

Dante's Teacher without a Shadow: The Figure of Virgil in the *Commedia* and the Efficacy of Poetry

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Lo sol, che dietro fiammeggiava roggio,
rotto m'era dinanzi a la figura,
ch'avèa in me de' suoi raggi l'appoggio.

Io mi volsi dallato con paura
d'essere abbandonato, quand'io vidi
solo dinanzi a ma la terra oscura;
e 'l mio conforto: «Perché pur diffidi?»,
a dir mi cominciò tutto rivolto;
«non credi tu me teco e ch'io ti guidi?»

(*Purg.* III, 16-24)¹

(The sun which at our backs blazed red, / was broken on the ground before me, / where my body blocked its rays. / I turned around in fear / that I had been abandoned, when I saw / only in front of me the darkened ground; / and my comfort: 'Why lose heart?', / he began to say turning round to face me; / 'do you think I am not here with you, guiding you?')

One particular tradition of Japanese etiquette had it that one should not tread upon the shadow of a teacher. That this habit of courtesy cultivated in an older Japan might find an echo in the regard Dante displays in the *Commedia* for his guide Virgil is one of the principle contentions of Sukehiro Hirakawa in his study of the teacher-pupil relation in Dante.² Drawing on the Confucian models which helped to shape Japanese social values, Hirakawa defines the traditional conception of the ideal pupil in terms of a life-long reverence for and dependence upon the teacher. The role of the latter, in meriting such devotion, is not so much one of imparting knowledge as of providing a

1 References to the *Commedia* follow the standard critical text: *La 'Commedia' secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966-67). Citations from the *Vita Nuova* are from the text edited by Marcello Cicuto with an introduction by Giorgio Petrocchi (Milano: Rizzoli, 1984). Translations are, by and large, my own and aim to give a literal rendering in English while adhering as closely as possible to the original Italian syntax and phrasing. I have often relied upon the following translations: *The Divine Comedy*, 3 vols translated by Mark Musa (London: Penguin, 1984); and *Vita Nuova* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) translated with an introduction by Mark Musa.

2 Sukehiro Hirakawa, *The Four Seasons of the Middle Ages (Chusei no Shiki): Dante and his Circle* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1981), pp. 183-206. Hirakawa is also the author of one of the most accessible translations of the *Commedia* in Japanese. I am grateful to Etsuko Kikuchi for kindly drawing my attention to the *Four Seasons* essay.

model of virtuous behaviour. More than merely a source of information, the teacher is a spiritual guide. The presence of similar notions underlying the Virgil of the *Commedia* is epitomised for Hirakawa in the triple epithet which the poem's protagonist addresses to his guide as they first set out upon their journey at the end of the second canto of the *Inferno*.

«Or va, ch'un sol volere è d'ambidue:
tu duca, tu signore e tu maestro.»
Così li dissi; e poi che mosso fue,
intraì per lo cammino alto e silvestro. (*Inf.* II, 139-142)

(‘Let us go, for we are both of one will: / you my guide, my lord and teacher.’ / So I said to him; and when he moved on, / I entered on that deep and savage path.)

Hirakawa identifies several important differences which distinguish Dante's attitude from the Confucian model. This distinction revolves fundamentally about a recognition of Dante's independence of mind, both in placing his actual teacher Brunetto Latini in Hell, and more generally in his refusal to follow even Virgil's example with anything approaching blind obedience.³ These reservations aside though, Hirakawa's conception of the teacher-disciple relation between Dante and Virgil remains one in which Virgil is at all times Dante's 'guide, lord and teacher'. In this essay I will try to suggest ways in which Hirakawa's thesis might be developed and also how, in the light of recent scholarship, it might be susceptible to revision. The chief aim will thus be to explore a nexus of interrelated themes attached to the figure of Virgil and to his role as teacher in the *Commedia*.

The *Inferno* - the first segment of the tri-partite poem - begins as the poet depicts himself awakening in his middle years to a consciousness of having strayed from his true course in life.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita. (*Inf.* I, 1-3)

(In the middle of the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood / having lost the straight path.)

The 'dark wood' in which he has lost his way possesses much the same symbolic resonance today as in Dante's own time. To the twentieth century reader the 'selva oscura' has thus been seen to convey the spiritual alienation and acute disorientation that might afflict the human mind in modern urban civilisation. Dante, however, was an

³ Hirakawa, op. cit., p. 201, suggests here that if Dante had adhered unthinkingly to the Virgilian literary model he would have composed the *Commedia* not in his native Italian but in Latin. Whether Dante's decision to adopt the vernacular can really be seen to constitute a betrayal of Virgil is perhaps doubtful. There are, however, as I shall have occasion to remark at a later stage, instances in the poem where Dante might be considered to revise the Virgilian text as he transposes the ancient culture into a Christian context.

orthodox Catholic of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The darkness of the wood and the spiritual suffering it occasions is primarily an expression of the protagonist's, and we can assume Dante's own, distance from God. That this is how we should view the 'selva' is shortly confirmed. For Dante leaves the wood and begins to ascend a hill crowned by the rays of a rising sun which, in the mind of the medieval Christian, cannot but connote the God who is the source of all light and life. During his climb, however, the protagonist is assailed by three beasts, confidently identified by the Trecento commentators as allegorical representations of the sins of lust, pride and greed. While the first of these, the leopard, poses no great threat to the climber, the lion which follows fills him with fear. And the third beast – the wolf 'whose ravenous hunger is never satisfied' ('che mai non empie la bramosa voglia') (line 98) – drives him unrelentingly back. Confronted by these three bestial apparitions, which are essentially no more than projections of his own psychological condition – reflections of his own inherently sinful nature – the protagonist loses all hope of attaining the summit and finds himself returning to the dark wood from which he had only shortly before escaped. As the 'beast that never rests' advances he is compelled to retreat to 'where the sun is silent'.

E qual quei che volontieri acquista,
 e giugne 'l tempo che perder lo face,
 che 'n tutti suoi pensier piange e s'attrista;
 tal mi fece la bestia senza pace,
 che, venendomi 'ncontro, a poco a poco
 mi ripigneva là dove 'l sol tace.

(*Inf.*I, 55–60)

(And like a man who happily sees his fortunes grow / and then comes to make a loss / so that all his thoughts turn to weeping and sorrow; / so the beast that never rests, advancing towards me, little by little / forced me back there where the sun is silent.)

However difficult it might at first appear for the Japanese reader to assimilate this tale of the anguished Christian soul exiled through his own sinfulness from his God, the remedy, if we are to follow Hirakawa, is on one level at least far from alien to oriental culture. For, as the Dante character – the *personaggio* in the story as distinct from the poet who authors the narrative – finds himself precipitated towards the darkness of the wood, a figure rises up before him. This is Virgil, the poet of Augustan Rome, whose epic poem the *Aeneid* is not only the cornerstone of Dante's historical vision of the origins of the Empire, but also, as the protagonist will declare on first recognising his 'maestro', the chief source of his literary inspiration.

«Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
 che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?»,
 rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.
 «O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
 vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
 che m' ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
 tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
 lo bello stile che m'ha fatto onore.»

(*Inf.*I, 79-87)

('Are you then that Virgil and that fount / from which flows so broad a stream of language?' / I replied to him bowed in shame. / 'Oh, honour and light of other poets / may they avail me now, the long study and the great love / that made me seek out your book. / You are my master and my author, / from you alone I took / the beautiful style that has brought me honour.')

It is here, in this opening address to Virgil, that lies the most significant answer to the potentially vexatious question as to why Dante should have chosen a pagan to guide his fictional alter-ego on the path back to God. To be sure, the figure of Virgil had from earliest Christian times been credited with having prophesized the advent of Christ. His fourth Eclogue, celebrating the age of Augustus and the birth of a son to his protector Caius Asinius Pollio, was interpreted in terms of the coming of the Messiah, and Dante inserts a translation of this passage into Statius's recognition of Virgil's prophetic role in the twenty-second canto of the *Purgatorio*.

«Facesti come quei che va di notte,
 che porta il lume dietro e sè non giova,
 ma dopo sè fa le persone dotte,
 quando dicesti: 'Secol si rinnova;
 torna giustizia e primo tempo umano,
 e progenie scende da ciel nova.'»

(*Purg.*XXII, 67-72)

('You did as one who walks at night, / and carries his lantern behind him which is of no use to himself, / but makes those who come after grow wise, / when you said: "The world is renewed; / justice returns and the first age of humankind, / and a new progeny descends from heaven."')

Yet for all this, and as he himself asserts, Virgil remains a man who lived 'in the time of false and lying gods' ('nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi').⁴ Having died before the birth of Christ, his existence in Dante's Afterlife is confined - with the brief exception of his excursion as a guide through Hell and Purgatory - to a realm on the outskirts of the Underworld called *Limbo*. Here dwell those who have committed no sin, but suffered in Christian terms the tragic misfortune of having lived before Christ's redemption, or else of being unbaptized because they died in earliest infancy. For eternity they will remain imprisoned in the sadness of their frustrated longing for God: 'we live in desire without hope' ('sanza speme vivemo in disio').⁵ This *Limbo* was Dante's own invention, arising from what for him was ever the heartfelt theological dilemma of the virtuous pagan.

Much as the *Commedia* unfolds a vision of the eternal 'other world' beyond the grave, Dante's concerns throughout, even in the highest realms of heaven, are predominantly

⁴ *Inferno* I, 72.

⁵ *Inferno* II, 42.

with achieving, through his authorship of the poem, some amelioration in the condition of human beings here and now. The worldly imperatives underlying the *Commedia* are nowhere more clearly stated than in the pilgrim's encounter with his ancestor Cacciaguida, a Christian warrior now one of the myriad flames which compose a vast cross of light in the heaven of Mars. Urging Dante to be steadfast in the face of the vilification which his condemnation of those responsible for the present chaos of the world will undoubtedly earn him, Cacciaguida prophesies that his poem will have its effect, striking at the very echelons of the world's malignant institutions.

«Ma nondimen, rimossa ogne menzogna,
tutta tua vision fa manifesta;
e lascia pur grattar dov' è la rogna.

Chè se la voce tua sarà molesta
nel primo gusto, vital nodrimento
lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta.

Questo tuo grido farà come vento,
che le più alte cime più percuote;
e ciò non fa d'onor poco argomento.»

(*Par.*XVII, 127-135)

(‘But nevertheless, avoiding all falsehood, / (let your words) reveal your vision in its entirety; / and just let them scratch where it itches. / For if your voice tastes bitter / at first, it will then give vital nourishment / once it has been digested. / Your cry will be like the wind, / that strikes the highest peaks; / and that is no small cause for honour.’)

For the Christian Dante individual salvation lies in the spiritual rediscovery that the root and origin of human nature resides in God. But the vision of the *Commedia* is also permeated by the sense of a pressing need to remedy social ills through the very practical restoration of the religious and political institutions of Church and State. The chaotic world of the ‘dark wood’ represents not only a ‘dark night of the soul’. It is also an image of the internecine political strife that so bloodied Dante’s ‘Italia bella’.⁶ Salvation lay in the restitution of the Empire, and the attainment of virtue through the cultivation of the intellect. The expression both of this political ideal and of the highest moral perfection of which human reason was capable were to be found for Dante in the ancient world, epitomised by the global harmony of the Pax Romana under Augustus Caesar. Thus Virgil’s eligibility as guide rests in part upon the achievements in Dante’s eyes of the civilisation which in the poem he thus comes to represent. I say ‘in part’ here because, although Virgil’s presence signals the importance for Dante of the themes outlined above, one should remain wary of approaches which would see Virgil wholly as an allegorical figure standing for human reason or the culture of Imperial Rome. Such readings run the

⁶ This phrase is used by Virgil in *Inferno* XX (line 61) where he recounts the origin of his native city Mantua. One of the most forceful of Dante’s many outbursts against the political violence that characterised the civilisation of the Italian peninsula in the middle ages occurs in *Purgatorio* XIV.

risk of eclipsing the value which Dante clearly also attaches to Virgil not only as a poet but also quite simply – and perhaps most surprisingly – as an ordinary human being.

These are themes to which I shall return at a later stage. For the present, however, it will suffice to note that for Hirakawa also one of Virgil's qualities as a teacher lies in the display of a parental affection towards his pupil. Indeed, the fact that the Virgil of the *Commedia* is literally 'somebody' on whom the pilgrim can depend is repeatedly underscored by the way in which he is envisioned at times not only as paternal but *maternal*.⁷ Most notably, in their dramatic escape from the thuggish devils who patrol the fifth of the concentric ditches that compose the main part of lower Hell, Virgil bears Dante clear of danger like a mother rescuing her child from a burning house.

Lo duca mio di sùbito mi prese,
come la madre ch'al romore è desta
e vede presso a sè le fiamme accese,
che prende il figlio e fugge e non s'arresta,
avendo più di lui che di sè cura,
tanto che solo una camiscia vesta. (*Inf.*XXIII, 37-42)

(My guide suddenly lifted me up, / like the mother who is woken by the noise / and sees the flames burning near her, / and grabs her son and flees and doesn't stop, / caring more for him than for herself, / long enough to put on even a shift.)

Virgil's protective motherliness is reiterated throughout the *Inferno* in the often physical solace he offers the pilgrim during the journey. The theme also returns in all its emotive force in the Earthly Paradise as Dante, endeavouring in fear to retreat from Beatrice, seeks in Virgil the familiar refuge, only to discover that he is no longer there.

Tosto che ne la vista mi percosse
l'alta virtù che già m'avea trafitto
prima ch'io fuor di puerizia fosse,
volsimi a la sinistra col respitto
col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma
quando ha paura o quando elli è afflitto (*Purg.*XXX, 40-45)

(At that moment that my sight was struck / by the great power that first pierced me through / before I was out of my boyhood, / I turned to my left with the trust / of a child that runs to his mother / when he is afraid or upset.)

This characteristic of Dante's 'maestro' offers for Hirakawa further evidence of the similarity between the Dantean and Confucian conceptions of the teacher.⁸ It is also one

⁷ That the fluidity of Virgil's gender has been a recurrent theme in recent Dante criticism is exemplified by studies such as Jeffrey Schnapp, 'Dante's Sexual Solecisms: Gender and Genre in the *Commedia*', *Romanic Review*, 79 (1989), 143-63, also available in *The New Medievalism*, ed. by Kevin Brownlee, Marina Brownlee and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 201-225. See also Carolyn Lund-Mead, 'Notes on Androgyny and the *Commedia*', *Lectura Dantis*, 10 (Spring 1992), 70-79.

⁸ Hirakawa, op. cit., p. 194.

of the underlying motifs in the passage quoted above as a prologue to the present essay. These lines suggested themselves for the way in which, along with the sequence that immediately follows, they exemplify several of the themes I am pursuing here. Briefly the context is as follows. The two wayfarers have emerged at dawn upon the shore of the vast mountain of Purgatory which rises, in Dante's personal geography, from the midst of the otherwise landless southern hemisphere at the antipodes to Jerusalem. They have barely begun the ascent which will lead them eventually to the Earthly Paradise at the summit and Dante's traumatic reunion with Beatrice. Unlike Hell, the mountain reserved for the penitent souls cleansing themselves in readiness to ascend to heaven, is a world which knows daylight. As on any other part of the terrestrial globe the sun rises and sets, and the theological association of sun and divinity noted earlier is present here in the prohibition that prevents the penitent spirits, and Dante too, from moving during the hours of darkness (*Purgatorio* VII, 43–60). No advance can be made without the presence of God to light the way.

In Canto III then, for the first time after the prolonged night of Hell, the pilgrim observes his shadow upon the ground, only to recoil in fear that he has been abandoned by Virgil when he realises that he sees the silhouette of only one body and not two. With his habitual intuition the Roman poet surmises the cause of Dante's anxiety and reassures him. Virgil is here spoken of as 'my comfort' ('*l mio conforto*'), and in a phrase of typical syntactic density the bond between disciple and guide is conveyed by the triple pronouns of 'tu me teco'. The natural isolation of the subject 'tu' referred to Dante is cancelled out in the successive pairing of the object pronouns 'me' and 'teco', such that the status of the subject becomes, even at the level of grammar, dependent upon his relation as object to the activity of Virgil's presence. Then, in the '*ch'io ti guidi*' after the caesura this subject-object relation is both reversed and confirmed. The closely woven fabric of the single line thus articulates a sense of master and disciple as complementary subjectivities.

The final emphasis falls upon the notion of guidance, and it is helpful to consider here just how crucial Dante held such an activity to be. One needs in the first instance to recognise, as John Freccero has done, that in all probability Dante intends us to understand his failure in the prologue canto to ascend the 'delightful hill' – the '*diletto monte*' of line 77 – as a consequence of intellectual pride. Freccero parallels the pilgrim's false start with the fourth century St Augustine's similarly abortive efforts in his *Confessions* to achieve a state of ecstasy through the purely philosophical means advocated by the neo-platonist Plotinus.⁹ Ancient philosophers considered that for the mind to achieve its

9 See John Freccero, 'Dante's Prologue Scene', *Dante Studies*, 84 (1966), 1–25, referred to here in the version reprinted in John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 1–28 (p. 9). Freccero draws on Pierre Courcelle's seminal study, *Recherches sur les 'Confessions' de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire: Antécédents et postérité* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1963).

goal it was not a guide that was required but self-confidence.¹⁰ For Augustine, however, the philosophical presumption implicit in such an attitude meant that the mind's journey to the divinity was doomed to failure from the start. His own spiritual journey – the 'itinerarium mentis' – thus begins with an acute consciousness of his dependence upon God as his guide:

And being then admonished to return to myself, I entered even into my inward self, you being my guide; and I was able to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and saw with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the unchanging light.¹¹

Freccero identifies various textual parallels to suggest that precisely the same painful transition from intellectual overconfidence to the humble recognition of dependence can be observed in the fortunes of the Dante character in *Inferno* I.

There are also, however, further echoes of word and image within the poem itself which lend support to Freccero's thesis. In the eighth ditch of the part of lower hell reserved for the fraudulent Dante encounters Ulysses, the mythic hero of Greek and Latin epic poetry. Ostensibly Ulysses is condemned here for his guile and the misuse of his intellectual talents, especially in the role he played in the deception of the wooden horse which lead to the fall of Troy. Dante, however, imagines the illustrious Greek warrior at the end of his days. At Virgil's bidding Ulysses narrates how, instead of returning to Ithaca and his family home, he set sail into the West, journeying past the markers established by Hercules on either side of the strait of Gibraltar to deter human beings from trespassing beyond the world assigned to them. Motivated by an undiscerning passion to become 'knowledgable of the world' ('del mondo esperto')¹², Ulysses employs his considerable powers of persuasion to convince his followers to embark upon this last voyage. After five months at sea they come within sight of a vast mountain 'hazy in the distance' ('bruna per la distanza')¹³, from whence there arises a violent storm which sinks Ulysses and his men to their deaths.

Ulysses has no specific intellectual goal, and this alone might be enough in Dante's eyes to condemn him. But the 'world without people' ('mondo senza gente')¹⁴ he so passionately desires to discover finally assumes the shape of the same mountain which Dante will attain by following the 'other route' ('altro viaggio') proposed as a last resort

10 Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 6.

11 *Confessions* VII, 16. The translation is adapted from that of E. B. Pusey (New York: Collier Books, 1961) quoted by Freccero, op. cit., p. 9. The original Latin text reads: 'Et inde admonitus redire ad memetipsum, intravi in intima mea, duce te; et potui, quoniam factus es adjutor meus. Intravi, et vidi qualicumque oculo animae meae, supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam, lucem incommutabilem.'

12 *Inferno* XXVI, 98.

13 *Inferno* XXVI, 133–34.

14 *Inferno* XXVI, 117.

by Virgil.¹⁵ It is not only in their goals, however, that the experiences of Ulysses and the *personaggio* are analogous. For in the opening sequence of the *Commedia* the pilgrim compares the anguished disorientation of his night in the dark wood with the fear that remains still with a man who has narrowly escaped drowning and looks back upon the ocean that nearly claimed his life.

Allor fu la paura un poco queta,
 che nel lago del cor m'era durata
 la notte ch'i' passai con tanta pieta.
 E come quei che con lena affannata,
 uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
 si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,
 così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
 si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
 che non lasciò già mai persona viva. (Inf.I, 19-27)

(Then was the fear somewhat quieted, / that had dwelt so long in the lake of my heart / that night I had spent in such anguish. / And like one who with laboured breath, / emerging from the ocean onto the shore, / turns back to stare at the perilous water, / so my mind, fleeing still, / turned back to gaze upon the pass / which none ever came through alive.)

That Dante might have seen himself as having been close to being a Ulysses in his philosophical presumptions reflects the actual pattern of his intellectual career as he abandoned the *Convivio* to write the narrative work of the *Commedia*. These tensions are also dramatised in the way in which the protagonist clings at one point to a rock in order to prevent himself from tumbling down into the ditch from which the flame that now sheaths the body of Ulysses will shortly speak.

Io stava sopra 'l ponte a veder surto,
 sì che s'io non avessi un ronchion preso,
 caduto sarei giù sanz'esser urto. (Inf.XXVI, 43-45)

(I was leaning over the edge of the bridge to get a better view, / so that if I hadn't grabbed hold of a rock, / I would have fallen without needing to be pushed.)

One reading of the poem's *incipit* then might be that Dante in his middle years awoke to find that his preoccupation with purely philosophical concerns had led him astray from both God and Beatrice. The fictional pilgrim's reckless attempt to ascend the hill alone expresses the poet Dante's realisation of the extent to which his unaided intellectual resources were inadequate in the face of his own sin. Thus he conceives the need for a guide who can *show* him what sin is.

One apparent problem with this thesis is that the figure of Virgil in the *Commedia* is always to some degree an epitome for Dante of that intellectual culture to which Ulysses

15 *Inferno* I, 91.

also belongs. In *Inferno* XXVI the Dante character displays an extreme eagerness to meet Ulysses and is praised for his enthusiasm by Virgil. The cultural affinity between Virgil and Ulysses is also emphasised by the way in which it is Dante's guide alone who addresses the Greek hero in the language of epic poetry, fearing that his disciple's modern Italian dialect might only provoke a disdainful response from the Ithacan.

Ed elli a me:«La tua preghiera è degna
di molta loda, e io però l'accetto;
ma fa che la tua lingua si sostegna.

Lascia parlare a me, ch'io ho concetto
ciò che tu vuoi; ch'ei sarebbero schivi,
perch' e' fuor greci, forse del tuo detto».

(*Inf.* XXVI, 70–75)

(And he to me: 'Your request is worthy / of much praise, and so I accept it; / but hold your tongue. / Let me speak, since I have understood / what you want to know; for they might perhaps be scornful / being Greeks, of your speech.')

Are we to assume then that Dante is confused in electing as his guide a figure who represents precisely that reliance upon unaided human rationality that seems to have precipitated his crisis in the first place? The answer here is that there are always, as Kenelm Foster demonstrates, 'two Dantes': one a proto-humanist and lover of the pagan intellectual achievement, and the other a devout Christian of his own medieval times.¹⁶ It is scarcely surprising then that there are evident tensions which inform the figure of Virgil, who is imbued in the narrative with an acute awareness of the limitations of his own culture. And it is at this stage that the Confucian notion of the teacher's infallibility ceases to provide so useful a parallel.

This point can be no better illustrated than by returning to the slopes of mount Purgatory to consider the lines which immediately follow from the pilgrim's observation of his own solitary shadow in Canto III. Having assured Dante of his presence, Virgil continues by explaining that if he casts no shadow, this should give no particular cause for astonishment, because he is a ghost. His physical body lies buried in Naples to where the Emperor had it removed after his death in Brindisi.

«Vespero è già colà dov' è sepolto
lo corpo dentro al quale io facea ombra;
Napoli l'ha, e da Brandizio è tolto.

Ora, se innanzi a me nulla s'aombra,
non ti maravigliar più che d'i cieli
che l'uno a l'altro raggio non ingombra.

A sofferir tormenti, caldi e geli
simili corpi la Virtù dispone
che, come fa, non vuol ch'a noi si sveli.

16 See Kenelm Foster, *The Two Dantes* (London, 1977).

Matta è chi spera che nostra ragione
 possa trascorrer la infinita via
 che tiene una sustanza in tre persone.

State contenti, umana gente, al *quia*;
 chè, se potuto aveste veder tutto,
 mestier non era parturir Maria;
 e disiar vedeste senza frutto
 tai che sarebbe lor disio quietato,
 ch'etternalmente è dato lor per lutto:
 io dico d'Aristotile e di Plato
 e di molt'altri»; e qui chinò la fronte,
 e più non disse, e rimase turbato.

(*Purg.* III, 25-45)

(It is already evening there where lies buried / the body in which I used to cast a shadow; / Napoli has it after it was moved from Brindisi. / Now if no shadow appears before me, / do not be any more astonished than at the heavens / none of which obstructs the others' light. / Capable of feeling pain, heat and cold, / bodies like mine are created by that Power / which desires its ways to remain hidden from us. / It is madness to think that the human mind / can pursue the infinite paths / travelled by the three persons in one being. / Be content, humankind, with the *quia*; / for if you had been able to see everything, / there would have been no need for Mary to give birth; / and you saw desire without hope / those who would have known the satisfaction of that longing, / which is their eternal grief: / I speak of Aristotle and of Plato / and of many others'; and here he bowed his head, / and said no more, and remained troubled.)

In the place of that solid body which once cast its shadow on earth, the providential Power which is God has provided Virgil, and all the other souls Dante encounters in the *Commedia*, with bodies capable of experiencing physical sensations, but lacking the material substance which renders Dante's body alone an obstruction to the sun's rays. A more detailed exposition regarding the genesis of this paradoxically shadowless *ombra* or 'shadow body' will be entrusted to the Roman convert Statius in *Purgatorio* XXV. This later discourse does not, however, gainsay what is here the most crucial import of Virgil's speech in Canto III; namely that the nature of the body after death remains at God's own wish beyond the comprehension of human intellects. The pilgrim, Virgil admonishes, can no more hope to understand the miraculous nature of the Holy Trinity in which God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the separate persons of one substance. Ironically Virgil uses the language of logic to clarify his condemnation of those who would invest too much trust in the rational culture from which precisely such logical procedures first arose. Scholastic philosophers often spoke in terms of the relation between 'cause' and 'effect'. Arguing backwards from the latter to the former - a demonstration *a posteriori* - was a technique known as 'quia est'. By warning humankind to remain satisfied with the 'quia', Virgil means simply that all the mind can hope for is to know the existence of God from the evidence of his actions. To reason the other way and strive for knowledge

of God's motives – to seek to know how or why he causes what he does – is to trespass, as Ulysses does, beyond the boundaries established for human intellects. That the figure of Ulysses is implicit here is suggested not least by the association at lines 34–35 between 'madness' and the notion of traversing inconceivable distances. For the Greek hero himself had alluded to his own journey in similar terms.

«de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo» (Inf.XXVI, 125)

('Of our oars we made wings for our mad flight')

If, Virgil concludes, human beings were capable of such omniscience, they would not have sinned in the Garden of Eden, and Mary would not have been required to bear Christ in order to redeem humankind. Furthermore, ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle would have achieved the fulfillment of their intellectual being, instead of being tormented in Limbo by their frustrated desire for the God from whom they are eternally severed. And here amongst the many others Virgil implicitly includes himself. As he bows his head in sadness, he expresses more than at any other point in the poem the tragedy of the virtuous pagan divided from God.

Virgil's sorrowful recognition of his own limitations in the face of the miraculous nature of the shadow body is a prelude to the inevitable cessation of his role on the threshold of the Earthly Paradise – the garden that lies at the mountain's summit. Gazing upon the procession which precedes the arrival of Beatrice, Virgil is struck speechless, his face 'loaded with astonishment' ('con vista carca di stupor')¹⁷, as is natural in someone faced by an event utterly beyond their comprehension. And when the pilgrim turns a second time,

per dicere a Virgilio: "Men che dramma
di sangue m'è rimasto che non tremi:
conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma". (Purg.XXX, 46–48)

(to say to Virgil: 'Not a drop / of blood remains that does not tremble: / I recognise the signs of the ancient flame.')

his guide will have vanished, leaving Dante to face alone the accusations of betrayal that Beatrice will level at him.

The precise words the poet uses as the pilgrim seeks the familiar reassurance of his 'comfort' are significant. For the line which defines Beatrice's power as an 'antica fiamma' is evidently a translation of the Virgilian 'Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae' (*Aeneid* IV, 23). It has been suggested recently, however, that rather than a tribute to the Roman poet, Dante's borrowing actually points to a reversal of the line's original context, and thus requires to be read more as a critical revision of the Latin source. In the *Aeneid* the metaphorical 'flamma' of Dido's love for Aeneas suggests a prefiguration of the literal fire which will consume the Carthaginian Queen. For, on being abandoned by Aeneas, she

¹⁷ *Purgatorio* XXIX, 57.

throws herself in suicidal desperation on her own funeral pyre. The significance of Dante's intertextual revision is that the destructive flames of sexual passion which destroy Dido become transformed in Beatrice into the ardour of Christian love - of 'caritas'.¹⁸ In so far as this reading might be taken to imply that Beatrice stands as an exemplar of chastity in some antithetical relation to the erotic, it is a thesis which should perhaps be treated with a certain scepticism. Despite the tendency in much scholarship to depersonalise Beatrice, she remains throughout the *Commedia*, especially in the repeated emphasis on the overwhelming beauty of her eyes and smile, a focus to some degree at least of a sexual desire. Indeed, it is precisely because Dante does not view human and divine love as incompatible that his conception of Beatrice could so appeal to readers such as Blake or Rossetti.¹⁹ Be this as it may, the transformation in the Earthly Paradise of the flame metaphor is perhaps nevertheless one of several instances in which Dante adopts the language of his 'maestro' only to entirely reinvent its meaning.

One need not, of course, resort to such close analysis to grasp that Virgil's role as the pilgrim's mentor was ever anything but provisional and predicated from the first upon the distant goal of Beatrice. Virgil's timely intervention in the prologue scene is, as he himself explains in the following canto, in response to Beatrice's personal entreaty on Dante's behalf. And it is only when the pilgrim is apprised of this that he consents to follow Virgil at all. Similarly, as his role nears completion, Virgil only succeeds in manoeuvring his ward through the wall of fire encircling the last terrace on the mountain - the final barrier dividing him from the Earthly Paradise - by pronouncing Beatrice's name.

Quando mi vide star pur fermo e duro,
turbato un poco disse: «Or vedi, figlio:
tra Bëatrice e te è questo muro».

(*Purg.* XXVII, 34-36)

(When he saw me standing still stubbornly refusing to move / troubled a little he said:
'Now look, my son: / between Beatrice and you is this wall'.)

Once the ordeal by fire is past and Beatrice appears, Virgil has clearly fulfilled his function. His deference to Beatrice, however, has been apparent all along, and most especially in those questions of doctrine which exceed the competence of his pagan culture. Thus Virgil's discourse in *Purgatorio* XVIII on the relation between love and free

18 See Lino Pertile, 'L'antica fiamma: la metamorfosi del fuoco nella *Commedia* di Dante', *The Italianist*, 11 (1991), 29-60 (38-39).

19 On Blake's response to Dante in his illustrations see David Fuller, 'Blake and Dante', *Art History*, 11 (1988), 349-73. 'In the *Commedia* itself the relationship between Dante and Beatrice shows an earthly love with a profoundly erotic content as continuous with heavenly love. [...] The idea that *eros* and *agape*, earthly and divine love, are for Dante continuous and not separate is implied by the whole tone of the relationship and the way in which it functions, leading Dante towards God. [...] Blake must have thought wholly admirable the *eros-agape* continuum which the *Commedia* shows as basic to Dante's experience of religious vision. He accordingly depicts the relationship of Dante and Beatrice positively almost throughout the designs' (p. 361).

will is prefaced by the humble admission that the questions of faith that lie beyond the sphere of philosophy are matters not for him but for Beatrice.

Ed elli a me: «Quanto ragion qui vede,
dir ti poss'io; da indi in là t'aspetta
pur a Beatrice, ch'è opra di fede.» (Purg.XVIII, 46-48)

(And he to me: 'As far as reason can discern, / I am qualified to speak; to go any further wait / for Beatrice, for it is a work of faith.')

So in the *Paradiso* Beatrice will reveal to Dante the truths of the Christian faith. She will also, however, display an intellectual assurance in matters of philosophy that more than equals that of Virgil, handling technical terminology with the confidence of the professional teacher. In his earlier prose work, the *Convivio*, Dante abandons Beatrice in favour of Lady Philosophy. This is the waywardness of which the protagonist is accused by Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise and of which he repents. The *Commedia* then sees Beatrice displace Lady Philosophy in Dante's affections, but clearly she does this in part 'only by a process of assimilation'.²⁰ It will suffice to recall here the sophisticated lecture that Beatrice delivers in *Paradiso* II, in which she explains why the surface of the moon appears patterned by patches of light and dark. Employing the language of the scholastics, she systematically refutes Aristotle's theory as she attributes the phenomenon Dante has observed not to any intrinsic variation in the density of the substance composing the moon, but rather to its varying receptivity with respect to the informing power which descends from the angelic intelligences.²¹ Beatrice's discourse is an instance of extremely cogent reasoning that even includes careful instructions for a practical experiment with mirrors by which she invites her pupil to verify the truth of her conclusions. Yet her exposition is not to be read in itself as the product of any science to which a human mind might hope to attain. Mortal intellects she observes, bound to construct their arguments from information received through the senses, are inherently limited.

Ella sorrise alquanto, e poi «S'elli erra
l'oppinon», mi disse, «d'i mortali
dove chiave di senso non diserra,
certo non ti dovrien punger li strali
d'ammirazione omai, poi che dietro ai sensi
vedi che la ragione ha corte l'ali.» (Par.II, 52-57)

(She smiled a little then, and said to me, 'If / the conclusions of mortals go astray / when the senses cannot unlock the door, / surely you should not be stung by the arrows / of

20 Patrick Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 39: '...the Beatrice who is Dante's guide from heaven to heaven in the *Paradiso* is a blue-stocking who delivers no less than five major philosophical discourses in the first seven cantos.'

21 *Paradiso* II, 61-148.

amazement then, when you see that guided by the senses / reason cannot fly far.')

The 'short wings' of human reason are perhaps one more oblique reference to the intellectual ambitions of Ulysses whose oars turned wings in his mad flight. Beatrice's own powers of vision, however, are quite otherwise and more akin to the intelligence of the angels, who perceive the nature of the universe as it appears directly in the mind of God.²² So in Canto I the pilgrim gazes upon Beatrice whose eyes look directly upon the 'eternal wheels' of the sun.

Beatrice tutta ne l'etterne rote
fissa con li occhi stava; e io in lei
le luci fissi, di là sù rimote. (Par.I, 64-66)

(Beatrice was wholly absorbed / by her gazing into the eternal wheels; and I, / averting my eyes from the sun, fixed my gaze on her.)

She is in this sense a mirror, reflecting not only in her words but in some sense in her entire being the fundamental truths of Christianity. In this respect Beatrice's presence in the *Commedia* has often been read as that of an allegorical figure of wisdom, revelation or the science of theology. In Dante's time women were as a rule denied access to the education and institutions which would have permitted them to become philosophers or theologians. There were also numerous traditions, both textual and iconographical, of representations of wisdom as a female figure. So it is perhaps hardly surprising that the poem's earliest commentators should have chosen to view Beatrice not as a real person but as a symbol or personification.

In this century, however, scholars have shown a greater inclination to react against such a view.²³ And in recent years one of the most sophisticated defences of Beatrice's historical reality as a person, albeit in the *Vita Nuova* rather than the *Commedia*, has been mounted by Robert Pogue Harrison.²⁴ This study suggests that in the early lyric poems, and in the prose passages which frame them, Beatrice is presented in phenomenological terms - as a visible event proffered to perception. She first appears in the *Vita Nuova* in the transcription of a dream in which she is carried in the arms of Love, wrapped in a crimson cloth. The adolescent Dante's desire to understand the import of his dream prompts the writing of what will be left to posterity as his first poem. The fact that this sonnet arises in response to a vision suggests to Harrison that it inaugurates a poetic career which has its root in the 'genetic priority of perception over poetry'.²⁵ In other words, the poetry articulates Dante's response to what he sees: language follows the

²² This characteristic of the angels is explained in *Paradiso* XXIX, 76-81.

²³ Studies of seminal importance which have suggested that Beatrice should not be read with reference to allegorical meaning at all include: Bruno Nardi, *Saggi e note di critica dantesca* (Milan and Naples, 1966), p. 83; and Etienne Gilson, *Dante e la Philosophie* (Paris, 1939), pp. 72-78.

²⁴ Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988).

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 18. ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 52.

appearance of things. What he sees, of course, is the historically real body of Beatrice. But this body can never be fully evoked as the body it is. The mimesis of poetic language can never actually duplicate the 'thereness' of the body – the 'existential facticity'²⁶ of her corporeality. And so the poem can only speak of the way in which that body appeared – about the body's status as a phenomenal event. Similarly the analogies by which Beatrice seems to be like something else – she may appear for example to 'stand for' Christ or Love – are like the crimson drape that conceals her body in the dream. These are mere phenomena – perceptible qualities – which veil what Harrison calls the 'noumenal' presence of the body beneath. The term 'noumenal' implies the unknowable mystery of an indwelling divinity. But it is also related in Harrison's terminology, along with the notion of the 'phenomenal', to the Kantian distinction between the thing in itself and its appearance to perception.²⁷ And clearly, because the way she appears is not coterminous with who she is, she also seems at times to signify something other than herself. The emphasis both upon these analogous relations and the phenomenal constitute an oblique approach to that in her 'being in the world' which is inexpressible.

Nothing could be more antithetical to allegory than the person of Beatrice, whose body is indissociable from the phenomenal guises through which she gives herself to perception and poetic figuration. It is this unity, once again, that makes her 'miraculous'. This holding together of the difference between her body and her guises without collapsing that difference makes her body the locus of a singular presence.²⁸

In part language must of necessity defer before experience that exceeds its competence. The poem's oblique line of approach, the concealments of the various analogical guises which for Harrison conceal the body, also arise, however, in response to the codes of courtesy which condition the poet's perception of the lady. If indeed, as the *Commedia* would seem time and again to confirm, body for Dante is equivalent to personal identity, then it follows that the courtesy displayed to body through the modes in which it is perceived is a natural consequence of the courtesy owed to another *person*.²⁹ It is difficult to do justice to the subtle complexities of Harrison's analysis. His approach, as it opens many avenues previously inaccessible to narrower allegorical habits of reading, suggests that in Dante's lyric poetry, and possibly in poetry in general, there is an investment in mediating our experience of material 'facticity', of the embodiedness of our lived reality.

Harrison's insistence upon unity in Dante's perception of Beatrice and upon body as her 'exteriority [...] or the historical otherness of her being in the world',³⁰ suggests the

27 *ibid.*, p. 176, note 20.

28 *ibid.*, p. 60.

29 Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 182, notes that 'the person of Beatrice remains singular and substantial and unthinkable apart from her body, since the body is that which, for the Scholastics, individuates and singularises a person'.

30 *ibid.*, p. 54.

degree to which Dante's poetry constitutes a response to the dualistic tendency among medieval thinkers to perpetuate the association, prevalent in patristic texts especially, between the feminine and a purely material bodiliness.³¹ Woman was equated with body and matter, and man with intellect and spirit. Dante, however, displays an essential aversion to such dualistic conceptions of body. So in Beatrice, rather than a splitting of body and spirit, it is the integration of these components that is celebrated. Thus one of the fundamental achievements of the *Vita Nuova* is the articulation of the marvellous truth that Beatrice is a body animated by spirit.³²

Our present culture, it might well be argued, is very much the inheritor of a dualism which gained currency in modern times with the philosophy of Descartes and the conviction that the identity of the human person is located in a mind which is distinct and separable from body.³³ Non-materialist conceptions of human identity have, of course, been present from the earliest traditions of Western thought. Plato taught that at birth the soul descended from the Plain of Ideas into a body where, imprisoned in materiality, it longed to return to its divine origins, afflicted by 'anamnesis' – a nostalgia for the perfection of its earlier disembodied state.³⁴ In two important respects at least, however, Christianity directly contradicts such dualism. Firstly, the divide in Platonism between the divine and the corporeal is cancelled in the person of Christ, in whom God is 'incarnated' in a human body.³⁵ And secondly, the significance of the redemption wrought

31 This simple view of the medieval gendering of body and soul as dichotomous is challenged by Caroline Walker Bynum in her book *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), pp. 200-238.

32 Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 151, writes, 'At the heart of the *Vita Nuova* there is the poet's urgent discovery that minds cannot be partitioned from bodies, that bodies, by themselves, are corpses, that substances are spiritualized and essences incarnated, and that finally love and intellect – as the pivotal "Donne ch' avete intelletto d'amore" (Ladies who have intelligence of love) exemplifies – must be thought of together'.

33 The question of the relation between body and identity or 'personhood' has become once again in recent years a topic of serious philosophical debate. Among many studies one notes: Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); J. Perry, 'The Importance of Being Identical', in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. by Amelie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); S. Shoemaker and R. Swinburne, *Personal Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). For a more comprehensive survey see *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism*, edited with an introduction by Stuart F. Spicker (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970).

34 Such Platonic notions have been employed to interpret the *Commedia*. Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, *Structure and Thought in the 'Paradiso'* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1958), for example, seeks to demonstrate an underlying analogy between the *Paradiso* and Plato's *Phaedrus*. See especially pp. 6; 18-22; and 57.

35 For an argument which explores the relation of this Christian doctrine to recent philosophical debate on the issue of personal identity see John Haldane, 'Incarnational Anthropology' in *Human Beings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), ed. by David Cockburn, pp. 191-211.

by Christ is that, at the end of history, the human soul will be reunited with the body in the resurrection. In medieval theology especially, Christ's triumph over death in his own return from the tomb entailed for Christian anthropology a conception of the human person as an indissoluble unity of body and soul.

The *Commedia* is punctuated by references to the resurrection of the body. Various implications of this crucial doctrine are explored in each of the three *cantica*, culminating in the highest heaven – the Empyrean – where the pilgrim will receive a vision of the resurrected body. In the first heaven, that of the Moon, the protagonist dimly perceives the indistinct forms of those compelled to break their vows. They appear like faces reflected in glass or still water, or like the lustre of a pearl against a pale brow (*Paradiso* III, 10–15). From this point onwards, however, the bodily shapes of the blessed in Paradise will be invisible, concealed by the dazzling light which they radiate. And so, in Canto XXII, Dante appeals to St Benedict to reveal himself 'con imagine scoperta' (60) – 'with bodily shape unveiled'. His eye will strive similarly to penetrate the flaming radiance which enfolds the Apostle St John, who will reply that contrary to popular legend he did not ascend bodily to heaven upon his death (*Paradiso* XXV, 118–126). John asserts that his body lies still in the grave, 'earth in the earth' (124), and that Christ and Mary are the only two human beings to have been assumed into Heaven 'con le due stole' (127) – 'with the two robes'. Shortly before this, in response to the examination of his faith to which he is submitted by the Apostle St James, the pilgrim had defined his hope for the future in precisely similar terms.

«Dice Isaia che ciascuna vestita
ne la sua terra fia di doppia vesta:
e la sua terra è questa dolce vita.»

(*Par.* XXV, 91–93)

(Isaiah says that each / in their own land will be clothed in a double garment: / and their land is this sweet life'.)

At first sight the language Dante employs here appears arcane. The metaphor of the 'two robes' or the 'double garment', however, was a common formula in exegetical writings to indicate the union of body and soul in the afterlife. The image was derived from St Gregory the Great's interpretation of the phrase in *Isaiah* (LXI, 7), 'duplicia possidebunt' ('they shall possess the double'), in terms of God's covenant with humanity to preserve for eternity the dual elements of the human being. In order to arrive at the metaphor of the two robes, however, Gregory and those who followed, set the Old Testament passage against St John's *Book of Revelation* (VII, 9), where the evangelist relates a vision of the resurrection in which the blessed multitude stand before the Lamb 'robed in white' ('amictis stolis albis'). Thus, in Canto XXX, Beatrice will gather together these metaphorical threads, and at the same time grant the pilgrim's desire to see the bodily figures of the saints 'unveiled', when she bids him gaze upon the blessed 'as they will appear at the Last Judgement' – 'in quelli aspetti / che tu vedrai a l'ultima giustizia'

(*Paradiso* XXX, 43–45). And again at the end of the canto the allusion is repeated in the declaration: 'Gaze upon the multitude of the white robes!' – 'Mira / quanto è 'l convento de le bianche stole!' (*Paradiso* XXX, 128–129).

The reader has been prepared for this miraculous vision not only by the theological passages noted above, but also by the numerous allusions to the destiny of the material body which punctuate the first two canticles. From the figure of Farinata in Canto X, the *Inferno* repeatedly presents parodic inversions of the Risen Christ.³⁶ The theme of the resurrection is also of paramount importance in Dante's conception of Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise. Various references in the *Vita Nuova* make it obvious that one of the primary identifications of Beatrice, particularly at the moment of her death, is with Christ.³⁷ And scholars have argued convincingly that if the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova* is to be associated with Christ's First Coming in history, then her appearance in the *Purgatorio* must correspond to his Second Coming in judgement of humanity at the end of time.³⁸ As Christ was the first body to rise from the grave, the suggestion that Beatrice's advent refers to the Second Coming carries already the suggestion that she is to be linked in some way to the resurrection. This implication is strengthened by a specific reference in *Purgatorio* XXX to the end of history, when Christian doctrine holds that the Second Coming will coincide with the resurrection of the body. In the previous canto the pilgrim had beheld the progress through the pre-lapsarian forest of a marvelous procession of figures representing the books of the Old and New Testaments, trailing in their wake a chariot drawn by a gryphon. As this fantastical creature – half eagle, half lion – comes to a halt on the other side of the river from where Dante stands, the figures that had preceded the chariot turn to face it while one of them cries 'Come, bride, from Lebanon' – 'Veni, sponsa, de Libano' (*Purgatorio* XXX, 11). From the chariot there arises

36 Vincent Moleta's cogent and perceptive essay, 'Dante's Heretics and the Resurrection', *Medioevo Romano*, 7 (1980), 247–84, explains in both textual and iconographic terms the connection between Farinata and the resurrection. Phillip Damon, 'Dante's Ulysses and the Mythic Tradition', in *Medieval Secular Literature*, ed. by W. Matthews (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), pp. 25–45, makes a case for reading Ulysses as an inversion of Christ.

37 Charles Singleton, *Dante's 'Commedia': Elements of Structure* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 54–57, reminds us that the Christological aspect of Beatrice is so explicit in the early work, that in the first printed edition in the sixteenth century, the closing sentences of Chapter XXIV were deleted, thus suppressing the association between the figure of Giovanna and the Baptist. Other significant allusions include the signs which accompany Dante's premonition of Beatrice's death in Chapter XXIII and echo the Gospel account of Christ's death and ascension. According to Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–27, the references in the *Vita Nuova* begin earlier still with an allusion to the sacrificial blood of Christ in the 'drappo sanguigno' of Dante's dream in Chapter III.

38 Recently Amilcare Iannucci, 'Beatrice in Limbo: A Metaphoric Harrowing of Hell', *Dante Studies*, 97 (1979), 23–45, has suggested that Beatrice's descent to Limbo in *Inferno* II to secure the services of Virgil to save Dante is 'delicately modelled on the harrowing of Hell' (p. 25), and thus, as an echo of Christ's last act in his First Coming, 'completes the analogy [...] established in the *Vita Nuova*' (p. 32).

in response the collective voice of a hundred angels whose joyful acclamation Dante imagines like that of the redeemed souls at the end of time, crying 'Allelulia' with voices newly 're clothed' (15) in their resurrected flesh.

Besides this direct reference to the resurrection, scholars have identified other less explicit allusions.³⁹ The cry 'Veni, sponsa' which invokes Beatrice's presence, is a quotation from the Biblical *Song of Songs* (IV, 8) – a text which was read by Christian exegetes as an allegorical foreshadowing of the resurrection.⁴⁰ Moreover, it is the supposed author of the *Song of Songs*, Solomon, whom Dante elects in *Paradiso* XIV to articulate the poem's most powerful evocation of the glory of the resurrected body. Yet, while various allusions thus combine to suggest that Beatrice is to be thought of as a body already resurrected, the words she herself speaks would seem rather to assert the opposite. For she accuses Dante of abandoning her when she rose 'from flesh to spirit',

«Quando di carne a spirto era salita,
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,
fu'io a lui men cara e men gradita.» (*Purg.*XXX, 127-129)

('When I had risen from flesh to spirit, / and beauty and virtue had increased in me, / I was less dear to him and less pleasing.')

and later chastises him again for his infidelity when her physical body had perished.

«pon giù il seme del piangere e ascolta:
sì udirai come in contraria parte
mover dovieti mia carne sepolta.
Mai non t'appresentò natura o arte
piacer, quanto le belle membra in ch'io
rinchiusa fui, e che so' 'n terra sparte.» (*Purg.*XXXI, 46-51)

('put away the cause of your weeping and listen: / so you will hear how in another way / my buried flesh should have moved you. / Never did nature or art set before you / a beauty like that of the lovely limbs / in which I was enclosed, and that are scattered in the earth.')

39 One notes also in this regard one further example of Dante's borrowing from Virgil. At line 26 the angels on Beatrice's chariot cry '*Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis!*' – 'Oh, give lilies with full hands'. In the *Aeneid* these words are an expression of mourning for the death of the young Marcellus. As we shall see, however, through the evidence which Beatrice offers of the truth of the resurrection she reverses the tragic implications of irrevocable loss that must in the pagan context attach to the notion of premature death.

40 For a discussion of this and other echoes of the *Canticum* in the Earthly Paradise, see Paul Priest, 'Dante and *The Song of Songs*', *Studi Danteschi*, 49 (1972), 79-113. A more general survey has been provided recently by Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

41 See Mazzeo, *Structure and Thought*, p. 128, for whom these lines vindicate a view of Beatrice as 'a true reconstitution of the *Phaedrus* doctrine'.

Beatrice's words would thus seem to constitute a powerful reminder of the loss of her corporeality. One reader at least has found in these assertions, and especially in the notion of the increase in Beatrice's beauty as she ascends from flesh to spirit, a confirmation of Platonic attitudes to the body.⁴¹ But Beatrice's insistence upon her buried flesh needs to be read in the context of the way in which this theme has been developed in the early cantos of the *Purgatorio*.

Here, before he gains admittance to Purgatory proper, Dante hears on the lower slopes of the mountain of how various souls were severed from their bodies in violent deaths. The emphasis in these poignant tales is upon the fate of the physical body. In Canto V, Buonconte da Montefeltro will narrate how, dying from wounds inflicted at the Battle of Campaldino, he repented of his sins. Commending his soul at the last moment to Mary, he narrowly escaped the clutches of the demon who had arrived as he died fully expecting to be able to haul him down to Hell. In order to vent the anger of his disappointment, the demon summons up a violent tempest which washes the body into the River Arno, thus answering the pilgrim's question as to why Buonconte's corpse was never found (*Purgatorio* V, 100-129). The same theme had featured prominently in Canto III. Here Manfred, the Ghibelline leader and King of Sicily, recounts how, in consequence of his excommunication, the Pope had ordered his corpse to be exhumed and disposed of without proper burial outside the Kingdom of Naples, which was a part of the Church's territory.

These tales have been read by some commentators as signifying the elevation of the spirit over a body which is demeaned in death as mere inert matter exposed to the whim of storms and crusading Popes. Angelo Jacomuzzi, however, argues that the body in the *Purgatorio* should be read as

the sign of a temporary and shared condition which will only be resolved at the end of time. The ties of affection which bind the souls of the second realm to their bodies with particular frequency and intensity are not therefore the consequence of an intermediate stage in a progressive detachment from earthly realities, (as has often been said from the banal perspective of a platonism wholly alien to the mind and ideology of the poet) but are an aspect of the purgatorial eschatology by which fulfillment is envisioned in the future and absence, with all its symptoms, makes itself painfully present.⁴²

Jacomuzzi's reading of Canto III revolves around his identification of an implicit parallel

42 Angelo Jacomuzzi, 'Il Canto III del *Purgatorio*', *Lettere Classensi*, 5 (1975), 13-40 (14): ' [...] il segno d' una condizione provvisoria e divisa che solo alla fine del tempo troverà la sua integrazione. L' affettuoso legame che stringe al loro corpo le anime del secondo regno con una particolare frequenza e intensità non è dunque la conseguenza di uno stadio intermedio d'un progressivo distacco dalle realtà terrene, (come spesso si è detto secondo una prospettiva banalmente platonizzante che è del tutto estranea alla mente e alla ideologia del poeta) ma è un aspetto della escatologia purgatoriale per la quale il compimento si proietta nel futuro e la mancanza, con tutti i suoi segni, si fa dolorosamente presente'.

between the destinies of the bodies of Virgil and Manfred. For while, it will be recalled, Virgil's corpse was honoured by a magnificent translation from Brindisi to Naples, Manfred's remains conversely suffered the ignominy of an exhumation in his posthumous banishment from the same kingdom. Yet despite this, the unmistakable visual echoes of the Risen Christ in the battle-scarred flesh of the Sicilian king suggest that his eventual destiny will lie in the fulfillment prepared for his being by providence – the ultimate dignity of the reintegration of his body and soul in the resurrection. Virgil, on the other hand, remains condemned to Limbo. Jacomuzzi's analysis finds support in the more recent work of Anna Chiavacci Leonardi, who suggests similarly that the reiterated stress upon the 'buried body' requires to be read in terms of the theme of the resurrection in the *Paradiso*.⁴³

In the light of these studies Beatrice's declaration in the Earthly Paradise regarding her own body 'scattered in the earth' becomes an assertion not of a platonic escape from imprisoning flesh, but of a confident faith in the resurrection to come. Her words suggest moreover that Dante's waywardness – his pursuit of 'false images of the good' ('*imagini di ben [...] false*')⁴⁴ – might be construed as a lapsing of his faith in the immortality of the body. It is no accident that it is the denial of this doctrine which is the prevalent theme in Dante's depiction of heresy in *Inferno* X, a canto which ends significantly with Virgil conjuring an image of Beatrice's physical beauty at line 131.⁴⁵

There can thus be no doubt about the centrality of the resurrection, identified by Chiavacci Leonardi as the basis of that corporeal realism which is so notable a feature of Dante's narrative. The ghosts that inhabit the space of the poem derive their appearance of reality – their '*concretezza*' – from 'that ultimate and definitive reality' of the future perfecting of their being in the resurrection.⁴⁶ The contradiction of their apparent solidity anticipates the reclamation of their materiality at the end of time. Indeed, hardly has the journey commenced than Virgil will remind Dante of that destiny by which each soul will 'take up again its own flesh and shape' – '*ripigliar sua carne e sua figura*'

43 Anna Chiavacci Leonardi, "'Le bianche stole': il tema della resurrezione nel *Paradiso*", in *Dante e la Bibbia*, ed. by Giovanni Barblon (Florence: Olschki, 1988), pp. 249–71.

44 *Purgatorio* XXX, 131.

45 See again Moleta, *op. cit.*, p. 271, who, although he does not mention Beatrice, notes that the '*diritta via*' (*Inferno* XI, 9), the 'straight path' from which Photinus drew Anastasius into the sin of heresy, echoes the opening lines of the *Commedia*. This observation, I suggest, might be combined with Virgil's use of the word '*smarrito*' (*Inferno* X, 125) meaning 'lost' in describing Dante's disorientation upon his encounter with Farinata, to encourage a perception of the crisis of the dark wood as linked to questions of human immortality. Anastasius's heretical refusal to believe in the divinity of Christ can be equated, Moleta also argues, with a denial of the resurrection, a connection suggested not least by the open sarcophagus in which the damned Pope now lies. Thus, given that it is also in this canto that Virgil describes the organisation of the underworld, the 'moral topography of Hell is outlined [...] in the shadow of the Resurrection' (p. 277).

46 Chiavacci Leonardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 252–3.

(*Inferno* VI, 98). These then are the themes which underlie both the beauty of Beatrice's physical form in the *Commedia* – the eyes and smile which will become more radiant with each stage of the ascent through the celestial spheres – and the repeated emphasis in the Earthly Paradise upon her body in the grave.

Much as the foregoing discussion might seem to constitute a digression, it in fact returns us to our initial theme and once more to the shadow cast upon the mountain. For the motif of the 'corpo sepolto in terra' also bears upon the figure of Virgil. Firstly though, one needs to note that the protagonist's shock on observing that Virgil casts no shadow is mirrored in the equally astonished reaction that, paradoxically, the pilgrim's possession of a shadow will provoke on more than one occasion amongst the penitents. Thus, in Canto V, for example:

Io era già da quell'ombre partito,
e seguitava l'orme del mio duca,
quando di retro a me, drizzando 'l dito,
una gridò: «Ve' che non par che luca
lo raggio da sinistra a quel di sotto,
e come vivo par che si conduca!».
Li occhi rivolsi al suon di questo motto,
e vidile guardar per meraviglia
pur me, pur me, e 'l lume ch'era rotto. (*Purg.*V, 1-9)

(I had already departed from those shades, / and was following in the footsteps of my guide, / when behind me, pointing a finger, / one cried out: 'Look how / the light seems not to pass through the left side of that one below / and how he seems to move like a living man!' / I turned my gaze on hearing these words, / and saw them look in wonder / at me alone, at me alone, and the light which was broken.)

Revelations of the pilgrim's mortality had, to be sure, already caused wonderment among the damned in Hell.⁴⁷ But here under God's light the sense of the miraculous becomes reciprocal. For the absence of a shadow in the penitents is no less marvellous than the fact that God has granted a living man the privilege to undertake a journey through the eternal realms of the Afterlife.⁴⁸ As will become apparent in *Purgatorio* XXV, the shadowless 'shadow body' represents a half-way stage, a prelude to God's fulfillment of his covenant to preserve the human form for eternity. And if, for the penitents, the solidity of Dante's body becomes an occasion for a joyous amazement it is in part because it provides a sign of the miraculous workings of a God who will one day render their own bodies as substantial as the pilgrim's is now. Secure in this belief they can thus recall unflinchingly the circumstances of their demise on earth.

In Virgil, however, the recollection of the body now buried in Naples is suffused not with anticipatory wonder but with sadness. Like Beatrice he recalls his mortal shape. Yet

47 See, for example, *Inferno* XXVIII, 52-54.

48 See *Purgatorio* V, 45-46.

rather than an evocation of the substantiality of flesh and blood and the implicit confidence in the resurrection that such an allusion becomes in Beatrice, Virgil's remembrance is attended rather by a sense of irretrievable loss. It is not clear how Dante conceives the ultimate fate of the virtuous souls of the ancient world in Limbo. There is no evidence to suggest that he thought the pagans assigned to Hell proper would be excluded from the resurrection. As Virgil explains in *Inferno* VI, however, their reclamation of the material body entails an intensification of sensation, and thus in the virtuous pagan presumably an amplification of that 'grief' by which their condition will be defined in *Purgatorio* III. While the Christian soul in heaven, upon regaining its body, joys in the increase of its perfection and greater resemblance to the God who is Himself embodied in the Incarnation, the pagans remain severed from that knowledge of the divinity of their bodily form. The climax of the *Commedia* is Dante's vision of the Incarnation.

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

(That circle that appeared generated / in You like reflected light / after I had looked
some time at its circumference, / at its centre and of its own colour, / appeared to me
painted by our image: / so that my gaze was fully absorbed in it.)

The radiance of the bodies of the blessed anticipates the resurrection in which the human form will realise the divinity it shares with the Incarnate Christ. So, if Virgil's first and most explicit regret in *Purgatorio* III has to do with his membership of a pagan culture whose intellectual achievement is no compensation for being divided from God, his second sadness lies in the perception of his bodily destiny. The eternal value of his bodily nature will never be confirmed by an eventual admission into the presence of the God in whose image the human form was cast. It is this transfiguration into luminosity in the acquisition of what Virgil himself had called earlier on the mountain's shore 'the robe which will be so radiant on the great day' ('la vesta ch'al gran dì sarà sì chiara')⁴⁹ that is denied to Dante's first guide. Thus in *Purgatorio* III he conceives of his body in

49 *Purgatorio* I, 75.

50 Robert Hollander, *Il Virgilio dantesco: tragedia nella 'Commedia'* (Florence: Olschki, 1983), pp. 23-79, surveys critical responses to this line. Up until the end of the last century commentators read the 'fioco' in reference to Virgil's voice, thus emphasising the allegorical sense in which he is viewed as representing the voice of reason grown silent from prolonged disuse. Modern scholars, however, have increasingly taken the line to refer rather to Virgil's physical appearance - his body's 'ghostliness'. Thus one recent edition speaks of 'the necessity of reading "fioco" in a visual sense, in other words as "faded"' ('la necessità di intendere fioco in senso visivo, cioè *evanescente*'). See *La 'Divina Commedia'*, edited by Giuseppe Giacalone, 3 vols (Rome: Angelo Signorelli, 1988; 1st edn 1968), I, p. 84.

terms not of light but of shadow. Indeed, Virgil's first apparition in the narrative is circumscribed by precisely such a notion. For, as he descends the hill, the *personaggio* sees a man who appears 'faint from long silence' (63).⁵⁰

Mentre ch'i' rovinava in basso loco,
dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto
chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco.

Quando vidi costui nel gran deserto,
«Miserere di me», gridai a lui,
«qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!».

Rispuosemi: «Non omo, omo già fui.»

(*Inf.*I, 61-67)

(While I found myself hurtling down to that low place, / before my eyes there arose / one who seemed faint from long silence. / When I saw this man in the great desert, / 'Have pity on me', I cried out to him, / 'whatever you are, whether shade or living man!' / He replied to me, 'No man, though man I once was.')

The relation between the pagan figure of Virgil and the shadow body has then, as we have said, to do with the theological question of the resurrection. But, and here is the crux of the present argument, it also bears considerably upon the notion of narrative itself. This is a conjecture best developed with reference to the exposition which Dante devotes to the shadow body in *Purgatorio* XXV. Firstly, however, one needs to note briefly the degree to which, with regard to the relation between body and soul, Dante's thought was influenced by the intellectual currents of his day, and most especially by the teachings of Aristotle.

In the thirteenth century St Thomas Aquinas had changed the course of Western thought by rehabilitating Aristotle and reconciling the doctrine of the ancient Greek philosopher with Christian theology. Aristotle had taught that the soul was the 'substantial form' of the body. According to this thesis, not only would body without the 'informing' principle of soul be no more than inert matter, but a soul without the body whose 'form' it supplied was similarly inconceivable. Unlike the Platonists, Aristotle thus viewed body and soul as the wholly interdependent components of the human person. This formulation, known as 'hylomorphism' (from the Greek words for 'matter' and 'form') became, in the hands of the theologian Aquinas, a means of giving the doctrine of the resurrection a veneer of philosophical credibility. Hitherto an article of faith rather than reason, the resurrection of the body thus became a logical necessity. If the soul was immortal then so must the body be also since one could not exist without the other. One needs to stress that this rigidly philosophical approach to the question of the resurrection was not immune from contradiction, nor indeed plain absurdity.⁵¹ And in this respect one of the

51 See Bynum's chapter on this theme: 'Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval Context', *op. cit.*, pp. 239-297. Besides giving examples of some of the more outlandish iconography of the resurrection - for instance medieval depictions of limbs being regurgitated at the end of history by predatory animals - Bynum also

most intractable problems facing Dante in the *Commedia* is that of how to conceive of the hylomorphic unity of the human person in the interval between death and resurrection. If soul could have no existence separate from the body how could it survive in the Afterlife while waiting to be reunited with its body? Dante's very personal solution to this problem lay in the invention of the 'shadow body', whose genesis is treated at length in the twenty-fifth canto of the *Purgatorio*. Here the poet Statius describes how the soul, once separated from the body in death, irradiates the air with its 'formative power' to generate a new 'airy' body. This 'rainbow body' is thus conjoined with the soul, much as a flame follows fire – a simile which suggests incidentally another way in which the flame images that surround the figure of Beatrice might connote notions of embodiment.

«la virtù informativa raggia intorno
così e quanto ne le membra vive.

E come l'aere, quand' è ben pïorno,
per l'altrui raggio che 'n sè si riflette,
di diversi color diventa addorno;

così l'aere vicin quivi si mette
e in quella forma ch'è in lui suggella
virtùalmente l'alma che ristette;

e simigliante poi a la fiammella
che segue il foco là 'vunque si muta,
segue lo spirito sua forma novella.»

(*Purg.*XXV, 89-99)

('the formative power rays forth / in manner and in degree as it had in the living limbs. / And like air, when it is laden with moisture, / because of the light from the sun which it reflects, / is made beautiful by various colours; / so the surrounding air here assumes / that shape which is imprinted upon it / by the power of the soul that came to rest there; / and similarly then to the flame / which follows the fire wherever it moves, / so the new form follows the soul.')

In the philosophical context Dante's solution is somewhat 'ingenuous'.⁵² But in narrative terms it provides an elegant justification for the aesthetic representation of the numerous bodies whose movements and keenly individuated characteristics contribute so powerfully to the enduring fascination which the poem holds for its readers. For Statius asserts that the shadow body is equipped with all the faculties of expression through which the movements of the soul had been manifested in life.

«Però che quindi ha poscia sua paruta,
è chiamata ombra; e quindi organa poi
ciascun sentire infino a la veduta.

indicates the complexity of the theological debate, pointing for example to the way in which Thomism's refusal to allow the body any substantial reality of its own was in some quarters conceived as a threat to corporeality.

⁵² Boyde, *Philosopher and Philomythes*, p. 280.

Quindi parliamo e quindi ridiam noi;
quindi facciam le lagrime e ' sospiri
che per lo monte aver sentiti puoi.

Secondo che ci affliggono i disiri
e li altri affetti, l'ombra si figura.»

(*Purg.* XXV, 100-107)

('Once this form becomes visible, / it is called a 'shade'; and thus provides organs / for each of the senses including sight. / Thus we are able to speak and laugh; / thus we weep and sigh / as you will have been able to see on the mountain. / As we are moved by desire / and the other emotions, the shade's appearance changes.')

In short, the issue of the 'ombra' is principally one of narrative representation. If Dante had described a journey through a realm that actually seemed disembodied, the *Commedia* would perhaps have long since been forgotten. This enfleshing of his Afterlife was due in part to the example of the literature of antiquity and most especially of Virgil.⁵³ For in the *Aeneid*, the hero Aeneas also journeys through the Underworld and encounters the visible shapes of the dead. Recently, however, it has been suggested that it is not only to the broad fact of Aeneas's mission that we can trace the bodiliness of the *Commedia* as a work of fiction. The debt to Virgil is no less apparent in the finer details of narrative procedure. Tibor Wlassics points to what might be defined as the 'optical perspective' of Dante's storytelling technique.⁵⁴ The poem is never more vividly real than when it describes how, through the eyes of the protagonist, some new scene comes gradually into focus.

This technique, which has more than once been labelled as 'cinematographic', is best exemplified by the description in the second canto of the *Purgatorio* of the approach of the boat ferrying the penitent souls across the ocean to the mountain's shore. The craft is piloted by an angel. But at a distance the pilgrim on the shore can discern no more than a steady radiance outshining the tremulous light of the dawn sky. Only as the angel comes progressively closer can his eyes resolve what at first was simply an unidentifiable brightness into the winged figure of the 'celestial helmsman' which will eventually dazzle the pilgrim (*Purgatorio* II, 13-42). The story unfolds in accordance with the physiological

53 *La 'Divina Commedia'*, edited by Natalino Sapegno, 3 vols (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1978; 1st edn 1955), II, *Purgatorio* XXV, Introduction: 'L'idea di un corpo aereo [...] era imposta a Dante da ovvie esigenze di rappresentazione e di racconto; e gli era inoltre suggerita dalle finzioni poetiche degli antichi, nonchè da alcune tradizioni patristiche e da leggende religiose'. ('The notion of the airy body [...] imposed itself on Dante for obvious representational and narrative reasons, and was suggested moreover both by the poetic fictions of the ancients and by certain patristic traditions and religious legends.')

54 See Tibor Wlassics, 'La "percezione limitata" nella *Commedia*', *Aevum*, 47 (1973), 501-8; and by the same scholar, 'L'ottica di Dante', in *Studi di filologia e letteratura*, II-III (Genova: Tilgher, 1975), pp. 97-110 (p. 99), where it is argued that, as in the *Aeneid*, the dominant mode of perception can be defined in terms of 'a movement towards the object' ('un moto verso l'oggetto'), a feature of the narrative which is contrasted with the more 'panoramic' vision of Homer.

limitations of the human eye. More especially in the *Inferno* distance and darkness had combined to deceive the protagonist. In the frozen pit of Cocytus he mistakes giants for towers (*Inferno* XXXI, 19-33), and the enormous bat-winged form of Satan appears at first to be a windmill (*Inferno* XXXIV, 4-7). The narrative voice emanates from the fixed perspective of a first person narrator whose embodiedness in this respect is confirmed not only by the fact that his observation of events is hampered by the natural limitations of his visual faculty,⁵⁵ but also by the way in which the position from which he observes constantly reflects the progress of his body from one vantage point to another. This is particularly apparent in the *Inferno* where – as we saw in the Ulysses episode – the pilgrim sometimes strains and manoeuvres to gain a better view. The point here, of course, is that the view the protagonist enjoys is at all times also that of the reader.

The discovery of precisely such narrative techniques in the *Aeneid* is significant. To read Virgil as a symbolic figure, whether of Reason or Empire, is to deny the fact that his intrusion into the narrative of *Inferno* I marks precisely a shifting away from the typically medieval mode of allegory. One of the fundamental ironies informing Virgil is thus that, while belonging to the older pagan dispensation, he is also the source of that embodiedness of narrative in which, as Richard Neuse contends in his recent study of Dante and Chaucer, lies the ‘newness’ of Dante’s art.

[...] the reminder that an embodied Pilgrim, like the reader herself, is intruding on disembodied shades, seems to suggest a break with allegory and its entrenched assumption that letter and spirit, body and soul, material and immaterial constitute neatly distinguishable realms that can yet stand in for each other. One implication would seem to be that in the *Comedy* Dante is redrawing the intellectual map of medieval Europe in such a way as to make the physical, the human body, an integral part of it.⁵⁶

As Aquinas accommodated the thought of Aristotle to Catholic doctrine, so Dante worked the pagan poet’s aesthetic sense of the body into his Christian vision.

Even without the evidence of intertextual studies such as those by Wlassics, this contradiction in the figure of Dante’s ‘duca’ is also suggested by the details of the narrative. For, although Virgil himself humbly concedes his own condition as a ‘shadow’ in the prologue canto, his representation throughout the journey belies this declared insubstantiality. Despite being a ghost, the fictional Virgil will, as observed earlier, display towards the Dante character a very physical affection, to the extent even of hoisting him bodily aloft and carrying him to safety. One instance in particular of such narrative ‘inconsistency’ has attracted scholarly attention. In his first encounter with the

55 Wlassics, ‘L’ottica di Dante’, p. 100, goes so far as to argue that the narrative might be conditioned by the poet’s own defective eyesight. His evidence for this view is taken from a passage in the ninth chapter of the third book of the *Convivio*, where Dante relates how he weakened his eyes by excessive study, and how he cured the affliction by resting in cool, dark places and bathing his eyes with cold water.

56 Richard Neuse, *Chaucer’s Dante: Allegory and Epic Theater in ‘The Canterbury Tales’* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 11-12.

souls freshly disembarked from the angel's boat in *Purgatorio* II, Dante tries in vain to embrace his old Florentine friend Casella. His arms simply pass through the airy body. Similarly in Canto XXI Virgil suggests to Statius that he abandon his attempt to embrace him.

Già s'inchinava ad abbracciar li piedi
al mio dottor, ma el li disse: «Frate,
non far, chè tu se' ombra e ombra vedi». (Purg.XXI, 130-132)

(Already he was bending down to embrace the feet / of my teacher, but he said to him:
'Brother, / stop, for you are a shade and a shade is what you see.')

Yet in Canto VI Sordello will succeed in embracing Virgil. Various arguments have been advanced to explain this inconsistency.⁵⁷ But the point in the end is that Sordello's embrace expresses his love for Virgil as a fellow Mantuan. The gesture functions as an 'emblem of political unity'⁵⁸ for Dante, who knew from bitter experience how pernicious and costly to human lives divisions within the political community could be. The embrace illustrates a crucial aspect of Dante's thought: his elevation of ethics over metaphysics.⁵⁹ The embodiment of Virgil in the *Commedia* reflects Dante's moral concern with the need for human beings to demonstrate solidarity to one another, whether in the relation of one individual to another, or in the cohesion offered by political stability. When the fictional Virgil seems most to possess a real body it is because that body is in some sense also the metaphorical body politic.

The relevance of this to the arguments which I am pursuing here will become readily apparent in what follows. Firstly, however, I would like to turn to Seamus Heaney who, in his own critical writing, would seem to recognise a kinship with Dante precisely in a common sense of the 'body of poetic language'. A celebrated earthiness of language and the rural roots of his spirituality are perhaps just two of the more obvious qualities of Heaney's poetry which suggest an intense moral concern with ordinary materiality. This would at least seem to be what the poet himself means by striving to be true to 'the grain of things'. Words themselves are envisaged as a sensuous resource to be excavated from the subconscious – 'the word-hoard' – like ore dug from the ground. This is the central image of the early poem 'Digging', and is reiterated in the collections which follow. Thus Heaney speaks in the Glanmore Sonnets of

Sensings, mountings from the hiding places,

57 See, for example, Nicolae Iliescu, 'Gli episodi degli abbracci nelle strutture del *Purgatorio*', *Yearbook of Italian Studies*, 1 (1971), 53-63; and George D. Economou, 'Saying Spirit in Terms of Matter: The Epic Embrace in Medieval Poetic Imagination', *Lectura Dantis*, 11 (Fall 1992), 72-79.

58 Teodolinda Barolini, 'Bertran de Born and Sordello: The Poetry of Politics in Dante's Comedy', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 94 (1978), 395-405.

59 The seminal discussion of this theme appears in Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, translated by David Moore (London, 1948).

Words entering almost the sense of touch...

Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,
Each verse returning like the plough turned round.

The sense that language itself is a material substance not only to be dug for but also crafted and shaped by the poet's hand is one of the principle motifs of the poem *Harvest Bow*. Here Heaney remembers his father's hands plaiting straw into the form of the bow that is the traditional emblem of the harvest.

Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks
And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks
Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent
Until your fingers moved somnambulant:
I tell and finger it like braille,
Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable.

The poet conceives of his creative activity as an inheritance of the rural craft practiced by his father. Like the straw, language also is moulded into shape, conveying by its 'palpability' that which might otherwise remain inexpressible. The value of the poetic idiom which interests Heaney lies in the tangible qualities of texture and rhythm as much as in explicit statement. As Andrew Motion has recently commented, 'like the poets he most admires, Heaney very rarely tells us what to think. The axioms in his philosophy are axioms we feel upon our pulses; his ideas are embedded in things'.⁶⁰

In the first of his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, entitled 'The Government of the Tongue', Heaney recalls how he was early attracted to C. K. Stead's championing of the 'new poetic' that emerged in the early part of this century and achieved at that time its most notable expression in *The Wasteland*. Heaney declares his sympathy for 'a poetry of image, texture and suggestiveness; of inspiration; [a] poetry which writes itself'.⁶¹ The argument then turns to Osip Mandelstam's appraisal of Dante who supplies the Russian poet with a pretext for his celebration of what Heaney calls 'the sensuous foragings and transports of the body of poetic language' (p. 98).

Clearly there are dangers in approaches which allow to effects of sound and image an autonomous and uncontrolled power of expression. To read Dante in this Romantic vein is to ignore the rigorous artistic discipline by which verse and phrase are wrought into wholly intentional patterns. The *Commedia* pursues its philosophical themes with an unequivocal clarity.⁶² In Dante, perhaps more than in any other poet, the organisation of

60 Andrew Motion's review of Heaney's latest volume of critical writings, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), appears in *The Guardian Weekly* of October 1st, 1995.

61 Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 92.

62 See Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante's 'Paradiso' and the Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

syntax responds to the moral imperative to fashion meanings that might be clearly apprehensible to the rational mind. Words then, however they might be imbued with a material presence, do not slip the moorings of their conceptual framework. The signifier remains anchored to the sequence of the poet's intended meaning.

Yet that Dante did recognise a value in the suggestiveness of language's materiality is attested by his own theoretical assertions in the early Latin work *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. This work articulates what might be thought of as Dante's anthropology of language. For human beings alone he claims require language. Animals do not possess rational souls and live by instinct without any need for social intercourse. Angels enjoy direct intelligence and need have no recourse to the sensible intermediary of language. Humans, however, located midway on the ladder of created beings, are both rational and embodied. Thus our social existence requires a medium of communication which can convey the processes of intellection in a form perceptible to the senses. Significance requires to be carried by the material 'signifiers' of language.⁶³ But, much as Dante anticipates Saussurean theory in insisting upon the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified,⁶⁴ his concern with the way in which language as sound impinges upon the senses suggests perhaps a broader and more complex view. Most especially, his categorisation of sounds according to a lexicon of tangible textures such as 'rough' and 'smooth', or 'shaggy' and 'combed',⁶⁵ implies an attitude which would win sympathy among modern post-Saussurean theorists who have claimed that the material qualities of language stand in a relation to meaning which is more than merely arbitrary.⁶⁶

Any consideration of those elements of Dante's poetic language which appeal directly to the senses must also naturally include a recognition of the intensely visual nature of the *Commedia*. As is often noted the word 'occhio' ('eye') and verbs related to seeing are among the most frequently occurring lexical items in the poem. And this emphasis is reflected both in the vivid colourings of Dante's similes and metaphors, and

63 See Joseph Cremona, 'Dante's Views on Language' in *The Mind of Dante*, ed. by U. Limentani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p.140: 'Men [...] share with animals the limitations imposed by their bodies and thus the communication must be physically based.'

64 See *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, I, iii, 3: 'Hoc equidem signum est ipsum subiectum nobile de quo loquimur: nam sensuale quid est, in quantum sonus est; rationale vero, in quantum aliquid significare videtur ad placitum.' ('It is this very sign which is the noble subject of my discourse: partly sensible in so far as it consists of sound, and partly rational in so far as it is seen to signify something arbitrarily.') The translation is from Cremona, op. cit., p. 142.

65 *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, II, 7.

66 Cremona, op. cit., pp. 142-45, highlights the Saussurean aspect of Dante's conception of linguistic meaning both in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and in the *Paradiso*. He also takes account of the complexities which arise from Dante's apparent espousal in the *Vita Nuova* of the Platonic notion that the connection between form and meaning is 'natural' or 'conventional'. On the relevance of post-Saussurean theories of language to the analysis of poetry see, for example, Max Nännny, 'Introduction' and 'Iconicity in literature', *Word and Image*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1986), 197-208.

more broadly in the mimetic vigour, in the first two *cantiche* especially, with which the poem evokes what Harrison calls the 'embodied historical world'.⁶⁷ So the poet Montale speaks of the aesthetic satisfaction to be derived 'from the concrete quality of Dante's images and similes, and from the poet's ability to make the abstract perceptible to the sense and to embody the immaterial'.⁶⁸

The two different approaches to Dante's poetry, the one concerned with the spontaneous rhythmic energy of the 'body of poetic language', and the other with the systematic organisation of thought, are not as mutually antagonistic as they might appear. For they are best viewed as complementary strands, which are perhaps nowhere more significantly interwoven than in Dante's vision of the human body. For in the *Paradiso*, Dante's firm belief in the divinity of the human form becomes - as it had been before in the figure of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* - the theme once again of a poetic song of marvellous visionary intensity. The most crucial statement regarding the resurrection of the body, long since prepared for by the philosophical discourses of Virgil and Statius, is entrusted to the voice of Solomon - the assumed author of the *Song of Songs*. On Dante's behalf Beatrice asks the saints in the Heaven of the Sun to explain whether the radiance that their souls now emanate will remain after the resurrection. The reply is given by Solomon who describes the luminosity of the glorified body.

«Ma sì come carbon che fiamma rende,
e per vivo candor quella soverchia,
sì che la sua parvenza si difende;
così questo folgor che già ne cerchia
fia vinto in apparenza da la carne
che tutto di la terra ricoperchia.»

(Par. XIV, 52-57)

(But like coal that makes a fire, / and with its incandescence outshines the flames, / so

67 Harrison, op. cit., p. 52.

68 Eugenio Montale, 'Dante ieri e oggi', in *Sulla poesia*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), pp. 15-34 (p. 27): 'dalla concretezza delle immagini e delle similitudini dantesche e dalla capacità del poeta di rendere sensibile l'astratto, di rendere corporeo anche l'immateriale'.

69 The reading of these lines by Gabriele Muresu, 'La "gloria della carne": Disfacimento e trasfigurazione (Par. XIV)', *Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana*, 91 (1987), 253-68, could hardly be more divergent. He sees the passage as a celebration of 'la ricostituzione dell'unità della persona in termini di immaterialità evanescente ed eterea' ('the reconstitution of the unity of the person in terms of an effervescent and ethereal immateriality') (p. 257). This conclusion is reached partly on semantic grounds in that words associated with light far outnumber references to the body. Dante thus aims to divorce body from 'alcun connotato terreno' ('any earthly association') and to establish the body's 'piena congruità con il regno della luce spirituale' ('utter conformity with the realm of spiritual light') (p. 258). The argument is also based on a rather odd reading of Beatrice's question to Solomon at lines 13-18 as an intuition of a fear in Dante 'che il corpo risorto dalla tomba avrebbe rischiato di contaminare con la sua terrestre fisicità la lucentezza dello spirito' ('that the soul's lucency might risk being contaminated by the earthly physicality of the body risen from the grave') (p. 258). To support this interpretation

that its shape is clearly visible; / so this effulgence that already envelops us / will be vanquished in brilliance by the flesh / that the earth still covers over.)

The familiar imagery of light and fire is recast in the context of a hypostasis as concrete and textured as the coal, or the earth whose heaviness is evoked in the rhythms of line 57. The body attracts a materiality denser even than it knew in life.⁶⁹ Outwardly it fills the surrounding space with light, while within, the body's substance is gathered into the inner core of its own solidity, as in its perfection it works to outshine the dull radiance that previously enveloped the soul.

Puzzled that these lines should be spoken by Solomon, rather than by a Christian theologian better placed to comprehend the meaning of the resurrection, many commentators have indicated that the *Song of Songs*, attributed to Solomon, was interpreted as a symbolic prophecy of the union of the human and divine in the incarnation.⁷⁰ The fusion of poetry and theology is significant. For in seeking to define the 'concrete' quality of Dante's mimesis, critics have often had recourse to the notion of the incarnation as a metaphor for creative procedure. Charles Singleton views the *Commedia's* visual imagery as an embodiment of concepts, and speaks of Dante's poetry in terms of a vision 'made flesh' – a process of incarnation.⁷¹

By far the most exuberant instance of this kind of reading, although quite different from Singleton's more theological emphasis, is that found in the Mandelstam essay which becomes so crucial a point of reference for Heaney. Mandelstam finds in the regular, measured beat of Dante's *terza rima*, an echo of the kinetic rhythms of the body.⁷²

The *Inferno* and especially the *Purgatorio* glorify the human gait, the measure and rhythm of walking, the foot and its shape. The step, linked to the breathing and saturated with thought: this Dante understands as the beginning of prosody.

Muresu appeals to the notion in *Purgatorio* XXV, 80-84 that the mental faculties will become 'in atto più che prima agute' ('keener than before') on separation from the body, hoping to demonstrate that Dante conceived of body as an impediment to spirit. As we saw earlier though, the thrust of Statius's speech is to stress that body is indispensable to the soul. Moreover, Beatrice's question to Solomon has to do not with the contamination of luminosity, but with the possibility that the 'lucentezza' might damage the eye – which amounts to almost the opposite. Her inquiry serves in fact to assert that the bodily organ of the eye will be reconstituted in all its physicality, which is especially significant given the value attached from the *Vita Nuova* onwards to the beauty of Beatrice's eyes and to the physiology of seeing.

70 Edmund Garratt Gardner, *Dante and the Mystics* (London: Dent, 1913), p. 121, accounts for Dante's choice of Solomon by referring to St Bernard's interpretation of the *Canticum* (V, 1) in terms of the resurrection. See *De diligendo Deo*, XI, 31-32. Lino Pertile, 'L'antica fiamma', p. 43, notes that the tradition of ascribing the three *Books of Wisdom* to Solomon can be traced back to Origen's *Commentarium*.

71 Singleton, *Elements of Structure*, pp. 10-13, is typical in discussing Dante's evocation of the 'concrete, the fleshed, the incarnate [...] and the irreducibility of reality itself'.

72 Osip Mandelstam's essay, translated by Clarence Brown and Robert Hughes under the title 'Talking about Dante', appears in *Delos*, 6 (1971) (The University of Texas at Austin), p. 68.

This anticipates the arguments of Harrison who suggests that the unrepresentable body of Beatrice becomes incorporated into the rhythms of the poetry. Naturally enough, this assimilation of the body's animations into the very texture of the poem is epitomised for Harrison by the sonnet 'Tanto gentile' and its enactment of 'the rhythm with which her presence comes and goes'.⁷³ This poem represents one of the most technically accomplished results of Dante's avowed intention in the central segment of the *Vita Nuova* to devote himself to praising Beatrice. It is quoted here in full with a part of the accompanying prose frame.

Questa gentilissima donna [...] venne in tanta grazia de le genti, che quando passava per via, le persone correano per vedere lei; onde mirabile letizia me ne giungea. E quando ella fosse presso d'alcuno, tanta onestade giungea nel cuore di quello, che non ardia di levare li occhi, né di rispondere a lo suo saluto. [...] Queste e più mirabili cose da lei procedeano virtuosamente: onde io pensando a ciò, volendo ripigliare lo stile de la sua loda, propuosi di dicere parole, ne le quali io dessi ad intendere de le sue mirabili ed eccellenti operazioni; acciò che non pur coloro che la poteano sensibilmente vedere, ma li altri sappiano di lei quello che parole ne possono fare intendere. Allora dissi questo sonetto, lo quale comincia: *Tanto gentile*.

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
 la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,
 ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta
 e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.
 Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
 benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
 e par che sia una cosa venuta
 da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.
 Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira,
 che dà per li occhi una dolcezza al core,
 che 'ntender no la può chi no la pruova:
 e par che de la sua labbia si mova
 un spirito soave pien d'amore,
 che va dicendo a l'anima: Sospira.

(This most gracious lady [...] became so beloved of the people, that when she passed through the street, they ran to see her; upon which I felt a wondrous joy. And when she was near anyone, such honesty entered their heart that they did not dare to raise their eyes, nor to reply to her greeting. [...] These and still more remarkable virtues were seen in her: that with this in mind, and desiring again to write in praise of her, I conceived the idea of setting down words which might bear witness to her marvellous and noble qualities; so that not only those who had seen her with their own eyes, but others too might know of her that which words are capable of expressing. Thus I wrote this sonnet, which begins: *So gracious*.

So gracious and so honest seems

73 Harrison, op. cit., p. 44.

my lady when she greets others,
 that every tongue trembling falls silent
 and eyes do not dare to look at her.
 She passes by hearing herself praised,
 Clothed in courteous humility;
 and seems to have come down
 from heaven to earth to appear as a miracle.
 She shows herself so beautiful to those who look at her,
 that through the eyes they feel a sweetness in the heart,
 that can only be understood by those who experience it:
 and from her lips there comes
 a sweet spirit full of love,
 which says to the soul: Sigh.)

Harrison's point is born out most immediately by the line 'Ella si va, sentendosi laudare', where the rhythmical flow of language evokes the kinesis of Beatrice's figure as it passes through the street. The apparent ease with which Dante achieves here a poetic form in which the assurance of syntax and the simplicity of diction are so deeply in sympathy with his theme, marks the poem out as exemplary of the 'dolce stil novo' - 'the sweet new style'. However, it is the earlier and much longer poem - the *canzone* 'Donna ch'avete' - which is celebrated by the shade of Bonagiunta da Lucca in *Purgatorio* XXIV as the first instance of the new poetic.

«Ma dì s'i' veggio qui colui che fore
 trasse le nove rime, cominciando
 'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore'».

E io a lui: «I' mi son un che, quando
 Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
 ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando».

(*Purg.* XXIV, 49-54)

(‘But tell me if I see before me he who / brought forth the new rhymes, beginning / “Ladies who have intelligence of love”. / And I to him: ‘I am one who, when / Love breathes in me, take note, and in accordance with the way / Love speaks within I express myself’.)

The English version here falls far short of capturing the continuous, unimpeded flow of creative activity suggested by the gerundive form in the Italian ‘vo significando’ - literally ‘I go making meaning’. This definition of poetic procedure might indeed be identified with the Romantic conception of a poetry that ‘writes itself’ in response to the dictates of an inner voice. Heaney traces the origin of the notion of ‘inspiration’ in the Western poetic tradition to the belief held by the ancient Greeks ‘that when a lyric poet gives voice, “it is a god that speaks”’.⁷⁴ The idea of spontaneity is certainly present in the prose passage which precedes the ‘Donne che avete’ poem. Words spring forth unbidden into the creative mind.

⁷⁴ *Government of the Tongue*, p. 93.

Avvenne poi che passando per uno cammino lungo lo quale sen già uno rivo chiaro molto, a me giunse tanta volontade di dire, che io cominciai a pensare lo modo ch'io tenesse; e pensai che parlare di lei non si convenia che io facesse, se non ad ogni donna, ma solamente a coloro che sono gentili e che non sono pure femmine. Allora dico che la mia lingua parlò quasi come per se stessa mossa, e disse: Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore. Queste parole io ripuosi ne la mente con grande letizia, pensando di prenderle per mio cominciamento; onde poi, ritornato a la sopradetta cittade, pensando alquanti die, cominciai una canzone...

('It happened then that while walking by a river of the clearest water, I felt so strong a desire to write poetry that I began to consider how I should proceed; and I thought that it was only fitting to speak of my lady not to any woman, but only to those who are noble of heart and not merely women. And so my tongue moved as if of its own accord, saying: Ladies who have intelligence of love. These words I stored in my memory with great joy, thinking of taking them as the opening of my poem, whereupon, having returned to the above mentioned city, after thinking for some days, I began to write a poem...')

Yet inspiration in Dante can never be said to constitute a denial of the role of the intellect in organising the dictates of emotion. The poem's opening line and governing idea materialise suddenly in the mind, flowing swift and clear like the water of the river. But it is only 'after some days' of reflection that the poem itself comes into being with its sustained and elaborate structure. The 'significando' which responds to the promptings of the heart is not an unmediated outpouring but a procedure of the utmost technical control in which language is crafted into significant expression.⁷⁵

Thus it is no accident that in the *Commedia* the image of the river which defines the notion of a spontaneous outpouring of language in the *Vita Nuova* recurs in the 'largo fiume'⁷⁶ (the 'broad flow') of the poetry of Virgil, who must remain for Dante the embodiment of a crucial principle of rational control. The natural voice of the love which speaks within is to be allowed as free an expression as the poet's moral resolve to spell out his meanings as clearly as possible will permit. Words might indeed flow, but down channels hollowed out by the intellect. As we saw, one of Virgil's merits lies in his recognition of the natural limitations that attend the activity of the mind. Virgil's own language is thus first identified by Beatrice in *Inferno* II, in a lexical context which harks back unmistakably to the 'sweet new style' of the *Vita Nuova*, as an 'honest speech' - 'onesto parlare' (line 113). The humble acknowledgement expressed in the figure of Virgil of the boundaries that circumscribe any intellectual enterprise, including the artistic

75 See Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante's 'Inferno': Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 435: [...] the opening lines of 'Donne ch'avete...' mark a technical as well as a moral advance; for, as Dante confirms in the *Purgatorio*, the merit of these lines is to combine art and spontaneity. Dante writes to express his mind, but also recognises that spontaneity is the product not of confused vehemence, but rather of linguistic measure and control whereby a form is created in which the natural and authentic character of the voice can display its full complexity.'

76 *Inferno* I, 80.

project of a poem such as the *Commedia*, is in some sense anticipated in the prose passage quoted above which prefaces the 'Tanto gentile' sonnet. For language can never substitute the historical reality of Beatrice. In its 'hypostatic density' body must always remain an excess that resists representation. Those denied the miracle of Beatrice's presence will be only partially compensated by the limited expression of 'that which words are capable of' ('quello che le parole ne possono fare intendere').

That the figure of Virgil in the *Commedia* bears witness to the divide between fiction and reality is powerfully suggested by an episode in the opening sequence of the thirteenth canto of the *Inferno*. Dante here derives his representation of the souls of the suicides, incarcerated in gnarled thorn bushes, from a passage in the *Aeneid* (III, 22-43) in which the shrub which has taken root over the body of the buried Polydorus bleeds and speaks when Aeneas breaks one of its branches. But the pilgrim, having apparently forgotten the Virgilian text, assumes that the voices he hears emanate from people hiding behind the trees. So Virgil induces him to pluck a branch from one of the bushes. There is a gush of speech and blood, and Vigil apologises to the injured soul for resorting to such a tactic to overcome the protagonist's disbelief (*Inferno* XIII, 46-51). It might appear here, to be sure, that one implication of this episode is to demonstrate the coincidence rather than the divergence between literature and reality. Yet Virgil's action also serves to remind the reader, in danger of being bewildered by one of Dante's most fantastical imaginings, that fictions require to be tested against reality. It is this which defines Virgil's sanity and intellectual measure, against the madness of a Ulysses in whom an unbridled inclination to myth-making overextends to absorb the self and obscure its relation to the dry land of the real, material world.

In Dante's opening appeal to the muses in the *Paradiso* the poem's potential to body forth his vision is humbly equated with the conjuring of the 'shadow' of his faded recollection.

O divina virtù, se mi ti presti
 tanto che l'ombra del beato regno
 segnata nel mio capo io manifesti... (Par.I, 22-24)

(Oh divine power, if you but lend me of yourself / enough that I might make known the shadow of the blessed kingdom / imprinted in my head...)

The poem in its entirety, as much as the airy bodies of the dead souls, is also a *shadow* - an aesthetic tracing of a 'reality' experienced by the visionary. On the final terrace of the mountain the shades once more note the pilgrim's shadow and comment 'He does not seem to be a false body' ('Colui non par corpo fittizio').⁷⁷ The bodies that inhabit the *Commedia* are indeed 'corpi fittizi', fictional bodies, shadows, so to speak, cast by the poet whose own nature, as it is manifested in his art, is in one sense perhaps the

⁷⁷ *Purgatorio* XXVI, 12.

only genuine 'reality' that we can ascribe to the poem. Yet, the 'ombra' of the poem also embodies what Dante perceived to be the ethical and religious value of a human being.

And so we turn once more to Heaney whose personal vision of the efficacy of poetry works towards an identification of art's moral purpose with a particular awakening of the conscience to realities which might otherwise remain buried. To illustrate his argument Heaney quotes a passage from the eighth chapter of St John's Gospel, reproduced here in the form in which it appears in the *New English Bible*.

At daybreak he appeared again in the temple, and all the people gathered around him. He had taken his seat and was engaged in teaching them when the doctors of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught committing adultery. Making her stand out in the middle they said to him, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. In the Law Moses has laid down that such women are to be stoned. What do you say about it?' They put the question as a test, hoping to frame a charge against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they continued to press their question he sat up straight and said, 'That one of you who is faultless shall throw the first stone.' Then once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard what he said, one by one they went away convicted by their conscience, the eldest first; and Jesus was left alone, with the woman standing there. Jesus again sat up and, seeing no one but the woman, said to her, 'Where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She answered, 'No one, sir.' Jesus said, 'Nor do I condemn you. You may go; do not sin again.'

This passage becomes for Heaney a figure for what he calls 'the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general'.⁷⁸

Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed.

The Gospel narrative, however, is also germane to my own discussion in that it might itself be seen as a text as efficacious as the writing on the ground that in Heaney's reading is its most significant theme. It suggests a further way in which writing might through 'embodiment' aspire to authority. For like the *Commedia*, the Gospel episode gives aesthetic expression within a moral context to the singularity of bodily actions. In the first instance there is a particular attention devoted to Christ's own body: an almost giottesque sense of a human form seated on the ground, stooped and then straightening in a gesture of both irritation and authority. Jesus says little and the tension of the scene resides, especially in the emphasis given by Heaney, in the silent interplay between Christ's writing and the gradual dispersal of the bodies of the accusers, convicted by a

78 *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 107.

consciousness of the weaknesses of their own flesh and blood. And then with the woman's body, made to stand out from the crowd in the architectural space of the temple – isolated in retribution for yielding to the desire to be with another – comes the threat of a violent death to echo Christ's own bodily destiny.

The implicit notion here of corporeal vulnerability is undoubtedly a central theme in one of Dante's most explicit treatments of the body in the *Commedia*. I am thinking here of the twenty-eighth canto of the *Inferno*, where those who provoked political and religious divisions are now themselves repeatedly cut open by the vengeful sword of a devil. The last of the schismatics to speak is the Provençal poet Bertran de Born, who carries his severed head by the hair like a lantern. His punishment corresponds with rigorous logic to his crime. Having sown enmity between father and son – Henry II and III of England – he is condemned to a separation of his head from a body conceived as the root from which his scheming brain has grown. So at the canto's close he will declare himself to be the perfect illustration of the 'contrappasso' – the mechanism of divine retribution which from the earliest commentaries has been identified as one of the governing systems of meaning in the *Inferno*. It is not surprising therefore that the episode of the schismatics should be read as confirmation that Dante intends bodies throughout the poem to be read symbolically.⁷⁹ Yet the logical absurdity of the 'contrappasso' here might as easily lead one to conclude rather that Dante is parodying the systematic codes of meaning which he himself has established.

The significance of Bertran lies in his activity as a poet, and the way in which the canto suggests a radical distinction between his poetry and that of Dante. From the first lines of the canto, Dante stresses the difficulty of describing the bodily mutilations he will witness. But he will succeed nevertheless in affecting his reader with a graphic portrayal of the horror of war and the tragedy that can result from the 'constitutional fragility of the human body'.⁸⁰ On the other hand, as a poet who celebrates the activity of the battlefield, Bertran's goal would appear wholly contrary. And thus he fails to awaken in his reader that sense of the absolute dignity and inviolable integrity of the human person which Dante asserts in the *Commedia* through his allusions to the resurrection and to the figure of Beatrice. Both in the symbolic patterns of the 'contrappasso', and in Bertran's lyric glorification of war, the true value of the body is obscured. So Bertran is defined as 'two in one and one in two'; an allusion to the incarnate Christ which thus parodies for Dante the supreme religious truth of human embodiedness.

Di sé faceva a sé stesso lucerna,
ed eran due in uno e uno in due... (Inf.XXVIII, 124-125)

(Of himself he made a lantern for himself, / and they were two in one and one in two...)

79 Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 199, views the figure of Manfred in *Purgatorio* III as exemplifying the way in which 'corporeal representation in the poem is self-consciously symbolic'.

80 Kirkpatrick, *Difficulty and Dead Poetry*, p. 370.

The imperative for the poet to speak the truth is also articulated in terms of the body. A true conscience is envisaged metaphorically as the protective armour which the bodies of the schismatics lack against God's sword.

Ma io rimasi a riguardar lo stuolo,
e vidi cosa ch'io avrei paura,
sanza più prova, di contarla solo;
se non che coscienza m'assicura,
la buona compagnia che l'uom francheggia
sotto l'asbergo del sentirsi pura. (Inf.XXVIII, 112-117)

(But I continued to stare at the throng, / and saw something which I would be afraid, / without further proof, to recount alone; / were I not reassured by conscience, / that true companion that gives a man courage/ beneath the breastplate of knowing himself pure in heart.)

And Virgil too, as one might expect by now, has a role to play in the articulation of this theme. For when he points out to the damned the miraculous integrity of the pilgrim's still living body, the fact of his own speech is offered as sufficient testimony to the truth of his declaration.

«e quest' è ver così com' io ti parlo». (Inf.XXVIII, 51)
(‘and this is true just as I am speaking to you’.)

It is Virgil's ‘parlar onesto’ then which qualifies him to express the truth about the body; and is in this sense like the writing in the sand. It is the natural voice of the praise poems in the *Vita Nuova* in which artistic form, while knowing its own limits, comes as close as it can to embodying the moral truths invested in the singular activity of Beatrice's existence. Language attains to the status of a presence which is luminous in its mediation of the true nature of a specific external reality. So the movement and music of the poem become, as much as Beatrice, an object which the mind contemplates for its own good.

It is with the deliberate intention of exploiting an ambivalence that Heaney entitles his essay ‘The Government of the Tongue’. To reverse the order of his argument, the phrase connotes on the one hand a discipline of utterance such as that which we have seen associated with Virgil in his admonitions against intellectual arrogance. Principally, however, the notion of ‘government’ refers to the authority which in Heaney's view accrues to the poetic voice that emerges ‘ungainsayable and symbolically radiant out of the subconscious deeps’. So ‘the poet is credited with a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the nature of the reality we inhabit’. This authority of the poetic voice arises for Heaney because the form of the poem ‘is achieved not by dint of the moral and ethical exercise of mind but by the self-validating

operations of what we call inspiration'.⁸¹ In the case of the *Commedia*, however, we have noted that there clearly is an unremittingly intellectual engagement with poetic language as an ethical discourse. But one can nevertheless also concur with the suggestion in Mandelstam and Heaney that the animation of rhythm and image – the 'body of poetic language' – contributes its own voice of authority, working across, but not to the detriment of, the weave of the political and philosophical discourse. And these two aspects of Dante's poetry – much as body and soul are unified – remain harnessed to the same end. As Heaney writes in his meditation in the Harvest Bow poem on the nature of his art,

The end of art is peace
 Could be the motto of this frail device

Finally then, to return once more to where we began, although the pilgrim Dante finds himself alone on the mountain, surrounded by bodies which are no more than fictions, the voice which speaks to him out of the shadows and prevents him from losing heart is also the voice of art. In this sense Virgil embodies a principle which is directly opposed by the figure of Bertran de Born. As an emblem of the futility of his achievement, Bertran now displays to view the physiological organ of his intellect in a gesture which becomes an absurdly graphic depiction of the unnatural separation of body and soul. His use of the word 'cerebro' ('brain') alludes negatively to Dante's conviction that the human organism is not divisible into the mechanistic components of body and brain, but is rather a unity in which soul is a function of the body's actions and experience. It is not only in his misapprehension of his own human nature, but also in his artistic disregard for the integrity of human corporeality that Bertran has 'deanimated' the body, denying its relation to that 'noumenal', indwelling divinity which is its 'substantial form'. The crime of his divisiveness lies in the separation of art and moral purpose: a kind of dualism which Dante would have found as reprehensible as the heresy that in Farinata denied the hylomorphic immortality of Beatrice. In his definition of his body as a 'beginning' – 'principio' (141) – and in the mutilation of his form, Bertran is an expression of how beginnings and ends in a human existence can go awry. Both in his life and poetry he has misconceived the significance of the root of his own consciousness in the body.

Bertran brandishes his severed head like a lantern 'for himself'. All that *his* 'cerebro' has produced has been directed to satisfying his own ends. But Virgil, it will be remembered, became through his poem a lantern for those who were to follow him. If there is one single notion that might be seen to characterise Dante's Virgil it is that throughout the journey of the poem's first two canticles he is a perambulating intelligence – a body whose movements and speech are an expression of considered and well-intentioned thought. In

81 *Government of the Tongue*, pp. 92-93.

this sense he is the best that an ordinary human being can be, and thus radically distinguished from the figure of Mohammed, another of the schismatics, who speaks to the wayfarers balancing on one leg in a comic enactment of the divide between body and intelligence.⁸² It is precisely because of his acute sense of human limitation that Virgil embodies the efficacy of art and an authority of poetic utterance whose end might indeed be construed as no less than that of universal justice.⁸³ So naturally it is in the footsteps of Virgil that Dante follows the path that leads out of the dark wood and towards Beatrice, guided by the lantern glow that art holds out behind itself, one foot firmly planted after another on the ground where bodies cast their shadows.

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82 *Inferno* XXVIII, 61-63.

83 In the review quoted above Andrew Motion refers to Heaney's sympathy 'with Nadezhda Mandelstam's view that poetry is a "vehicle for world harmony"'.