 75), though earlier Dante had unsuccessfully tried to clasp the insubstantial body of his friend Casella (II, 76–81). Generally, however, Dante’s interaction with the souls is verbal. In every circle, terrace, or heaven,

after describing wider scenes with large numbers of shades, Dante focuses on one or two and encourages them to tell him their stories or express their anxieties about what is happening on earth. They are often tales never heard before, and of which no independent evidence remains. Dante's journey fills the gaps left open by history, chronicle, and even legend. His exchanges with the dead shed light on their last days, hours, even instants, revealing secrets that the dead took to their graves. In *Paradiso* (XVII, 124–42) we discover that these stories are told so that we may learn from them. Nevertheless, what engages Dante-character, as well as the reader, is not necessarily the moral lesson they convey, but the extent to which they go beyond it. What persuaded Francesca to yield to her desires? How and where did Ulysses end the journey of his life? What happened in Ugolino's tower after its door was nailed shut? How did Buonconte da Montefeltro die, and where did his body go that it was never found? And what about Pia dei Tolomei and Piccarda Donati: what happened to them? And what was Florence like in 'the good old days'? Most of Dante's great characters tell the stories of their deaths. They satisfy the reader's desire to be taken back in time and see how the inevitable happened in Francesca's chamber, Ulysses' ship, Ugolino's tower, Buonconte's lonely plain of Campaldino. Dante's astonishing ability to give each of his characters a unique voice – or a silence that can be more disturbing than words, as in the case of Geri del Bello (*Inf.* XXIX, 1–39) – means that we willingly suspend our disbelief and fully identify with them, forgetting that the stories they tell are no more than poetic fabrications.

What makes Dante's characters so vivid and credible is, perhaps more than anything else, the poet's brilliant and pervasive use of dialogue. After one thousand years in which it had been virtually absent from literature, speech bursts out as one of Dante's most powerful tools in the *Commedia*'s narrative representation of reality. Direct speech is not rare in classical Latin literature or in the early Italian lyric, but in neither does it aim to reproduce ordinary conversation in all its subtlety and complexity. This is what Dante does, not just tentatively or experimentally, but with consummate self-confidence. Indeed his dialogue has the freshness of a new invention and the sophistication of a well-tested technique. The examples, especially in *Inferno*, are countless. Consider, for instance, how, as he traverses Styx, Dante replies to Filippo Argenti's challenge by picking up, and then turning against him, first one ('vieni') and then another of his words ('piango'), while at the same time carrying through the increasingly taunting theme of Filippo's muddiness/ugliness. Dante's counter-challenge is so effective that it enrages Filippo to the point that, frustrated by the verbal sparring, he resorts to physical violence only to be beaten back again. Eventually, Filippo finds that only against himself can he safely exercise his

wrath (VIII, 30–63). Or consider in *Purgatorio* the lively three-way interaction between Statius, Dante, and Virgil, when, still not knowing that Virgil is walking by his side, Statius sings the praises of the *Aeneid*, while Dante looks now at one and now at the other of his exceptional travelling companions, uncertain whether to hold his tongue or speak (XXI, 94–136). Even in *Paradiso* Dante instils unexpected freshness into the pervasive doctrinal and theological discourse, as in the conversation on the moon spots between Dante and Beatrice (II, 49–63) or the cut and thrust of St Peter's examination of Dante on faith (XXIV, 52–111).

The *Commedia* is one of the most fragmented and at the same time most unified of the great poems of the Western tradition. Fragmented in that so much of it is composed of the compelling stories of real as well as mythological and imaginary characters; unified in that the powerful macrostructure of Dante's journey is capable of absorbing and making sense, in both narrative and moral terms, of the multiplicity that threatens its very existence. In the end Dante's encyclopaedic project succeeds because the lost character at the beginning of the journey is able to reach total clarity at the end: in Longfellow's words, 'I saw that in its depth far down is lying / Bound up with love together in one volume, / What through the universe in leaves is scattered' (Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna / legato con amore in un volume, / ciò che per l'universo si squaderna'; *Par.* XXXIII, 85–7).³

Conclusion

In the poetic preface to his translation of the *Divine Comedy*, Longfellow imagines himself approaching the poem with the same reverence with which 'a labourer, pausing in the dust and heat' (p. 2), approaches a cathedral door, and he continues:

How strange the sculptures that adorn these towers!
This crowd of statues, in whose folded sleeves
Birds build their nests; while canopied with leaves
Parvis and portal bloom like trellised bowers,
And the vast minster seems a cross of flowers!
But fiends and dragons on the gargoyle eaves
Watch the dead Christ between the living thieves,
And, underneath, the traitor Judas lowers!

This Gothic structure is not inert. Its statues, parvis, and portals are alive with leaves, bowers, and flowers; its gargoyles watch the mystery of the Son of God dead between the 'living thieves', the traitor Judas lowering underneath. Here Benedetto Croce's 'luxuriant vegetation' does not spring from an

external and separate source, but is produced by the frame itself. There is no separation here between structure and poetry; indeed structure is a direct, poetic expression of the poet's tormented mind and heart, of his 'exultations' and 'despair', his 'tenderness' and 'hate of wrong'. Needless to say, it is a 'romantic' reading of Dante's masterpiece; however, it captures the unity and singularity of Dante's wondrous invention.

Dante entrusts the *Commedia's* structure with the task of creating differences throughout the three realms of the otherworld – topographical, psychological, moral differences. It is so fundamental that he needs to imagine and extend it even where, strictly speaking, it does not objectively exist, as in Paradise. Thanks to the structure, the souls appear on a graduated series of dramatically different planes and situations. Take, for example, the transition from the hustle and bustle of the ditch of the barrators to the eerie quiet of that of the hypocrites, or from the snake-infested *bolgia* of the thieves to the firefly valley of the fraudulent counsellors. Yet the structure is not a straitjacket; it never feels artificial nor does it overwhelm the 'natural' voices of the characters that inhabit it. Dante has the astonishing ability to identify what morally defines a character without reducing her or him to that definition. This is why souls can inhabit the same location without seeming similar, let alone the same. Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti lives next to Farinata (*Inf.* X) but the two Florentines could not be more different; and the same could be said of Ulysses and Guido da Montefeltro (*Inf.* XXVI–XXVII), Buonconte and Pia (*Purg.* V), Forese and Bonagiunta (*Purg.* XXIV), Carlo Martello and Cunizza (*Par.* VIII–IX), and so on. The invention of the narrative structure may even be more crucial than that of any 'lyrical' fragment of the poem. Although we know the poem was written over at least fifteen years, during which Dante changed and his views on the world evolved, the structure creates the illusion of verisimilitude and synchronicity, which in turn compels us to suspend our disbelief and experience the poem, seven centuries after the poet wrote it, on his terms as his travelling companions on his journey through the otherworld.⁴

Notes

1. B. Croce, *The Poetry of Dante* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1922), p. 93.
2. See L. Pertile, *Songs beyond Mankind: Poetry and the Lager from Dante to Primo Levi* (Binghamton: CMRS, 2013), p. 40. Levi mistakenly refers this episode to Bocca degli Abati (*Inf.* XXXII, 70–111).
3. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. H. W. Longfellow (London: Routledge, 1890), p. 603.
4. I should like to thank Zyg Barański, Angus Clarke, Simon Gilson and my son Giulio Pertile for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.