

01
Stones, Shadows
and Visions

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If it is true that we may identify the highest node of an interpretational structure of *Remembrance of Things Past* in the sentence ‘Marcel becomes a writer’, as suggested by Gérard Genette (but why not a yet higher generic node, such as ‘someone does something’, or even ‘something happens’? We shall come back to this later), then probably the highest pertinent structural node of the *Divine Comedy* features a sentence such as ‘Dante visits hell, purgatory and paradise in sequence’, or, more topographically, ‘Dante descends to the centre of the Earth and then ascends towards the ethereal regions’. At lower nodes, we shall find these same sentences enhanced by modifiers (such as ‘in the company of Virgil’, or ‘together with Beatrice’) and many more besides, which gradually sharpen our partial vision or interpretation of the work.

Erwin Panofsky made a distinction between various levels of interpretation of an image. Without this distinction, images would not be interpretable. In the procession of the saints and the apostles in the apse of Monreale Cathedral in Sicily, we would be forced to see a curious group photo of seemingly annoyed people, each bearing an unwieldy golden disc precariously balanced on their heads; we would also have to make do with describing Botticelli’s *Venus* as a bizarre exercise in staged gymnastics. I cannot but hint briefly at major interpretational problems, which I intend to leave behind me without further ado, having raised them for the sole purpose of highlighting the methodology of this brief study. Nobody could deny that there are various grades of depth in the interpretation of a work. However, it is also difficult to deny that there is a primary level of understanding and enjoyment [*jouissance*] which not only makes it possible to access the other levels, but also deserves consideration as a perfectly legitimate vantage point from which to consider that which is being read, or more generally, any artistic creation which is being experienced.

A catalogue of rancour; a political manifesto; a conveyor of more or less hidden messages and rants; a semi-systematic guide through medieval knowledge; a path of initiation; a vast undertaking designed to raise the moral and spiritual tenor of an era. As well

as being all these things, and prior to being any of them, the *Comedy* is the first-person telling of a movement, of a journey, split up into episodes, dotted with a variety of incidents, brought alive by the personal considerations of the narrator, observed from a point of view that the reader tries to make his or her own. Reading the *Divine Comedy* means first and foremost being for a brief moment where things happen. An understanding of this journey may appear partial or even somewhat obscure to those who cannot boast a certain range of skills: being at home with the language of the 13th and 14th centuries; being familiar with the politics and diplomacy of Italy and Europe of that era; understanding notions of poetic metre; having a thorough knowledge of deep-set religious beliefs and subtle theological controversies; possession of a good grounding in classical antiquity, the science of the times, and familiarity with the Tuscan literary and artistic sphere – or at least with what today we believe that sphere to have been made up of: after all that art is a trifling matter compared to life and the time that separates us from the 14th century grows relentlessly, distancing the echoes of that world, distorting it to adopt ever-new guises. Whoever is blessed with many if not all of these assets may bask in the privilege of undertaking a rich cognitive experience in the reading of Dante’s hendecasyllables: an experience which would manifest itself in the availability of inferences, connections, memories and images to a greater degree than would be allowed to those in possession of fewer such skills at the outset. Yet such a reader would still have access to an understanding or pre-understanding of the various incidents along Dante’s journey: Dante walking, descending and ascending, meeting with this or that figure, describing, classifying, explaining, conversing, learning, worrying, doubting, sleeping, dreaming, fainting, fearing, rejoicing and hoping.

To paraphrase the historian David Freedberg, we may spend an entire lifetime coming up with refined interpretations of a Botticellian *Venus* or a Farnese *Hercules*, yet we would be lying to ourselves were we to deny feeling an exquisitely sensual pleasure in the simple contemplation of well-formed naked bodies which seem to offer themselves up to our gaze like a promise. Yet to tell the truth, it is not that we have the duty not to take advantage of this pleasure; quite the contrary, it is more than legitimate to suspect that we

would undermine the intentions of the artists were we to declare that the most immediate pleasure of observing what they have to show us is irrelevant, and instead try to attribute primary importance to the most deeply-hidden meanings of the work, going so far as to declare them essential and worthy of our undivided attention, at the cost of the initial, direct, corporeal impression.

The methodological restriction applied here does not however go hand-in-hand with a quest for simplification. Restricting interpretation to an understanding of the plot substantially means limiting the number and type of inferences that we may consider acceptable or pertinent, at the cost of others which we think may be brushed aside or which we should in some way neutralise. However, many of these inferences, many of the concepts evoked, simply run the risk of not satisfying us for some reason or another – and I'm using a rather bland term here, 'not satisfying us', to paper over a wide range of issues: logical, cognitive, meta-cognitive and emotional. (According to the most highly refined interpreters, the final synthesis will take place at that very deepest level which essentially deploys the rich background knowledge which we have methodologically decided to do without; we shall soon see that this cannot be the case, at least in a certain number of examples which are anything but marginal.) In many situations, we do not understand what is happening, or perhaps we are unable to understand it. (And this is why the shrewdest of interpreters always call upon us to consult the ample notes and commentaries that accompany a vast range of editions of the *Divine Comedy*.)

I would like to note that this descriptive thesis, according to which we do not understand many of the situations in the texts we read, does not reflect the phenomenology of reading and its enjoyment; and herein lies one of the most interesting problems in our research. The illusion of understanding is in fact tyrannical; it leads us to where, if we were very punctilious and honest, we would have to spend hours picking over the author's work, demanding explanations of his proposals, and taking all of his intentions to task. Thus we are stuck between, on the one hand, the possibility that the phenomenon we are referring to – perplexity in the face of the incongruous – does not exist, given

that the 'illusion of understanding' sweeps away all the reader's doubts; and on the other hand the possibility that what is incongruous might not then appear as such if only we were to take that one step further in our interpretational practices and thus get kitted out with the suitable tools. Instead, I want to maintain that the active frequentation of the level that for the time being I shall call 'superficial', and which corresponds to Panofksy's 'pre-iconological', is the most important exercise to be undertaken in order to reach the heart of the narrative. This is the level we face, equipped with weak, essential resources; we are walking on our own legs here, yet we should not for this reason shyly bow our heads: our only defence is our spontaneous understanding of the world, of the things to be found here and of the people who bring it to life. This active reading is not necessarily a hostile act with regard to the writer. Every work of imagination is based on an excitingly precarious balancing act between taking on trust the cognitive capacities of the protagonist, and constantly questioning the laws that the author tries to dictate. At one extreme, excessively realistic documentary stories appear lifeless, conforming all too readily to the axioms of easy understanding; they offer no hooks to hang imagination on, imitating and repeating the commonplace, without leading us anywhere. At the other extreme, the plots that propose, let us say, the unmotivated jealousy of Pi for an unsuspecting two-headed lizard are deemed extravagant and normatively unacceptable. Yet treading the line between the two is not for the fainthearted.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Dante is a human being, wandering among disembodied souls. He is a freak in a different world, one based on extraordinarily different laws. He himself is unable to explain properly what happens to him, especially when he tells of strange events marking the border between the worlds; he struggles to be convinced (and for this reason, as rhetoric admonishes, he struggles to be convincing). Now and then he finds himself unable to come to terms with this world, but is benevolently put on the right path by either Virgil or Beatrice, who both view as impertinent his desire to rationalise things which apparently go beyond the bounds of human reason; he even faints on more than one occa-

sion under the cognitive burden thrust upon him by a world he himself has created.

And yet Dante has no choice. He is not writing a knightly epic or a gallant poem. While he might mention flowers or weapons in passing, he primarily speaks of virtues, laws, politics and theology, inserting such concepts within an imagined narrative. The task of justification is indeed a difficult one. Why not entrust it to others? To Chiron, for instance:

*Are you ware
That he behind moveth whate'er he touches?
Thus are not wont to do the feet of dead men.*
(*Inferno*, Canto XII, 80–82)

Or to an unnamed soul that he meets later on:
*And with my shadow did I make the flame
Appear more red; and even to such a sign
Shades saw I many, as they went, give heed.
This was the cause that gave them a beginning
To speak of me; and to themselves began they
To say: 'That seems not a factitious body!'*
(*Purgatorio*, Canto XXVI, 7–12)

The two situations described above might seem perfectly comprehensible – almost visible. Indeed, a number of painters and illustrators have depicted them with painstaking attention to detail. After all, I daresay there is no problem of appearances. The possible world that Dante represents is visually akin to our own. The distance is rather conceptual.

What exactly is it that Chiron and the anonymous soul in Canto XXIV of *Purgatorio* discover; or rather what is it that Dante thinks they should discover? They become aware of the fact that Dante is not disembodied like them, and in particular that he therefore possesses physical properties unlike those – so far unknown – of souls in general in the supernatural world. In fact, they can tell Dante is different from them by virtue of the fact that he appears to have highly peculiar physical properties: he makes stones roll, he breaks the light and casts a shadow, he does things

that we also do, and that the souls – we discover – do not and indeed cannot do. For us, this Difference between the souls and Dante is not cause for worry *per se*. We may quite easily accept that the supernatural world is conceptually very distant, i.e. perfectly incomprehensible to our minds. We may even go much further and state that it is a world graspable by reason, yet nevertheless beyond the reaches of intuition. However, this is not what the *Comedy* calls upon us to do. Instead it asks us to see the difference between the two worlds, accepting the sense of surprise of the inhabitants of the supernatural world faced with Dante's physical properties; basically he's asking us to look through the eyes of the souls and reflect on what we see.

Except that at the same time, we are called upon to reject the result of our mental calculations, a result that, in the intention of the author, should lead to a clear judgement of otherness: this is our world, that one is theirs. Thus Chiron is taken aback by Dante's ability to move stones, which other souls do not do, not so much because their movement is more light-footed than that of the clumsy poet on the broad crumbly ridge that leads to the Phlegethon, but because they just *cannot* move them, presumably because they are *unable to interact* with them.

Let us pause a second, retrace our steps and analyse the metaphysics of this scene. The generic soul evoked by Chiron does not make stones roll. Yet at the same time, we might presume, it walks upon ground that appears to hold it up. We are not told of other ways in which to step upon the ground. On the contrary, we have no end of examples of souls who walk throughout the *Comedy*. For example, the soothsayers of Inf. Canto XX, despite their heads being mounted backwards upon their shoulders, with all the ensuing complications, do not appear to walk any differently from normal, i.e. from those who keep their feet on the ground. They are not scattered hither and thither at different heights from the ground, or even partially or completely buried in the ground, with which they must not interact (according to Chiron, and to Dante speaking through the mouth of Chiron). If this is so, they certainly don't walk, and the ground serves merely to hold them firmly in their place, as happens to the Simoniacs in Canto XIX of *Inferno*.



2012
Mohamed Bourouissa
All-in

terrestrial bodies cast

a shadow



Hence the souls for us are a source of metaphysical concern, infinitely more than the corporeal Dante is for the incorporeal Chiron. The very ground that holds them up, countering adequate resistance to their presence, would appear to be entirely inefficient once crumbled into fragments, rocks:

*Thus down we took our way o'er that discharge
Of stones, which oftentimes did move themselves
Beneath my feet, from the unwonted burden.*
(*Inferno*, Canto XII, 28–30)

The division that seemed to hold true between our world and that of the souls shifts within that of the souls and separates the stones that oppose resistance to force and those which do not, in a way which for the moment we can only consider arbitrary.

The inferential dance is ready to begin, and we shall do nothing to hold it back. On the first level, which we would happily do away with for its excessive naivety were it not our self-imposed task to adhere faithfully to the multiple possibilities of the interpretive thought, we may suppose that the dead present some degree of incapacity or incompetence with regard to the kicking of stones: ‘Thus are not wont to do the feet of dead men’.

The dead, generally being by nature lazy (although this is not always the case, and is certainly not so for the slothful, forced into hyperactivity, in *Inferno*, Canto VII), or weak, are unable to dislodge the stones they kick. However much goodwill they put behind it, either their movement comes to a halt a little before, or the kick reaches the stone with insufficient force. If only they were to make a bit more of an effort, they would be sure to achieve encouraging results: the pebbles would move, and their new-found zeal might even be put to good use for the completion of projects of public utility, such as the removal of the landslide from the seventh circle, the crossing of which Dante finds rather exhausting. Or – without wishing to give the idea that this is in any way a hypothesis to be even remotely taken into consideration – perhaps it’s only that their feet are a bit sore. The rest of their bodies are vigorous and energetic; only their weary extremities are startled at the prospect of falling over. Of course, these two

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hypotheses have the advantage of not forcing us to adopt a metaphysical dualism with respect to minerals. There would thus be no supporting stones and non-supporting stones, but only feet with capriciously selective behaviour when faced with two neighbouring states of matter.

Other paths branch off here. We might even boldly accept a dualism of matter in Hell. On what laws would such dualism be based? As long as a portion of matter is an integral part of the ground, firmly joined onto it (although a lot could be said of this adverb ‘firmly’), it would boast the virtue of supporting those who stand on it or in some way entrust themselves to it; i.e. opposing a reaction to the action. But once transformed into an autonomous particle (‘either by earthquake or by failing stay’, *Inferno*, Canto XII, 6: like all of us, Dante has fairly clear ideas about the possible causes of subsidence) it is no longer in a condition to resist or interact, and the feet of dead men would be able to cross them without altering their position or imposing their movement.

This is not an entirely fanciful hypothesis. The difficulties inherent to interacting with supernatural objects are well documented in the *Comedy*:

*One from among them saw I coming forward,
As to embrace me, with such great affection,
That it incited me to do the like.
O empty shadows, save in aspect only!
Three times behind it did I clasp my hands,
As oft returned with them to my own breast!
I think with wonder I depicted me...*
(*Purgatorio*, Canto II, 76–82)

Not once, not twice, but three times Dante insists on seeking contact with the immaterial body which appears before him, and at this point he is quite within his rights to express surprise (although he is not completely sure: ‘I think I depicted me’). We might also note that on careful inspection a great number of strange things happen in metaphysical terms, and this is just one of them. For example, there are a number of rather flagrant violations of the

space–time continuum. In the seventh *bolgia* [pit], the sorrowful Vanni Fucci, bitten by a snake, turns to ashes from which he arises in the same semblance that he had before being bitten:

*And when he on the ground was thus destroyed,
The ashes drew together, and of themselves
Into himself they instantly returned.*
(*Inferno*, Canto XXIV, 103–05)

Is this really the ‘same’ Vanni Fucci? Or is it not rather another one, similar to the first even to the point of being indistinguishable from it? If it were the same one (‘into himself’), as the plot calls on us to believe, what were the ashes he melted into? In that ‘transitional’ moment, could we have asserted, winking like a stage magician: ‘And here, before your very eyes, Vanni Fucci, as you will be able to see for yourselves!’? Or maybe here we are dealing with an identity by fiat along the lines of ‘Let it be: I’m the author and I’ll decide who’s who and what’s what’.

Or once again, to return to dubious material interactions, Phlegyas’ boat sinks into the water beneath Dante’s weight ‘more [...] than ‘tis wont with others’ (*Inferno*, Canto VIII, 30), yet Virgil is forced to push away the ‘brute’ Filippo Argenti, who menacingly ‘stretched he both his hands unto the boat’ (*Inferno*, Canto VIII, 40), presumably in an attempt to capsize it. On the one hand, Filippo Argenti weighs nothing, yet on the other hand what else if not his own mass could threaten the boat’s stability?

And lastly, the flame of purgatory heats and burns but does not consume:

*When I was in it, into molten glass
I would have cast me to refresh myself.*
(*Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII, 49–50)

Considering that glass melts at around 1,400°C, Dante’s misgivings, overcome only by various encouragements from Virgil to cross the flames, and by the thought of meeting Beatrice on the other side, are perfectly comprehensible; doubt remains, however, as to the mechanism that allows Dante’s body to feel the

pain caused by such temperatures without undergoing corresponding somatic alterations.

But as we have already noted, it's not these metaphysical peculiarities that hinder our understanding. We can more or less separate the painful from the material effects of the heat, and we can more or less imagine the turning to ashes and the resurrection. However, as we persevere in our data collection, we may observe that the stones (mineral particles detached from the ground) represent a valuable means of punishment for the avaricious and the prodigal, who in the fourth circle, as heralded by the mysterious blatherings of Plutus, move back and forth in two opposite lines, pressing against each other, resisting each other, like the undertow of a tide:

Rolling weights forward by main force of chest.
(*Inferno*, Canto VII, 27)

In other words, they are rolling rocks with a fair degree of effort. The image is powerfully dark, and the physicality of the punishment multiplies one's recall of the torture of Sisyphus by the number of souls, then makes it grow exponentially by virtue of those inevitable clashes between the two sides, who must both complete the circle to which they have been assigned, the paths of which are maliciously designed to overlap – in the opposite direction – each with the other:

Forever shall they come to these two buttings...
(*Inferno*, Canto VII, 55)

We know that Dante's inferno is a physical place, just like purgatory: they are both geographical entities within Earth. Purgatory is shaken by earthquakes (*Purgatorio*, Canto XX, 127ff.). Thus we are not worried by how the ground that supports the souls and the evanescent stones interact between each other; we know that when we place one of these stones on the ground, it will not be swallowed up. Rather, it is the fickle relationship between the souls and the ground that puzzles us.

In fact, at this point, in order to protect the coherence of the metaphysical framework, we may attribute to Chiron a simple

unawareness of the practices deployed not so far away, only a few circles above his own: something which however we may not forgive Dante. Otherwise we may continue to play inferential musical chairs. The avaricious and the prodigal appear not to be dead like the others; for them, millstones have the selfsame inertia and solidity that we attribute to our own stones, and which when kicked (if not too heavy), move. Be that as it may, a metaphysical divide must be introduced; we can at the most shift it from one point of the scenario to another.

I would like to underline a what I take to be the important print. It's not the singularity of the supernatural world that creates problems here. We have highly sophisticated conceptual tools with which to give sense to entities quite unlike the concrete objects that our metaphysical neighbourhood is full of. After all, numbers and dreams are not material objects like sticks and stones; nor are stories and waves. This much we know. Is the supernatural world really so different? The beings that inhabit it are still conceptually similar to material objects, having shape and size; they are simply immaterial. They are not entities of some entirely unlikely metaphysical genre. And even if they were, a certain degree of tolerance and even fondness for its eccentricity would lead us to willingly accept their originality. We might however add: 'as long as this does not force us to do away with coherence (and what's more, with arbitrary renunciation)'. The problem with Chiron is that in order to safeguard coherence, we are forced into an arbitrary dualism of supernatural material without ever knowing when the attribution of one or the other condition applies – at certain points impenetrable, at others penetrable – to the matter of which the world of souls is made up.

Furthermore, we may observe (and this is another qualifying element of our argument) that an informed over-interpretation (based on historical, theological and artistic knowledge, on all that which goes by the name of 'erudition') is of no help to us here. What knowledge of theology may help us to resolve this cognitive conflict, the mystery of a metaphysical distinction between solid and immaterial stones, or between souls that stand on the ground and those unable even to kick the smallest fragment?

This problem rears its head on the threshold between the natural and supernatural world, and is to be found throughout the supernatural journey. The sins of the damned are punished quite effectively, in ways that cause great suffering. Without action and reaction, there would be no sense in which we could speak of punishment; we cannot give a meaning to metaphysics that might imply the inefficacy of punishment. For example, a non-interactionist form of metaphysics such as that usually ascribed to Nicolas Malebranche would allow us to describe the dance of the avaricious and the prodigal in the following terms: on contact with the hand of the avaricious, the rock would start to roll of its own accord (in actual fact, by divine will), without any impetus actually being transmitted by the movement of the soul, which as mentioned before is insubstantial. This movement, to the eyes of an onlooker, would appear to be a perfectly normal casual transaction, given that it would imitate the movement down to every last detail, even including the grimaces of strain on the faces of the damned, of the rock-pushers.

However, at this point, we should look for another way to make the soul suffer, for otherwise he would relate to his punishment in much the same way as an actor relates to the theatrical death of the character he is playing. For example, at the same time as the two stones clash (which as we have said would be the pure illusion of a clash), God would send a signal to the spirits who are moving them, who simultaneously would feel a sensation of pain and suffering. The general coherence of the overall scene would be preserved *ex machina*, yet it is clear that we would inevitably start to lose sight of aims and means. Why get bogged down in such a pantomime if the only important thing is for the soul to receive a signal subjectively experienced as unpleasant and thus punitive? The terrible rolling stones may be pulled back in line, metaphorically speaking, to become an epiphenomenon, a visual decoration which adds nothing to the geometric accountancy of divine retribution. If the only important thing about punishment is the illusion of it, we could have all the souls put in a big depot like the one in the film *The Matrix*: Dante would do nothing but read all the labels on the various containers of souls to us, reeling off extracts from a vast and highly detailed register, telling us what they *believed* they were undergoing.

VISIBILITY

So, why this pantomime? The answer is not so far off. The reason behind this problematic metaphysical hotchpotch lies in the need to make the scenes and their contents visible. The unlikely metaphysics of the *Divine Comedy* is subject to its epistemological needs. There are three steps in this argument. The souls must take note in some way of the anomaly that Dante creates; epistemology has always opted for visual shortcuts; and the things we see are first and foremost material objects. We 'see' stones rolling, pushed aside by the only foot capable of pushing them: in our case one belonging to a human being.

Vision requires light. Bodies exposed to light cast shadows. Dante casts a shadow. But at many points throughout purgatory, Dante's shadow causes a scandal, at least in metaphysical terms. It may be more evanescent than the stones that are rolled down the slope, but it is no less indicative of the protagonist's worldly nature. One such description is quoted above; here are others:

*Tell us how is it that thou makest thyself
A wall unto the sun, as if thou hadst not
Entered as yet into the net of death.*
(*Purgatorio*, Canto XXVI, 22–24)

*The sun, that in our rear was flaming red,
Was broken in front of me into the figure
Which had in me the stoppage of its rays;
Unto one side I turned me, with the fear
Of being left alone, when I beheld
Only in front of me the ground obscured.*
(*Purgatorio* Canto III, 16–21)

Virgil's lack of shadow is a false negative for Dante: the absence of shadow should allow us to conclude that there is nothing there, for all things cast a shadow (given the appropriate light conditions). Dante thus feels abandoned. But the fundamental axiom on which his reasoning is based is flawed: there are things that cast no shadow, such as the souls and supernatural beings in general, such as Virgil. Another passage reads:

motionlessness

of the background



*Ere thou art up there, thou shalt see return
Him, who now hides himself behind the hill,
So that thou dost not interrupt his rays.*
(Purgatorio, Canto VI, 55–57)

And:

*When from behind, pointing his finger at me,
One shouted: 'See, it seems as if shone not
The sunshine on the left of him below,
And like one living seems he to conduct him'.
Mine eyes I turned at utterance of these words,
And saw them watching with astonishment
But me, but me, and the light which was broken!*
(Purgatorio, Canto V, 3–9)

(Note here that not only can the souls see and be seen, they can also shout and make themselves heard.)

Here the theme of moveable dualism resurfaces. The dividing line between shadowy bodies and diaphanous ones shifts back and forth within the supernatural world. Let us ascertain that terrestrial bodies cast a shadow. We learn that souls do not. This problem would seem to be contained by reiterating the paradox of Chiron, were it not that here the very core of Dante's epistemology is at stake. It is obvious that the dividing line wavers. The hills and buildings of purgatory cast shadows:

And see, e'en now the hill a shadow casts.
(Purgatorio, Canto VI, 51)

Were all objects transparent, including the ground beneath Dante's feet, there would be no need to go forth 'to see the stars once more'; it would suffice to look below the horizon during daylight hours – except that day and night alternate in purgatory, which means that the shadow of the Earth continues to carry out its function, just as the shadows of the Earth's geographical elements (mountains, hills) do.

The souls are thus perplexed, and Virgil's consolation/exhorta-

tion is probably of little comfort:

...I confess to you
This is a human body which you see,
Whereby the sunshine on the ground is cleft.
Marvel ye not thereat...
(*Purgatorio*, Canto III, 94–97)

This question of whether bodies cast a shadow in the *Comedy* is no trifling or anecdotal matter, as the presence of dark spots in an otherwise clean, shadowless world, like the one presented to us in certain images from Tintin strips could be. A body that does not cast shadows is a body that lets all the light striking it pass through. But a body that lets all light through is a body that does not reflect any. And a body that does not reflect light is a body that is not visible (unless, as we shall discuss shortly, it is a body that emits light of its own).

Thus, the ‘Axiom of Visibility’ on which the entire framework of the *Comedy* stands, allowing it to carry out its pedagogic function, would appear to be at odds with this physical impossibility. Nevertheless:

O empty shadows, save in aspect only!
(*Purgatorio*, Canto II, 81).

One might say – setting out once more on the inferential merry-go-round – that various other options are open to Dante. The main one would force us to consider that the implication from *visible* to *reflective* would not stand up at all. The visible bodies are not passive ones, capable only of reflecting the light they receive from elsewhere; the sun and stars are clearly part of Dante’s cosmological horizon (along with the planets, which at the time were believed to shine with their own light). In actual fact, however, the only things visible apart from opaque bodies such as Dante would appear to be those bodies that shine with their own light (if we discard the notion of the souls reflecting light). The souls might therefore look like certain phosphorescent fish with their delicate glow, generally found in tropical seas. Groping our way through this hypothesis, we might imagine that the weak light given off by these fish-souls and all other supernatural mate-

rial is clearly enough to make their features visible and project around them a light sufficient to banish all the shadows that would inevitably be cast in such circumstances. Yet the cancellation would, in one sense, only be virtual: the shadows would still be there, though on the one hand they would be cast on luminous surfaces, and on the other hand, an infinite number of light sources (one for every point of a body that emits rays), distributed in every direction by the environment, would create such a huge number of overlapping shadows that they would cancel one another out, preventing any of them from being pre-eminent among their companions.

This alternative to transparency – the bodies imagined here emitting light are in fact bodies entirely opaque to light – has the further advantage of providing sense to the projection of Dante’s shadow on the ground, given that the ground is undoubtedly of an opaque nature. Were the ground diaphanous, the shadow would be invisible, like that cast on glass or mirrors.

In this metaphysics of phosphorescence, we would however have problems finding a place for Dante’s own shadow. Its cause and source could not by definition be the weak light given off by the fish-souls, for as we have seen, the infinite number of light sources of supernatural material would obliterate any shadows they produced. Such a shadow could only be the result of the intervention of a light source (i.e. the sun) far more powerful than that of the supposed fish-souls; but as we are constantly reminded of the presence of the sun, this possibility cannot be lightly brushed aside. Yet a sun bright enough to create a defined shadow of Dante would be more than capable of surpassing the effect of cancelling the weak little shadows of the fish-souls, and therefore, given that such souls are now by definition to be considered opaque, nothing would prevent it from providing them with shadows, no less than those of the poet; in such a case, Dante’s shadow would lose its salience and hence its very narrative *raison d’être*.

Clearly, other paths lie before us that would allow us to save appearances and the ‘Axiom of Visibility’ without forcing us into over-constructed or fanciful hypotheses such as that of the fish-

souls (which, it might be said in passing, would also force us to revise other fundamental aspects of our metaphysical cartography: for example, we would be obliged to explain how night works if – shall we say – at night all the phosphorescence dims or is turned off, giving way to real darkness, with all the problems that would entail). An alternative idea which immediately comes to mind is to provide all the souls with a reduced transparency. They would thus be unable to reflect most of the sun's rays; however, some would not pass through them and, once reflected, would be visible. The price to pay for this meagre reflective capacity would be the casting of a weak shadow, only just visible, so modest and uninteresting – we might think – that it might go largely unseen. It would clearly be unable to live up to comparisons with the thick, dark shadow that the metaphysical intruder on a visit from the natural world carries with him (growing ever more embarrassed by it). This idea of weaker shadows, far from being part of our worried modern imagination, have enjoyed a certain iconographic fortune, starting with the frescoes by Luca Signorelli in the Cathedral of Orvieto, where the astonished souls contemplate Dante's shadow, foolishly unaware of the fact that they too cast a shadow upon the ground: smaller, weaker and only just perceptible, but a shadow nevertheless. Or does the sun focus its luminous rays upon Dante alone? This seems unlikely. In *Purgatorio* (Canto XXVI, 7–13) he speaks to us of a complex luminous phenomenon, when Dante's shadow highlights the contrast that flames make:

*And with my shadow did I make the flame
Appear more red.
(Purgatorio, Canto XXVI, 7–8)*

And this indeed is what happens in reality: flames are much more visible in the dark than in the light (although in the light they are far from invisible, and indeed Dante here uses the comparative 'more red'). This is not a banal observation; it testifies to his fine attention to phenomenological detail. We dare not even start a paragraph on Dante's scientific curiosity for it would oblige us to undertake long digressions and move across philological territory which is not our intention to enter; however, any reader who wished to go through the *Comedy* looking not only at the characters but also at the back-

ground would be compensated by marvellous digressions into natural phenomena. Such digressions can only be perceived as subtly paradoxical, if not indeed ironic, given that Dante uses them as a metaphorical launch pad for a better understanding of the supernatural, thus inverting the order intrinsic to the metaphysical project according to which the explanation of worldly things depends upon our comprehension of a higher order. (For instance, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVI, 34–36: the ants exchange signals on meeting; *Paradiso*, Canto XII, 10–15: the double rainbow; *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXIII, 109–11: he observes the various qualities of shadows, 'a dark shadow's edge / Such as, beneath green leaves and branches black'; *Paradiso*, Canto XVI, 28–29: he notes the revival of embers when stoked with air; *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX, 25: he comments on the veiling of the sun in a misty dawn.)

I hinted at an 'Axiom of Visibility', but perhaps should have spoken in more general terms of an 'Axiom of Perceptibility', which would include not only the visible but also the audible, the tangible etc. (*Purgatorio*, Canto XXXI, 3ff.). Dante is a master of acoustic metaphors (*Purgatorio*, Canto XIII, 28; *Purgatorio*, Canto XIV, 152; *Purgatorio*, Canto XIX, 36), although in a certain sense sound is less penetrating for him than vision: the cry of the souls in *Purgatorio*, Canto XXII, 139 onwards is not as deafening as the light is blinding, and there is no meta-cognitive fainting due to music or sound.

Be it vision only or perception in general, the problem, an old one, is of primacy. The very structure of paradise is distorted as in a perspective lens that facilitates our seeing. The souls are all in the empyrean but appear to be set out throughout the various skies of paradise in order to allow Dante to better understand the hierarchy of blessedness:

*To speak thus is adapted to your mind,
Since only through the sense it apprehendeth
What then it worthy makes of intellect.
On this account the Scripture condescends
Unto your faculties, and feet and hands
To God attributes, and means something else...
(Paradiso, Canto IV, 40–45)*

*After all, common people understand only that which they see:
There will be seen what we receive by faith,
Not demonstrated, but self-evident
In guise of the first truth that man believes.*
(*Paradiso*, Canto II, 43–45)

Which, let us grant, already shows progress compared to wanting to touch everything with one's hand, which would call for rather more challenging research into metaphorical launch pads. In any case, these are precluded, as Dante himself reminds us through the words of Statius, who futilely tries – soul against soul – to embrace Virgil's feet. It is true that there lies a profound wisdom in presenting souls as bodies and not as abstract entities: the same wisdom (or malice) that governs the entire resurrection framework, which is a resurrection of the flesh and not of the spirit. But there's a limit to everything, as Statius is well aware:

*When this our vanity I disremember,
Treating a shadow as substantial thing.*
(*Purgatorio*, Canto XXI, 135–36)

THE INTELLECT WITHOUT HYPOTHESES AND THE IMAGINATION WITHOUT GRIP

Curiosity, as we said. How far does Dante go? And how far is it reasonable to think it can take him? Dante has no lack of imagination or creativity. Illustrated books tend to focus on his *Inferno*, but it is in *Paradiso* that we find the most complex imaginative setups: the composite cross (*Paradiso*, Canto XIV); the eagle made up of souls that speaks like a single man (*Paradiso*, Canto XIX), and other visions. Neither does Dante lack remarkable astronomical skill and scientific curiosity, as we have seen. But will he be able to bring together these admirable qualities and skills?

In Canto XXII of *Paradiso*, Dante goes beyond the Sky of Saturn. From there he turns back to contemplate the Earth. Let us accept that he cannot spend much time up there. What could he have seen but fails to? This we shall answer immediately, because otherwise it might seem to undermine the integrity of the text and the very

principle of interpretative charity. Dante should have seen, and described, nothing less than the Earth rotating on its own axis. I shall immediately reject the objection according to which, in Dante's Ptolemaic cosmology, the fact that the Earth revolves on its own axis was not even conceivable; it's an ungrounded objection, and indeed the very reasons for this apparent inconceivability undermine it. Dante's contemporaries, along with those who preceded them and those who followed – including us, celestial observers of the 21st century – stand before the objective visual phenomenon of a slow and ceaseless movement of the stars in the sky, from East to West, every day; of course, Dante is unaware that this observed movement depends on the rotation of the Earth. However, knowing is one thing, making hypotheses is another, and imagining is a third. We shall hypothesise that he is unable to conceive the movement of the Earth – as almost nobody had done prior to Copernicus – for a reason linked to visual perception and its laws; the 'Axiom of Visibility' at times works within us, or even against us.

The Earth is a reference system too great for us to become an astronomical 'figure'; only figures move observably, never the framing backdrops, without which movement would not even be visible. We therefore reinterpret but fundamentally accept the lesson of the relativist epistemologists; we like the idea of an Earth which is never a figure, but which serves as a background to the sky and the little things we see move within it. The stillness or even motionlessness of the background is however a fundamental axiom which holds true throughout the universe. A fixed star, were it only as big as the asteroid of the Little Prince, must have a minimum height or at least geometric extension in order to accommodate Dante's body; thus it automatically becomes the system of reference which serves as a backdrop to the tiny figures in its sky, among which is the Earth.

The movement observed of a star from Earth, given what Dante thinks he knows (or does know, according to our epistemologists) is a revolution around our planet in one of our days. And so if from the star Dante – with us looking over his shoulder – is observing an Earth which appears to rise and set, he must see different parts of the planet during the time that corresponds to an

tragic failure

hemisphere



earthly day. And therefore, by definition, he must see it rotate on itself. Yet as far as we can tell, this is not the way in which he sees it. I have taken all the possible methodological, cultural and conceptual precautions in presenting this clamorous blind spot on Dante's part (for example, I have not taken him to task for carrying out an observation – possibly from Saturn – of a planet which [as we know today] in turn revolves around itself: something that Dante could not have known). The limits of our exercise are all conceptual: it is within the limits of the knowledge available to Dante that he should have seen and narrated to us the rotation of the Earth on its own axis.

Dante could have challenged the validity of the 'Axiom of the Figure'. He could have maintained – and perhaps not without reason – that the universe is cognitively anisotropic: i.e. that what is valid here is not valid there, and not so much from the physical point of view, but rather from the mental one. On leaving the sublunary world, you start thinking and seeing things differently, to the point at which you are forced to abandon even the most elementary logic. Or Dante might have accepted the validity of the 'Axiom of the Figure' and concluded that the star from which he looked upon the Earth was too small to serve as part of the background effect, and thus does not relegate the sky to the role of a shape to be observed; as the Earth remains the background, we might have the impression of being on the seat of a merry-go-round.

Once again, it's not the relevant astronomical knowledge or the ability to take onboard different points of view that lets Dante down. It is true that when he dons his mortarboard, in Canto II of *Paradiso*, he gets rather lost in an abstruse explanation of lunar spots, but when he has to provide the reader with interesting information, it's hard to catch him out. In *Purgatorio*, Canto XVIII, 76–81, he compares geographical characteristics (of Rome, Corsica and Sardinia) with the orientation of the sun at sunset; in *Purgatorio*, Canto VIII, 91–93 he records the pace of the stars; in *Paradiso*, Canto X, 13 onwards he describes the inclination of the ecliptic: 'The oblique circle, which conveys the planets'. Dante is enough of an astronomer to have a certain knowledge of the tools which, if only they were put to good use,

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Lamia Naji
Immaculé

would have made him a precursor of that Kepler who to the mental experiment of the Earth seen from the Moon dedicates a prudent and enthralling and yet revolutionary *dream*.

However, maybe we are coming to a fork in our path, forcing us to make a choice; we can no longer simply read the *Comedy* trying to understand what happens, nor may we let the reasoning machine run unbridled on the basis of the phenomena that Dante observes; we must take our distance from the text, sound out the poet's motivations, and hazard higher and perhaps braver hypotheses.

THE DOUBLE PUNISHMENT OF ULYSSES

When Ulysses washes up on the island of the Phaeacians, he finds himself naked, senseless and lying on a beach. Not so far away, Nausicaa is doing the laundry, playing with her handmaidens. The cry of one of them awakens Ulysses. The hero listens half-asleep, makes confused hypotheses, asks himself questions, thinks about this and that, beats around the problem somewhat vainly, and fantasises about nymphs:

*Ah me! on what inhospitable coast,
On what new region is Ulysses toss'd;
Possess'd by wild barbarians fierce in arms;
Or men, whose bosom tender pity warms?
What sounds are these that gather from the shores?
The voice of nymphs that haunt the sylvan bowers,
The fair-hair'd Dryads of the shady wood;
Or azure daughters of the silver flood;
Or human voice? But issuing from the shades,
Why cease I straight to learn what sound invades?
(The Odyssey, VI, 119–29)*

It is of little importance. Something happens; something must happen.

Do.

Act.

Now:

But I want to try and see myself. (ibid.)

Act. Know. Now. Ulysses must go and see. Knowledge is a form of action. We can't hold it in our hands, and yet it is the result of a quest. It can't even be delegated; it is rather the assumption of responsibility; it's a first-person point of view.

Elsewhere we are called upon to seek out the causes of Ulysses' fate: his all-consuming desire to listen to the song of the Sirens, thereby placing not just the ship but the lives of his entire crew in peril. That seems to him fair enough. But the purest form of desire is that which may be found hiding under a crease on this page of *The Odyssey*; the detail is apparently insignificant, and its importance is diametrically opposed to its own modesty. It is this: you must keep on discovering. Always. In every way.

It is for this reason that *The Odyssey* makes *The Iliad* look like a modest and almost sinister preamble to the real journey of each of us across the Earth; an estranged memory sparkling with arms, crimson with spilt blood, pearly for the unforgettable manly tears wept over it. When wandering with Ulysses, every now and again we turn back and see – in a past that seems so distant, as if it had never been that of the sailor himself – something which becomes suddenly incomprehensible: heroes no more than capricious puppet versions of themselves, enfeoffed warriors carrying out Mafia-style vendettas, women assailed forever by unwonted sadness. Let us call things by their proper name: what else was this all about if not gang wars based on murky pretexts, such as the base motive of clearing the stain on offended honour? And driven, we suspect, by an insatiable need to come to fisticuffs, just for the sake of it. This was a past in which clan violence was dressed up in tyrannical codes of behaviour that attempted, unconvincingly, to ennoble it. Such codes Ulysses forever cast aside and ridiculed, substituting cunning and strategy – perfectly secular, efficient and determinant – for macho yet inconclusive bone-crunching. (And a remarkable one at that dressed up in cloaks of finely crafted gold, riddled by the semi-tragic and semi-farcical suspicion that as warriors they were mere pawns in an impenetrably vacuous game of the gods.) And it is for this reason that Dante punishes Ulysses for the first time: as a fraudulent councillor, sentencing him to the eternal flame. But while on one hand the punishment is insufficient, on the other hand it's almost blasphemous.

And so we may draw parallels between two great moves towards the southern hemisphere: one accomplished successfully by Dante, the other a tragic failure. Both setting out for the conquest of Mount Purgatory, in one case reached with ease, promising an ever more ambitious ascent; in the other case merely glimpsed. At the gates of hell, Dante passes through the centre of the Earth and finds himself in an upside-down world. As he himself says, he can make neither head nor tail of it:

*I lifted up mine eyes and thought to see
Lucifer in the same way I had left him;
And I beheld him upward hold his legs.*
(*Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, 88–90)

*Where is the ice? and how is this one fixed
Thus upside down? and how in such short time
From eve to morn has the sun made his transit?*
(*Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, 103–05)

And not only does he not understand; he declares a state of inferiority, acknowledging his need for Virgil to explain just how they both passed through the point ‘to which things heavy draw from every side’ (ibid., 111), and in fact instructs him to get up, given that the force of gravity now pulls him in the opposite direction, and also illustrates that ‘...here it is morn when it is evening there’ (ibid., 118). We thus learn that the two travellers are making their way towards the antipodes, where day and night are inverted. And shortly afterwards, Dante discovers other reversed phenomena, again unable to believe his own eyes:

*To the low shores mine eyes I first directed,
Then to the sun uplifted them, and wondered
That on the left hand we were smitten by it.*
(*Purgatorio*, Canto IV, 55–57)



And once more Virgil, with the patience of a saint, explains that they now find themselves in the southern hemisphere, where the stars appear to rotate in the opposite direction if we look to our pole of reference, compared to the direction in which they rotate in our own.

2010

Youssef Nabil
I Will Go To Paradise, Self-portrait,
Hyères

It's not a guide that Ulysses needs. Ulysses is a guide:

*And having turned our stern unto the morning,
We of the oars made wings for our mad flight,
Evermore gaining on the larboard side.*

(*Inferno*, Canto XXVI, 124–26)

He has gone past the Columns of Hercules, leaving Seville to his right and Ceuta to his left, gaining on port side; we are thus invited to make a mental map of the ship's path: the stern is to the east, and so he is sailing westwards; he is therefore turning to head south. Dante challenges us intellectually, forcing us to calculate the route, and then ups the game, quickens the pace, and we are transported to Ulysses' point of view, from where we may cast our gaze upon what the sailor sees:

*Already all the stars of the other pole
The night beheld, and ours so very low
It did not rise above the ocean floor.*

(*Inferno*, Canto XXVI, 127–29)

Ulysses has crossed the Equator, and his point of reference is now the southern sky. Like Dante beyond Saturn, he turns to look back at where he has come from and, unlike Dante, he sees correctly, without anyone having to explain anything to him: he no longer sees our celestial pole; the North Star is below the horizon. He has a knowledge of the world and – even more importantly – of his place in the world; knowing where you come from is a prerequisite for knowing where you are and therefore for understanding where you can go.

Dante the traveller needs Virgil to explain the basics of astronomy to him; a knowledge that Dante the poet must dispose of after all in order to be able to put it into Virgil's mouth, but which he precludes without a second thought to Dante the traveller. A knowledge which instead Dante the poet does not deny to Ulysses; this asymmetry implicitly attributes a degree of superiority to him, thus bowing before an absolute desire which he understands, or perhaps only senses, managed to drive history, transforming the long night of violence and arbitrariness into an endured but peaceful day. But the cognitive distance is unbridgeable: there is

no journey to paradise, no ascent, no display of erudition, no tale of love, no encyclopaedia, no treatise, no explanatory project that may redeem it. The world of the gods and of the heroes joins forces with the god of a thousand hallucinatory visions; the short-cut is close to hand, and the end is known:

*And the prow downward go, as pleased Another,
Until the sea above us closed again.*

(*Inferno*, Canto XXVI, 141–42).

1. I would like to thank Simon Njami for his invitation to rethink Dante's metaphysics; as well as Beatrice Biagini, Stefano Ercolino, Francesco Fagioli and Achille Varzi for the various discussions and corrections along the way. The *Divine Comedy* citations are taken from the translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; those of *The Odyssey* from the translation by Alexander Pope.