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## Dante's 'Strangeness'

The *Commedia* and the late Twentieth-Century Debate on the Literary Canon

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**ABSTRACT:** A reflection on Dante and the literary canon may appear tautological since nowadays his belonging to the canon seems a self-evident matter of fact and an indisputable truth. It is for this very reason, though, that a paradigmatic role has been conferred on Dante in the contemporary debate both by those who consider the canon a stable structure based on inner aesthetic values and by those who see it as a cultural and social construction. For instance, Harold Bloom suggests that 'Dante invented our modern idea of the canonical', and Edward Said, in his reading of Auerbach, seems to imply that Dante provided foundations for what we call literature tout court. While his influence on other poets never ceased, the story of Dante's explicit canonization through the centuries revolved around the same critical points we are still discussing today: his anti-classical 'strangeness' in language and style, the trouble he occasions in genre hierarchies and distinctions, and the vastness of the philosophical and theological knowledge embraced by the *Commedia* (and, as a consequence, the relationship between literature and other realms of human experience). Dante's canonicity is also evinced by the ceaseless debates that he has inspired and the many cultural tensions of which he is the focus. What I will try to do in the next few pages is to reflect on the features that make the *Commedia* central both to the arguments of the defenders of the aesthetic approach, such as Bloom and Steiner, and to [...]

# DANTE'S 'STRANGENESS'

The *Commedia* and the Late Twentieth-Century Debate  
on the Literary Canon\*

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A reflection on Dante and the literary canon may appear tautological since nowadays his belonging to the canon seems a self-evident matter of fact and an indisputable truth. It is for this very reason, though, that a paradigmatic role has been conferred on Dante in the contemporary debate both by those who consider the canon a stable structure based on inner aesthetic values and by those who see it as a cultural and social construction. For instance, Harold Bloom suggests that 'Dante invented our modern idea of the canonical',<sup>1</sup> and Edward Said, in his reading of Auerbach, seems to imply that Dante provided foundations for what we call literature *tout court*.<sup>2</sup> While his influence on other poets never ceased, the story of Dante's explicit canonization through the centuries revolved around the same critical points we are still discussing today: his anti-classical 'strangeness' in language and style, the trouble he occasions in genre hierarchies and distinctions, and the vastness of the philosophical and theological knowledge embraced by the *Commedia* (and, as a consequence, the relationship between literature and other realms of human experience). Dante's canonicity is also evinced by the ceaseless debates that he has inspired and the many cultural tensions of which he is the focus. What I will try to do in the next few pages is to reflect on the features that make the *Commedia* central both to the arguments of the defenders of the aesthetic approach, such as Bloom and Steiner, and to the political claims of the so-called 'culture of complaint'. As I went through the materials for this paper, I realized that most of the essays I considered relevant to my point had something in common: in a crucial turn of their argument, they mentioned or analysed the episode of Farinata and Cavalcante. Was this simply due to the persistent influence of Auerbach's choice of this canto in *Mimesis* (1946), or was it related to some crucial thematic or stylistic matter at stake in *Inferno X*?

I will start from the outstanding voice in the debate on the canon, namely that of Harold Bloom. Significantly enough, in *The Western Canon* the pages devoted to Dante follow the chapter on Shakespeare, right after Bloom's 'Preface and Prelude' and 'An Elegy for the Canon'. This structural choice suggests that the fate of the canon is largely the fate of Dante and Shakespeare. In Bloom's opinion, what makes authors canonical is their 'strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange'.<sup>3</sup> In an evaluative canon, Dante comes immediately after Shakespeare (the centre of the canon), but in a neutral, synchronic perspective, they are paradigms of two different forms of originality: Dante makes the reader feel strange at home, Shakespeare makes us 'at home out of doors, foreign, abroad. His powers of assimilation and of contamination are unique'.<sup>4</sup> We'll come back to this distinction later on. But where does Dante's originality dwell? Bloom's answer is implied in the title of his Dante chapter, 'The Strangeness of Dante: Ulysses and Beatrice', from which my own title comes: as Dante's greatest and most audacious inventions (or re-inventions), Ulysses and Beatrice repay his creative effort by making him 'strange', and, as a consequence, canonical. At the same time, Dante's canonicity saves Beatrice from religious censorship: 'Beatrice would be an offense to the church and even to literary Catholics' if Dante had not won 'his wager with the future within a generation after his death'.<sup>5</sup> Bloom depicts Dante as irredeemably wild, proud, conservative, and politically incorrect, totally devoted to his poem and its immortality, cruel to his political enemies and anything but generous to his poetic rivals – as the absence of Guido Cavalcanti in the Farinata and Cavalcante episode shows.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, in 1994 Bloom predicted an imminent attack from the 'school of Resentment' on Dante, an attack similar to the 'onslaught' led by New Historicism against Shakespeare:

The New Historicists and allied resenters have been attempting to reduce and scatter Shakespeare, aiming to undo the Canon by dissolving its center. Curiously, Dante, the second center as it were, is not under similar onslaught, either here or in Italy. Doubtless the assault will come, since the assorted multiculturalists would have difficulty finding a more objectionable great poet than Dante, whose savage and powerful spirit is politically incorrect to the highest degree.<sup>7</sup>

Bloom goes further and blames the most distinguished interpreters of Dante in the twentieth century, including Curtius and Spitzer, because they approached Dante's greatness either in relation to the theological and philosophical tradition (Eliot, Singleton, Freccero) or in relation to the real world he so powerfully represented (Barolini). In Bloom's opinion, both the perspectives, the theological and the secular, could be charged with the same critical crime committed by New Historicism and gender and cultural studies: that of deliberately discarding the aesthetic challenge any great author imposes on critics, reducing the *Commedia* to mere theology or down-to-earth mimesis. In his violent argument Bloom goes so far as to criticize the most influential Dante scholar of the twentieth century, Erich Auerbach, to whose interpretative achievements he seems completely blind. *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (1929) and 'Figura' (1939) brilliantly reconciled heaven and earth, life and afterlife, and provided an unrivalled explanation for the radical intermingling of the human and the eternal in the *Commedia*. Dante's approach to 'dargestellte Wirklichkeit' would not have been conceivable without the representational revolution engendered by Christian texts, a phenomenon that the *Commedia* carried to an extreme. In *Mimesis* Auerbach chose to analyse the episode of Farinata and Cavalcante, most likely because it allowed him to convey, on a stylistic basis, the distinction between two human personalities in the afterlife and, through this distinction, to illustrate the inextricable unity of life and afterlife in a figural perspective ('das Bild des Menschen tritt vor das Bild Gottes').<sup>8</sup> Auerbach in fact makes the contrast between the two sinners central to his argument, while Bloom underlines the silence surrounding Guido Cavalcanti and repeatedly mentions the 'formidable' Farinata, but hardly pays attention to Cavalcante. The peculiar difference between these two critical viewpoints can be related to the aesthetic predilection disguised in Bloom's opinion that Dante and Shakespeare<sup>9</sup> are the best representatives, respectively, of the 'ultimate changelessness' of characters and of the 'psychology of mutability';<sup>10</sup> this position implies an aesthetic judgement (that Shakespeare is better than Dante) and, underlying this judgement, the claim that the *Commedia* is not 'an imitation of life', because, except for Dante himself, the characters do not change:

Whatever Dante's realism may be, it does not give us what Chaucer and Shakespeare bestow upon us: characters who change, even as actual human beings change. Only Dante changes and develops in the *Comedy*; everyone else is fixed and immutable. Indeed they have to be, because the final judg-

ment has been made upon them. As for Beatrice [...] she is necessarily even more removed from an imitation of life, for what has she to do with the conditions of human existence?<sup>11</sup>

This standpoint accounts for Bloom's simplifying dismissal of *The Undivine Comedy* (1992), where Barolini writes that 'The *Commedia*, perhaps more than any other text ever written, consciously seeks to imitate life, the conditions of human existence'.<sup>12</sup>

The relation at issue here between life and afterlife and the definition of the object of the mimetic process are central to Edward Said's reading of Auerbach, collected in his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004).<sup>13</sup> Said praises the chapter devoted to Farinata and Cavalcante (*Inf.* X) as one of the best critical essays ever written, and he connects Auerbach's preference for this canto to his intention to point out that the *Commedia*, though oriented towards the eternal and the immortal, is even more convincing when it represents human reality. Said's admiration for Auerbach (and for Dante) is central to our discussion, because the author of *Orientalism* was one of Bloom's mortal enemies, though he analysed literary texts 'first of all' as 'estimable and admirable works of art and learning'.<sup>14</sup> Only on the basis of this knowledge did Said accept

the challenge [...] to connect them [literary texts] not only with that pleasure and profit but also with the imperial process of which they were manifestly [...] a part; rather than condemning or ignoring their participation in what was an unquestioned reality in their societies, I suggest that what we learn about this hitherto ignored aspect actually and truly *enhances* our reading and understanding of them.<sup>15</sup>

A political or cultural reading must not make us blind to the text, but, as humanists, we are responsible if we fail to be aware of what lies behind or around the text, namely the involvement of great authors and masterpieces in cruel practices such as slavery, imperialism, and racial, social, and sexual persecution. Our reverential attitude towards culture, under attack here, often springs from the idea that the best texts are a repository for the highest values of civilization and provide a moral heritage that their readers are supposed to learn from and incorporate into their own lives.<sup>16</sup> Thus formulated, this position is both conservative and utopian, but trust in the human potential stored in great literature is not at all incompatible with the admission of the historical responsibility and social injustice that made this literature possible. This hope

is perceivable in Said himself, as well as in the late Tzvetan Todorov, who is also aware of the powerful role of literary discourse in the maintenance of political oppression but stubbornly clings to the possibility that we may learn a positive, dialogical attitude towards the Other from literary texts.<sup>17</sup> For both Said and Todorov the liberating strength of literature seems to be a matter of form – or, better, of ‘literature’ as a specific medium as opposed to science or philosophy – rather than a matter of content.<sup>18</sup> Bloom’s position is more roughly hewn: as he points out, canonical authors rarely embody normative values and democratic principles and their possible moral influence is at least questionable or ambiguous. As a consequence, the Western canon cannot and should not be defended on a moral basis.<sup>19</sup> Great authors are conservative because so is the Muse,<sup>20</sup> and if tyrants foster powerful images, sadly the same cannot be said of ‘the cause of the people’.<sup>21</sup>

What about Dante? Is his poem wildly conservative and ‘politically incorrect’, as Bloom proclaims, or progressive and tolerant, as suggested by Barolini’s latest work?<sup>22</sup> In my view, the theoretical issue implied by this question is far more interesting than any possible answer: does moral judgement influence our idea of Dante? Can we understand or even read the *Commedia* without confronting its morals? These interrogations obviously reflect a more general one: is it a fault on the part of the critic to include moral judgement in the interpretation and evaluation of a work of art? Or is it a fault *not* to do it? Facing the relation between literature and ethics mainly as a writer, Abraham Yehoshua devoted a collection of essays, *The Terrible Power of a Minor Guilt* (1998), to the multifaceted dilemma of the role of the ‘moral factor’ in the construction and reception of literary works of art. Among the possible reasons for the lack of critical interest in the ethical aspects of literature, he mentions the formalist idea that art should be judged only according to inner aesthetic principles, making the moral and human dimension irrelevant to – and, at worst misleading for – interpretation.<sup>23</sup> Yehoshua’s objection to this stance is simply that every work of art that describes human relationships can be examined from an ethical point of view and that this element is central to both aesthetic judgement and artistic creation: on one hand, a ‘moral’ analysis of texts improves our comprehension of them; on the other, morals are involved in the aesthetic effort itself. Literary devices affect the reader in peculiar ways, so aesthetics influences morals; at the same time, moral complexity, especially in the development of characters, is perceived as an aesthetic

value. Yehoshua's attitude towards formalism is, in his own words, a reaction against his youthful beliefs, when he opposed the violent and dramatic dominance of ideology in approaches to literature in Israel in the 1950s:

When we started to write, we felt a need to separate ourselves from the generation of writers and poets that preceded us, the War of Independence generation, whose writing was, to our taste, too strictly stamped with ideology and morality. Those writers and poets intensely experienced the War of Independence and with a blend of fresh nationalism and leftist socialism used their work to try to come to terms with different moral values. [...] Our feeling was that moral debates prevented literature from taking wing and flying, and created in the reader inhibitions that stopped him or her from opening up to the deeper experiences that cannot and should not be judged merely according to their moral value.<sup>24</sup>

A similar experience is described by Todorov in his account of his university years in Communist Bulgaria. As a young student, he chose to become a formalist because he did not want to be restricted in his judgements or subject to persecution on ideological basis, but he later renounced this non-committal stance. In his view, formalism and structuralism – along with the worst academic criticism (all too often self-referential) – can be held partly responsible for the contemporary irrelevance of literature to individual and social life:

Not surprisingly, lycée students learn the dogma according to which literature has no relation to the rest of the world and they study only the way the parts of the work relate to one another. This, no doubt, is one of the reasons students find the literary specialization uninteresting [...]. Why study literature when literature is only an illustration of the tools to study literature?<sup>25</sup>

The work of scholars in the humanities should be thought of as a dialogic exchange with authors, and critical writing should be practiced as language and not as metalanguage, as a discourse on truth and morals rather than merely as a discourse on another discourse (the literary text), whose truth or moral content can be dismissed as irrelevant. By acknowledging that our critical discourse and the literary one are in a dialogic relation, the problem of truth can once again be formulated:

Mais comment lui [the author under study] redonner la parole? En reconnaissant la parenté de nos discours, en voyant dans leur juxtaposition non celle du métalangage et du langage-objet, mais l'exemple [...] du dialogue.

[...] si j'accepte que nos deux discours sont en relation dialogique, j'accepte aussi de me poser la question de la vérité.<sup>26</sup>

During the same period, Thomas Pavel, who was educated as a linguist in Romania and then emigrated first to France and then to the United States, denounced the anti-humanist implications of structuralism and defined the vital importance of narrative themes and referential contents in the experience of reading and in the study of literary fiction.<sup>27</sup>

Dante comes before all this, and, unlike Auerbach's Shakespeare, he believes in a solid distinction between good and evil and sees the world as a structure where everything has its place and sense. Few masterpieces of the Western canon have faced the problem of representing a whole moral universe through literature with the audacity, utopian conviction, and aesthetic effort of his poem. As a consequence, it is indubitable that in the case of the *Commedia* philology and stylistics cannot avoid a moral perspective. It is not by chance that Wayne Booth includes Dante's poem in a list of works that 'offer themselves as [...] "equipment for living"':

Though the didactic content of such stories is often simply dismissed as irrelevant to their art, both their authors and their readers know that such works recommend one view of ultimate reality as against various mistaken views held by most of the characters in each story and by some, perhaps most, readers.<sup>28</sup>

Bloom writes that 'no other secular author is so absolutely convinced that his own work is the truth, all of the truth that matters most',<sup>29</sup> but he maintains that canonical authors invariably see their writings as forms that transcend any social programme, no matter how noble: 'Dante and Milton both sacrificed much for what they believed to be a spiritually exuberant and justified political course, but neither of them would have been willing to sacrifice his major poem for any cause whatever.'<sup>30</sup> This statement could, however, be undermined by Bloom's own words on George Eliot's Dantism ('If there is an exemplary fusion of aesthetic and moral power in the canonical novel, then George Eliot is its best representative') and by acknowledging the essential fact that the *Commedia* is undoubtedly based on a definite vision of reality – a vision (and a 'cause') that is one with its architecture and style.<sup>31</sup> Auerbach pointed out that the unitary order of the afterlife, as Dante represents it, is perceivable in the most immediate way as a moral system, struc-

tured through the distribution of souls in the three reigns and their subdivisions.<sup>32</sup> The unity of the moral order with the physical-cosmological and historical-political orders cannot be separated from the unity of Dante's illustrious style. The condition of the souls of the dead is definitive and immutable, but they act as living characters, and their individual personalities shine through: if the canonical strength of the *Commedia* is firmly rooted in this contradiction, then it springs from a representational mode which is Christian in spirit and origin.<sup>33</sup> Without this vision of truth, of the world and humanity, Dante's masterpiece would be simply inconceivable. The *Commedia* is not an empty cathedral: it is *full*, and its content *together* with its style makes it memorable for every reader. Furthermore, the specific quality of Dante's aesthetic energy depends on the way in which his poetic imagination chooses to face the concrete world around him and not only human existence as a moral or philosophical abstraction. The *Commedia* is a complex architecture that is set in the afterlife but deals powerfully with this life, aiming at its own immortality but also at something beyond itself.

In the last twenty years, literary theory and criticism – with the major and nuanced exception of cultural, postcolonial, and gender and queer studies – have often ignored the moral dimensions of literary texts, while philosophy, and contemporary ethics in particular, has returned to literature and to Dante as well. For example, Martha Nussbaum devoted an entire chapter of her *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) to Dante. In her view, the *Commedia* offers promising answers to the urgent need to build an ethics for our world, a shared ethics to be grounded in reciprocity, individuality, and compassion. As a Christian and an Aristotelian, Dante blends the 'Augustinian rehabilitation of the passions' with a 'classical respect for the dignity of agency',<sup>34</sup> promoting a good attitude towards other human beings and towards social and political institutions. In Dante 'love can move outward to embrace humanity while retaining intense attachments to particular individuals':<sup>35</sup> according to Nussbaum, this approach may be very precious for political life in this world, where we must learn how to combine harmoniously our concern for the equality of all human beings with our particular bonds towards our families and our fellow citizens. In the *Commedia*, the earthly quest for justice and human happiness is a crucial matter. Still, there are tensions and contradictions, especially concerning Dante's refusal of compassion towards the damned in hell (see for instance *Inf.* XXXIII, 149–50) and his rage against those who sinned

only because they followed their beliefs, often with moral rectitude, as is the case with the heretics. Whether intentionally or not, Nussbaum singles out the same episode analysed by Auerbach and mentioned by Bloom and by Said (*Inf.* X). Bloom writes that Dante ‘rejoices in the eternal torments he visits upon his very personal enemies’,<sup>36</sup> while Nussbaum considers Farinata as evidence of Dante’s acknowledgment of human dignity in spite of sin and as a key to his approach to the pagan world and its virtues, which opens a debate on heresy and tolerance:

Although Dante is encouraged to applaud their torments, he also gives us the noble figure of Farinata, whose dignity rises above his punishment. [...] In one way, Farinata’s dignity, like Brunetto’s, is an aspect of his sin, his contempt for Hell of a piece with the heretical rejection of the afterlife for which he is damned. But as in the case of Brunetto, the appealing aspect of his dignity is left standing, challenging the Christian conception to reflect and to learn. Virgil urges Dante to speak respectfully to him, and Dante does so. Thus Dante in no way conceals the fact that noble men, men of great significance, have been heretics – and he opens in the reader’s mind, again, the question of how a reasonable state should treat these differences, a question to which the reader may find a different answer.<sup>37</sup>

In the face of the same Dantean episode, Auerbach’s stylistics adopted a relatively neutral, descriptive point of view; Said, by means of his humanistic reading, took a more committed stance; Bloom and Nussbaum shift the analysis to a moral-political level: although from opposite sides, they both abandon the aesthetic dimension. Bloom would probably condemn Nussbaum’s approach as Aristotelian, as he would those of Rorty and Todorov, because they seem to grant poetry legitimation as long as it undertakes ‘the work of social catharsis under the banners of the new multiculturalism’.<sup>38</sup> But were we to admit Dante’s relevance to the ‘cultivation’ of humanity, who would benefit from it? The social and cultural elite or those of average education who go to school? Bloom, who counters Dante’s ‘elitist’ universalism with Shakespeare’s ‘classless universalism’, would probably answer that ‘Dante is not for the groundlings’<sup>39</sup>:

Everything that allows a common reader to read the *Comedy* ensues from qualities in Dante’s spirit that are anything but what is generally considered pious. Ultimately Dante has nothing truly positive to say about any of his poetic precursors or contemporaries and remarkably little pragmatic use for the Bible, except for Psalms.<sup>40</sup>

Said and Nussbaum adopt the opposite point of view, though neither lacks awareness of Dante's contradictions.

A reflection on the place of the *Commedia* in the Italian educational system might be revealing, because in recent years the time devoted to the study of Dante in Italian schools has been significantly reduced despite the fact that in Italy the *Commedia* stands as a national monument and can be read in the original language. Nevertheless, it is considered too difficult and too far from the world of teenage pupils. This tendency has been strongly opposed by many professors and teachers, including Pietro Cataldi, a scholar of contemporary literature, who devoted a militant essay and a passionate book to the good reasons why students should read Dante today.<sup>41</sup> In the *Commedia* they may still find a vital lesson regarding both the dangers of accepting the world as it is and the inspiration required to imagine a different society and humanity. Dante could also teach them to see reality in dynamic terms and to articulate their own subjectivities (both destructive and constructive) in mediated forms, equipped with meanings valid beyond themselves and structured in ways that others may understand and share.<sup>42</sup> This double victory over insignificance and solipsism takes place through formalization, which involves an aesthetic element: this brings us back to the inextricability of aesthetics, morals, and humanity in the construction of the work of art. In Auerbach's interpretation of Dante, human revolution and stylistic achievement go together; in Yehoshua, moral dilemmas and great literature always interweave; for Nussbaum, narrative imagination helps readers identify with the experiences of others and thus explains the moral importance of literature in human life.<sup>43</sup>

Now we realize what is at stake in this discussion: not simply the fate of the canon and the fate of Dante interpretation, but the necessity or the opportunity to overcome Romantic categories and face the world we live in. The university for the masses and multiculturalism are already here: if we follow Bloom's academic anathemas, we will be left alone in our study rooms and libraries, writing our elite criticism for other elite critics; if not, we must take education and school very seriously. In broader terms, the choice is one between elitism and the full assumption of the challenges of democracy. Nussbaum suggested that the classics should be studied with a critical attitude and not venerated as sacred texts and that syllabuses should combine them with books that promote democratic values and the acceptance of racial, sexual, and cultural differences. This opinion is ideologically biased and highly

controversial, because the idea of forcibly imposing the reading of certain books because of their moral content is always dangerous, as the intellectual biographies of Yehoshua and Todorov show. Bloom's anti-social stance, though, is not the only alternative to such a questionable solution. Dante may prove a precious antidote and a key to this debate, because, in Mazzotta's words, the *Commedia* 'tells the story of a spiritual education and drafts the strategies of teachers and the difficulties of learning'.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, to teach the humanity of Dante is to teach humanity *tout court*. Nowhere could we find more convincing evidence of this than in the words of a former student about the beloved professor of his youth:

Mr. Lowell never gave us less than a canto to read; and often gave us two or three [...]. Here before us was a great poem – a lasting expression of what human life had meant to a human being [...]. Let us try, as best we might, to see what life had meant to this man; let us see what relation his experience, great and small, bore to ours [...]. Let us read, as sympathetically as we could make ourselves read, the words of one who was as much a man as we, only vastly greater in his knowledge of wisdom and of beauty. That was the spirit of Mr. Lowell's teaching. It opened to some of us a new world.<sup>45</sup>

This is what Professor Barrett Wendell wrote about James Lowell, one of the nineteenth-century pioneers of Dante studies in the United States. As a teacher, Lowell was most faithful to Dante's art by never omitting the moral dimension of the *Commedia*. He constantly reminded his students of the profound human commitment that Dante expected from each of his readers – present and future.

#### NOTES

- \* I would like to thank Anna De Biasio, who kindly helped me to revise the English text of this paper.
- 1 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 19. 'Catholic distinctions between divine immortality and human fame, firmly founded upon a dogmatic theology, remained fairly precise until the advent of Dante, who regarded himself as a prophet and so implicitly gave his *Divine Comedy* the status of a new Scripture. Dante pragmatically voided the distinction between secular and sacred canon

- formation, a distinction that has never quite returned, which is yet another reason for our vexed sense of power and authority' (ibid., p. 36).
- 2 Edward W. Said, 'Introduction to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*', in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 85–118 (p. 107).
  - 3 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 3. 'One mark of an originality that can win canonical status for a literary work is a strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies. Dante is the largest instance of the first possibility, and Shakespeare, the overwhelming example of the second' (ibid., p. 4).
  - 4 Ibid.
  - 5 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 77.
  - 6 'In Dante [...] we cannot locate poetic limits, but human circumferences can certainly be discovered. Other poets, earlier and contemporary, do not move the poet Dante to storms of generosity. [...] Strangely absent, in his proper person, is Guido Cavalcanti [...]. Cavalcanti's father and father-in-law, the formidable Farinata, appear vividly in the *Inferno*, where the father expresses his chagrin that Dante, not his son Guido, has the honor of being the Pilgrim of eternity' (ibid., p. 50).
  - 7 Ibid., p. 76.
  - 8 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: A. Franke, 1946), p. 196.
  - 9 Both Auerbach and Bloom mark a crucial distinction (underlined by Said, 'Introduction', p. 110) between Dante and Shakespeare, two incarnations of the canon. For Auerbach, Shakespeare's works produce the representation 'eines unablässig sich selbst webenden, sich selbst erneuernden und in all seinen Teilen zusammenhängenden Weltgrundes, aus der dies alles fließt und die es unmöglich macht, ein Ereignis oder eine Stillage zu isolieren. Die gemeinsame, klar begrenzte Figuralität Dantes, in der alles jenseits, in Gottes endgültigem Reich zum Austrag kommt und in der die Personen erst im Jenseits ihre volle Wirklichkeit erreichen, besteht nicht mehr' (Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 313). According to Bloom – whose preference for Shakespeare may be biased by his literary Anglo-centrism or by his prejudice against the 'allegory of theologians' – 'Dante has been the poets' poet, even as Shakespeare has been the peoples' poet; each is universal, though Dante is not for the groundlings' (*The Western Canon*, pp. 50–51). George Steiner made the difference between Dante and Shakespeare central to the second chapter of his *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
  - 10 'Just as Dante surpasses all other writers [...] in emphasizing an ultimate changelessness in each of us, a fixed position that we must occupy in eternity, so Shakespeare surpasses all other in evidencing a psychology of mutability' (Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 48).
  - 11 Ibid., p. 95.
  - 12 Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 21.

- 13 Said describes Auerbach's masterpiece as the most interesting reflection on the revolutionary effects of Christian religion on literary representation and, at the same time, as a tribute to individual genius, especially in the chapters devoted to Dante, Rabelais, and Shakespeare (Said, 'Introduction', p. 104).
- 14 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p. xiv.
- 15 Ibid. See also p. xxii: 'My method is to focus as much as possible on individual works, to read them first as great products of the creative or interpretative imagination, and then to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire'.
- 16 The tendency to see culture as 'a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought' accounts for the attitude of 'most professional humanists', who 'as a result are unable to make the connection between the prolonged and sordid cruelty of practices such as slavery, colonialist and racial oppression, and imperial subjection on the one hand, and the poetry, fiction, philosophy of the society that engages in these practices on the other' (ibid., pp. xiii–xiv). Said instead has 'found it a challenge *not* to see culture in this way – that is, antiseptically quarantined from its worldly affiliations – but as an extraordinarily varied field of endeavor' (ibid., p. xiv).
- 17 In Todorov's opinion, literature has specific merits: literary texts talk to everyone, they can escape stereotypes and censorship, and they are full of cognitive and ethical ambitions, expressed through representation and not through direct assertions, thus leaving a great deal of room for interpretation and free elaboration on the part of the reader. See, for instance, Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 14.
- 18 See Tzvetan Todorov, *La vie commune: essai d'anthropologie générale* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), p. 12.
- 19 'The silliest way to defend the Western Canon is to insist that it incarnates all of the seven deadly moral virtues that make up our supposed range of normative values and democratic principles. This is palpably untrue' (Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 29). 'Reading the very best writers [...] is not going to make us better citizens. Art is perfectly useless [...]' (ibid., p. 16).
- 20 In Bloom's words, 'the Muse, whether tragic or comic, takes the side of the elite' (ibid., p. 34).
- 21 Bloom quotes Hazlitt's claim that "'the cause of the people is indeed but little calculated as a subject for poetry: it admits of rhetoric, which goes into argument and explanation, but it presents no immediate or distinct images to the mind". Such images, Hazlitt finds, are everywhere present on the side of tyrants and their instruments' (ibid., p. 34).
- 22 See, for instance, Teodolinda Barolini's lecture, 'Dante: Multiplicities of History, Identities of Belief' available online at <<http://universityprograms.columbia.edu/university-lecture-professor-teodolinda-barolini-1>> [accessed 8 August 2010], which will be published as 'Dante's Sympathy for the Other, or the Non-Stereotypical Imagination: Sexual and Racialized Others in the *Commedia*'.

- 23 See Abraham B. Yehoshua, *The Terrible Power of a Minor Guilt: Literary Essays*, trans. by Ora Cummings (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. xii–xv. The list of possible reasons introduced by Yehoshua is partially derived from Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and includes the role of psychology and of law in the drawing of the line between good and evil, the danger of legitimating a new censorship on political or religious basis, and, as regards the specific realm of literary theory and criticism, the absence of common criteria shared by the humanist community.
- 24 Yehoshua, *The Terrible Power*, p. xvi.
- 25 Tzvetan Todorov, 'What is Literature For?', *New Literary History*, 38 (2007), pp. 13–32 (p. 20). Paradoxically, libertarian positions such as the attack led by Barthes against the objective truth of the text and the human value of the work of art have facilitated the dismissal of literature's subversive potential against the state of things – the same potential that these positions aimed to set free. To use Antoine Compagnon's words, 'Pour Leavis ou encore pour Raymond Williams la valeur de la littérature est liée à la vie, à la force, à l'intensité de l'expérience dont elle témoigne, à sa faculté de rendre l'homme meilleur. Mais la revendication de l'autonomie sociale de la littérature à partir des années soixante, ou même de son pouvoir subversif, a coïncidé avec la marginalisation de l'étude littéraire, comme si sa valeur dans le monde contemporain était devenue plus incertaine', Antoine Compagnon, *Le démon de la théorie: littérature et sens commun* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 248.
- 26 Tzvetan Todorov, *Critique de la critique* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), p. 102.
- 27 See, for instance, Thomas G. Pavel, *The Spell of Language: Poststructuralism and Speculation*, trans. by Linda Jordan and the author (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) and his *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
- 28 Booth, *The Company We Keep*, p. 341, quoting Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1957).
- 29 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 78.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 320. 'Middlemarch, like Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, is ambitiously conceived as a large structure with an implicit but clear relation to Dante's *Comedy*' (*ibid.*, p. 324). See also Andrew Thompson, 'Dante and George Eliot', in *Dante Metamorphoses: Episodes in a Literary Afterlife*, ed. by Eric C. Haywood (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 199–220.
- 32 'Die einheitliche Ordnung des Jenseits, so wie Dante sie uns vorstellt, ist am unmittelbarsten greifbar als moralisches System, in der Verteilung der Seelen auf die drei Reiche und ihre Unterabteilungen' (Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 184).
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- 34 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: the Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 579.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 577.
- 36 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 29.

- 37 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, pp. 578–79.
- 38 Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 18.
- 39 Ibid., pp. 50–51. ‘Cultural criticism is another dismal social science, but literary criticism, as an art, always was and always will be an elitist phenomenon. It was a mistake to believe that literary criticism could become a basis for democratic education or for societal improvement. [...] We need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers. The others, who are amenable to a politicized curriculum, can be abandoned to it. Pragmatically, aesthetic value can be recognized or experienced, but it cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions’ (ibid., p. 17).
- 40 Ibid., p. 78.
- 41 Pietro Cataldi, ‘Perché leggere Dante (oggi)?’, *Allegoria*, 11 (1999), pp. 43–50 and his *Dante e la nascita dell’allegoria* (Palermo: Palumbo, 2008).
- 42 ‘[...] da Dante proviene l’invito, oltre che a concepire la realtà in termini vitalmente distruttivi-costruttivi e non vilmente statici, ad articolare la propria soggettività (distruzione e proposta) in forme mediate e dotate di un senso valido al di là di se stessi, strutturato in un disegno che altri possano comprendere e condividere’ (Cataldi, ‘Perché leggere Dante’, p. 50). ‘E non importa quali valori siano implicati nel poema dantesco: di certo si tratta di valori alti, che mettono chi ne faccia esperienza in condizione, per accoglierli o per respingerli, di collocarsi alla loro stessa altezza, di riconoscersi in un’idea, o in una possibilità, di umanità alta; appunto: generosa e libera’ (ibid, p. 48).
- 43 See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). According to Rorty, the act of reading is similar to the experience of meeting other people, and the specific contribution of literature to our comprehension of the world is related to the fact that books cure our egotism, our illusion of self-sufficiency. See, for instance, Richard Rorty, ‘Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises’, *Telos*, 3 (2001), pp. 243–63. See also Todorov’s remarks: ‘[...] literature does not replace lived experiences but forms a continuum with them and helps me understand them. Denser than daily life but not radically different from it, literature expands our universe, prompts us to see other ways to conceive and organize it. We are all formed from what other people give us: first our parents and then the other people near us. Literature opens to the infinite this possibility of interaction and thus enriches us infinitely. It brings us irreplaceable sensations through which the real world becomes more furnished with meaning and more beautiful. Far from being a simple distraction, an entertainment reserved for educated people, literature lets each one of us fulfill our human potential’ (Todorov, *What is Literature For?*, p. 17).
- 44 Giuseppe Mazzotta, ‘Reflections on Dante Studies in America’, *Dante Studies*, 118 (2000), pp. 323–30 (p. 324).
- 45 Barrett Wendell’s words are quoted in Theodore W. Koch, ‘Dante in America: A Historical and Bibliographical Study’, *Dante Studies*, 118 (2000), pp. 7–56 (p. 47).

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