

Dante's Plurilingualism  
*Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*



EDITED BY SARA FORTUNA,  
MANUELE GRAGNOLATI AND JÜRGEN TRABANT

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## INTRODUCTION



### Dante's Plurilingualism

*Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati and Jürgen Trabant*

While Dante's oeuvre is traditionally considered as the culmination and *summa* of medieval *Weltanschauung*, as far back as 1929 Erich Auerbach highlighted its modern and innovative character, which he associated with the representation of individuality. This book originates from a conference held at the *Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry* in April 2008 in which scholars from different disciplines and cultural traditions were invited to explore the role that language plays in Dante's novelty indicated by Auerbach. Indeed, Dante's discussion of language is encompassed in all his work — albeit intermittently and often implicitly: from the often disregarded seeds of *Vita Nuova* XIII and XXIV–XXV, through the position of *Convivio* I and the core discussion of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, all the way to *Paradiso* XXVI, the problem of language is ever pressing to an author who automatically aligned his practice of poetry with theoretical reflection. The question with which the conference has engaged is to what extent Dante's linguistic theory and praxis, which can be understood in terms of a strenuous defence of the vernacular language, in tension with the prestige of Latin, both informs and reflects a new configuration of the relationship between authority, knowledge and identity that seems to open up towards modernity and is imbued with subjectivity.

From this perspective, for instance, the *Vita Nuova* (1292–94) strikes us for being one of the first, full articulations of an autobiographical 'I'; the *De vulgari eloquentia* (c. 1303–05) for the emphasis it puts on the expressive potential of the vernacular language; the *Convivio* (c. 1304–07) for its confidence in making accessible, in the vernacular, philosophical themes previously treated exclusively in Latin, within the elitist circles of the universities; the *Monarchia* (c. 1313) for its passionate theorization of a lay State that is free of the Church's interference, and the *Commedia* (c. 1308–21) for the breadth and boldness with which it does not only include all these elements but also adds many more, in a full reconfiguration of reality expressed in the vernacular language, finally embraced — beyond any traditional category of medieval rhetorics — in all its openness, variety and multiplicity.

If the *Commedia's* 'plurilingualism' is a key concept and scholarly category proposed by several *Dantisti* (from Auerbach to Contini, to Mengaldo, to the recent discussion by Barański), this book takes it in a broader sense, reuniting scholars with different perspectives and backgrounds, and engaging them in a critical dialogue that can create new connections and thereby investigate the richness of Dante's language and its relationship with anthropology and *episteme* in all their complexity, novelty and relevance. These critical approaches to Dante's texts may also offer hermeneutical

tools to re-consider some of the most interesting ideas within contemporary debates about the origin and function of language, the relationship between language and knowledge, between authority and alterity, as well as between vulgarization and different identities.

The book is structured in three parts: the first is devoted to medieval theories of language and explores Dante's original place with respect to them by focusing on the concepts of universality, unity, variability and plurality; the second part explores the relationship between authority and language and shows Dante's original and different ways of negotiating between the traditional *autoritates* (both Classical and Biblical) and a more modern concept of an author writing in the *volgare* for a broader audience and attempting to integrate in more than one plurilinguistic project a multiplicity of philosophical, rhetorical, theological and linguistic sources; the third part investigates different aspects of the notions of linguistic subjectivity and self-reflectivity from the *Vita Nuova* to the *Commedia*. An epilogue presents a conversation with the writer Giorgio Pressburger on his novel *Nel regno oscuro* (2008), which offers an original interpretation of Dante's *Inferno* and, like all previous novels by Pressburger, is written not in native Hungarian but in Italian.

### Part I: Theories

Plurilingualism is not only a patent fact of Dante's poetical work, but also one of the most important issues of his theoretical writings. His linguistic world was that of the medieval diglossia: Latin as the 'high' language of Power, Science, and Religion, on top, and the 'vulgar' languages, the languages of the people (*vulgus*) and of 'lower' language uses. The vulgar languages were on the rise: they were no longer only the languages of daily life and commerce (vernaculars) but also the languages of the courts and the new powerful urban republics, the languages of secular noble life and culture. They had become the languages of the modern literature which had already flourished for three hundred years in the Romance and Germanic countries of the European West and to which Italy arrives later. However, the vulgar languages had an enormous problem: their plurality.

How it is possible to come to terms with vulgar plurilingualism, as opposed to Latin monolingualism, is Dante's crucial question. He participates in both linguistic worlds: he is a Latin doctor as well as a poet in *volgare* (which he calls also 'doctor' in *De vulgari eloquentia*), and he is actively trying to raise his vulgar language to a higher status. He does this through his own poetic production and through a theoretical reflection which is the most important contribution to linguistic thought between Saint Augustine and the Renaissance. The novelty of his theoretical contribution to philosophy of language is linked to the novelty of his historical position: he is the first European thinker of linguistic diversity. Of course, linguistic diversity has been discussed by nearly every linguistic theoretician from the Bible and Plato onwards. But nobody before Dante — 'nemo ante nos' — has dealt with linguistic diversity in such an elaborate way or developed such a deep understanding of the historicity and variability of language, because nobody before Dante — 'nemo ante nos' — has lived the problem of the plurality of languages in such a vital way as

Dante. Linguistic plurality is the decisive question for the poet in this dramatical diglossic situation: on the one side he has a never-changing, inalterable language of the 'higher' discourses, mainly of *doctrina*; on the other side, he is confronted with the multiplicity of the vulgar languages which differ from city to city, even from village to village, and which change incessantly and rapidly in time and yield no spatial distance and no temporal permanence. Which language should the poet use to guarantee a greater geographical range and perennity — or something close to it — for his poetical productions? Latin, the artificial, universal and eternal language of *doctrina*, is no longer an option since the audience of this poetry is no longer the old Latin theocracy, but the new and modern aristocracy, the 'nobile gente', which is the social support of a new, secular high culture.

As mentioned above, Dante has written on the question of language throughout his works, but mainly in two texts: the *Convivio* and the Latin treatise *De vulgari eloquentia*. The first book of the *Convivio* deals — in the vernacular — with the problem of the descent of the 'highest' human activity — science — into a lower linguistic medium, the *volgare*, which, by this very operation, rises — 'luce nuova, sole nuovo' — to the height of the old language, Latin, which is therefore doomed to *tramonto*, sunset. The most important text on language is *De vulgari eloquentia* which even as a fragment (it ends in the middle of chapter xiv of book II) is Dante's most complete text on language and a complete theory of language, dealing — as 'complete' language theories should — with the three major issues: the essence and function of language, the origin of language, and the diversity of language. And, complementing the *Convivio*, *De vulgari eloquentia* deals clearly with the ascent of the vulgar language to the top of discursive uses. Dante's third canonical reflection on language comes in Adam's speech in canto XXVI of the *Paradiso*.

Since the rediscovery of the treatise in the beginning of the *Cinquecento*, *De vulgari eloquentia* has been at the centre of passionate discussions. Until recently it was mainly read as an essential text on the Italian *questione della lingua* (what is the national language, where is the national language, is Tuscan the national language?). And the — apparent or real — contradictions between *De vulgari eloquentia* and the other language texts have been — and remain — the subject of heated scholarly debates. In recent years, however, *De vulgari eloquentia* has increasingly been considered as a theoretical or philosophical text not only of Italian but also European and even universal importance. Not only Italianists but philosophers and historians of linguistic ideas have recognized the enormous importance of Dante's philosophy of language. Dante has thus been recognized as what he is in the history of linguistic ideas and of the philosophy of language: a milestone in European linguistic reflection, a seminal medieval language theoretician as well as the first modern language theoretician, if we consider the discovery (and the corresponding theory) of the plurality and diversity (historicity) of languages as the decisive step into modernity. The contributions to our conference belong to this new approach to Dante's linguistic reflections. The enthusiasm this great linguistic thinker still arouses in the reader is reflected in the passion of the papers that follow. This is due not only to the literary quality of the great poet's linguistic text, but also to the fact that the issues at the heart of Dante's meditation — the essence of language, the

origin of language, the diversity of language, the language of science — remain at the heart of linguistic reflection today.

Before we reach the volume's various scholarly interpretations of Dante's theory of language, **Giulio Lepschy**, a master of Italian linguistics, reminds us that certain fundamental questions about the reality of Dante's linguistic world cannot be answered from the sources alone. Lepschy begins with an analysis of the problematic term 'mother tongue' and moves to show that we know little about the linguistic competences of medieval speakers. Notwithstanding the testimony of the written texts, we do not know very much about Dante's spoken mother tongue or about Dante's knowledge of other Italian dialects and can only speculate about these issues. Dante's mother tongue was certainly Tuscan, but did his spoken idiom have the traits we consider characteristic of that dialect, such as the 'gorgia toscana'?

**Jürgen Trabant's** interpretation of *De vulgari eloquentia* focusses on Dante's central problem of the plurality of languages. Trabant inserts Dante's quest for a *vulgare illustre* into the millenary tradition of philosophical and religious language criticism. From the very beginning, from Plato onwards, philosophy criticizes the variability of language, variation is considered as the punishment inflicted on language at Babel, and modern analytical philosophy fights the softness and variation of natural language in the name of science. In this sense, Dante is here presented as an analytical language philosopher whose main enemy is *variatio* of language. Dante's solution for his plurilingual and variable linguistic environment follows the model of the *gramatica*, the inalterable identity of the 'high' European language. It is the construction of an ideal language (*signum*) beyond space and time, an ideal language of poetry — which can be found rather in a New Paradise than in the Real World (*mundus*).

In opposition to this comes the reading of **Irène Rosier-Catach**. According to her paper, Dante resolves the problem of linguistic diversity in a dialectical *Aufhebung* of the differences: the Aristotelian *reductio ad unum* does not destroy diversity but allows it to thrive. To support her argument, Rosier-Catach stresses the parallel between Dante's political theory in the *Monarchia* and *De vulgari eloquentia* and links Dante's conception of diversity to Aristotle's optimistic or realistic acceptance of cultural differences. Hence, the *vulgare illustre* is here presented as a 'national' language in which variations are tolerated. Diversity would not be left behind, but integrated in the *unum* of the Italian language (and the Italian kingdom).

Trabant and Rosier do not disagree on the interpretation of the other elements of Dante's linguistic theory, such as for instance the nature of human language (*locutio*) and its position between animals and angels. Their divergence lies in their opposed evaluations of the problem of variation: Trabant is stressing (exaggerating?) the catastrophic tenor of Dante's text, his lamentation about Babel, his desperate search in the 'Italian forest', the absence — and ideal character — of an Italian Court, the abrupt ending of the text which does not descend into the various 'lower' *vulgari*. Rosier-Catach follows the optimistic tradition of the interpretation of linguistic variation, i.e., of Babel as a moment of creative generation of idioms which in a certain way reflects Dante's appraisal of language (*locutio*) as an *egregius actus humanus*.

**Mirko Tavoni** goes right to Dante's main linguistic problem as a citizen of the diglossic medieval world and the problem which this situation creates for a modern poet. He discusses and clarifies the fundamental opposition between *vulgare* and *gramatica*. He shows that this opposition does not only appear in the *Convivio* or in *De vulgari eloquentia* but already in the *Vita Nuova*, and permeates Dante's whole work. *De vulgari eloquentia* conceives of the diglossia as an achronical constellation of languages, a structural and functional opposition which can be found in different countries. After Babel an infinite *variatio* threatens language, and *gramatica* can stop this endless movement and resolve the problem of linguistic diversity. The *inventores gramaticae facultatis* resolve the problem of the instability of the *tertium idioma* of Europe, the language of the West, which has no name but is also a *tripharium idioma* as was the original language of Europe. One of the three languages is the *lingua di sì*, the Italian *vulgare*. Tavoni makes clear that *gramatica* — even if opposed to the Italian *vulgari* — is also 'nostrum', ours, i.e., a language of the Italians, since both — *gramatica* and *lingua di sì* — are outcomes of the *tertium idioma*, one 'artificial' and the other 'natural'.

**Stefano Gensini's** paper aims at proving the cohesion of the linguistic theory through Dante's whole work with regard to what he calls 'naturalismo storicizzante', a historicizing naturalness of language. As Tavoni and Rosier-Catach do with regard to other aspects of Dante's linguistic theory, Gensini refutes interpretations which insist on the inconsistency and incoherence of Dante's linguistic thought (the most famous 'contradictions' being the attribution of the adjective 'noble' to Latin in the *Convivio* and to the *vulgare* in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, and Adam's serene openness to linguistic diversity in *Paradiso* as opposed to the lamentations of *De vulgari eloquentia*). Gensini makes a strong connection between Aristotle and Dante's idea that the naturalness of the linguistic capacity goes together with the naturalness of the cultural variation of languages.

A detailed reconstruction of the similarities between the Aristotelian theory of language and Dante's conception of language can be found in **Franco Lo Piparo's** article. Lo Piparo has shown in his research that Aristotle's true conception of language does not coincide with the classical reading of *De interpretatione* which has so profoundly dominated the European linguistic conception for centuries. The Latin version of *De interpretatione*, familiar to every student in medieval Europe, is the source of linguistic Aristotelianism — and differs greatly from Aristotle's own rich theory of language. The most important Christian philosophers, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas, present linguistic theories influenced by the paradigm of Aristotelianism, while Dante is strikingly close to the genuine Aristotle: the similarities and differences between animal and human language, the natural plurality of the human languages, and the political nature of language are all Aristotelian concepts and represent the basis for Dante's modernity.

Reflecting on the articles on Dante's linguistic theory, one might come to the conclusion that their plea for one cohesive language conception in Dante is rather convincing. But — and this question must still be allowed — even if Dante's theoretical or 'objective' insights remain the same, is it not possible that his attitude towards these insights changes during his lifetime and in view of different linguistic

challenges? Thus, the same insight on the (natural) variation of language might lead to the catastrophistic reaction of *De vulgari eloquentia*, to the love for the Florentine language of affection and proximity in the *Convivio*, or to Adam's liberal serenity in *Paradiso*: 'Cosi o così, secondo che a Dante abbella'?

## Part II: Authority

The theoretical background for the concept of authority is the extensive cultural programme of translations from Latin into Romance and other European vernaculars undertaken in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is by confronting this innovative mode of cultural translation that Dante seeks at once to appropriate the authority previously granted to Latin texts and to perform a transmission of knowledge which is also based on an original re-conceptualization of philosophical and theological *auctoritates*. In this context Dante can be considered as a lay intellectual promulgating a communal and political dimension of philosophical praxis, which he subtracts from the exclusivity of knowledge written and discussed in Latin in the universities and religious schools, and addresses — through an act of vulgarization — the whole of humankind.

Moreover, as Albert Ascoli, among others, has shown in his book *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, Dante's unique attitude towards authority and his *status* as a poet (or rather as 'the perfect poet') depends on the awareness of the intrinsic tensions between the different dimensions of authority and on the sophisticated ability to integrate them. If Dante is able to re-invent his peculiar way of speaking as a poet and as a vulgarizing philosopher, this new language is produced in a tension between an existing multiplicity and an ideal unity, and achieves an original — plurilinguistic — kind of unity.

Contrasting a common hermeneutic view, Zygmunt Barański's paper explores the areas of continuity, rather than the differences, between the *Commedia* and previous works, and argues that Dante's commitment to experimentation and plurilinguism — understood especially as the combination of the 'many and diverse registers and languages of his world [...] to create a new plurilingual synthesis which revealed the potential of the vernacular [...] and established his own standing as the supreme *auctor* and *auctoritas* of this new literary tradition' — begins before the *Commedia* and as early as the *Vita Nuova*. In order to investigate the linguistic experimentation of the *Vita Nuova*, Barański focuses on the numerous Latin expressions that it incorporates, arguing that the *libello's* classical allusions aim mainly at revealing Dante's uncommon knowledge of classical culture, thereby establishing the ambition and the range of his work. The real model of the work, both in its salvific-religious character and its innovative plurilinguism, is the Bible, with its union of poetry and prose and its free and diverse use of the possibility of the *sermo humilis* to encompass all registers and style. According to Barański, it is through its imitation of the Bible that the *Vita Nuova* begins to stress the similarities between Latin and vernacular, dismantling the barriers between a 'natural' and an 'artificial' concept of language and showing an equivalence between them. Although the registers of *Commedia* and *Vita Nuova* are very different, Dante's innovative and

integrative concern with language has the same religious character and originates from the attempt to convey the 'ideas of plurality in likeness linked to a recognition of the wealth of the created universe'.

Bettina Lindorfer's paper explores the role of guilt and punishment in Dante's discourse on language. By focusing on the motif of Babel and on the philosophic-theological tradition which links the themes of guilt, punishment and language with the resulting 'confusion' of tongues, the first part of the article argues that Dante's *mise en scène* of linguistic diversity in *De vulgari eloquentia* endorses an 'ambivalent plurilinguism'. This ambivalent attitude towards plurilinguism is represented according to Lindorfer by a 'contrapasso antitetico', in the sense that in the case of the diversification of the technical languages punishing the groups constructing the tower, the confusion becomes more pronounced according to the extent of their participation. From the perspective of this *contrapasso* sketched in *De vulgari eloquentia* Lindorfer interprets also the most highly confused language of Nimrod, the leader of the Babelic enterprise, whom the *Commedia* places at the very bottom of hell. The second part of the article confronts the issue of linguistic sins in the *Commedia*, not only discussing the damned's verbal sins — the cursers and blasphemers — but also arguing in a broader context that Dante questions the medieval negativity of the 'evil' act of speaking and presents language and speaking as above all positive. In particular, this aspect, which is a sign of Dante's ever increasing freedom with respect to medieval *auctoritates*, clearly appears when the poem frequently stages the act of remaining silent as something taking place 'less out of humility or ascetic castigation of the senses than in order to lend the speech more weight'.

Elena Lombardi's paper explores language within the poetics of the *Commedia*, both as the common and uniquely human operation — the act and significance of speaking — and as dispersive variation — in the form of different languages, distorted languages, non-verbal forms of expression. In particular, Lombardi refers to the concept of 'minority literature' emerging in the studies of German Jewish literature, and makes an analogy between, on the one hand, the vernacular and Yiddish and, on the other hand, Latin and German at Dante and Kafka's times, arguing that the former have a natural, mutable and affective character, while the latter are languages of authority and stability. Lombardi argues that at the beginning of the *Comedy* Dante takes the position of a 'minority author' and applies strategies similar to those of 'textual masochism' as outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Sander Gilman respectively. In this way, Dante can turn the initial sense of the vernacular's powerlessness with respect to Latin (both epic and Biblical) into a language that is subsequently redeemed in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* and is able to maintain its natural and affective character and, at the same time, both to acquire the authority of which it was originally deprived and to represent, with confidence, the breadth of reality from the lowest depths of Evil to the highest summits of Good.

Barański's, Lindorfer's and Lombardi's papers highlight Dante's innovative approach to authority and his original way of negotiating between traditional concepts and a newer sense of the *volgare's* significance and expressive potential. Barański shows that through the experimental character of its linguistic operation, which is informed by the attempt to indicate similarities between the *volgare* and



Latin, the youthful *libello* already succeeds in developing a new artistic mode combining and recombining the various elements of the complex rhetorical, poetical and theological tradition to which it constantly refers. Lindorfer argues that although Dante is well acquainted with the exegetical tradition on the Babelic *confusio linguarum* and with the meticulous classification of vices and punishment of tongue within medieval treatises, he gives an original interpretation of the Babelic punishment and of the representation of the *peccata linguae* — one which stresses the expressive component of these linguistic acts against their classical image as merely impious and condemnable forms of speech. The *Commedia* ideally redeems even these degenerate forms of utterance and inverts the negative value often given to the act of speaking in the Middle Ages. The strategy adopted by the poem in achieving authority and turning the inferior position of *volgare* with respect to Latin into a dominant one is, according to Lombardi, a masochistic procedure which initially performs Dante's inferiority as 'disciple' with respect to Virgil as 'master', but ends up subverting these roles and presenting the Florentine author as the new, Christian *actor*.

### Part III: Subjectivity

Beginning with the presupposition, recently put forward by various scholars, that Dante's texts express both an implicit theory of the speaking subject and a high degree of self-reflectivity, this section engages with contemporary theories and critical reflections. Contributions address some of the central questions arising from the articulation of subjectivity in language: unconscious intentions, change, memory and oblivion, origin of language, desire, performativity, queer figurations, and multi-aspectuality. A common methodological trait of all the contributions of this section could be summarized by the Chinese proverb quoted by Carlo Ginzburg in his article and referred to in his own analysis: 'When a finger points to the moon, the imbecile looks at the finger'. The 'imbecile's methodological attitude — albeit in a slightly different sense from the interpretation of it proposed by Ginzburg — corresponds here to our drawing attention to what Dante's poem indicates about itself, both through specific contents — that is, certain images, metaphors, associations and complex analogic sets — and through a specific form of textuality. In following this interpretative strategy many of the articles in this section are indebted to Teodolinda Barolini's analysis of the *Commedia* which, above all in *The Undivine 'Comedy'*, puts emphasis on the poem's self-reflective character and shows how often its crucial passages express Dante's awareness about the unique, daring character of his work as well as his strenuous inquiry about the conditions for its legitimization.

Another paradigmatic work for confronting the relationship between language and subjectivity is Gary Cestaro's *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body*, which adopts the psychoanalytic model of ontogenesis of language developed by Julia Kristeva for highlighting the tension in Dante's meditation on language between a maternal, bodily, and affective language spontaneously learned by the child and a paternal language whose rules are learned through severe discipline. In particular, Cestaro refers to Kristeva's model which opposes the 'semiotic' — the maternal aspect

of language — to the 'symbolic' — the paternal, adult, fully abstract and rational language — and uses this opposition to theorize a peculiar concept of the 'revolution of poetic language': if for Kristeva such a revolution consists in subverting the order of symbolic language at different levels and thereby having the semiotic texture re-emerge, for Cestaro Dante's *Paradiso* — and above all the last cantos — succeed in creating a new 'maternal' textuality indicated by the numerous images of the infant drinking milk at the mother's breast. This hypothesis, which is also connected to Barolini's idea that the final cantos of the *Commedia* interrupt the linearity of the textual structure and perform a specific 'poetics of uguaglianza', considers the corporeal dimension as a crucial aspect of linguistic subjectivity in the *Commedia*.

Carlo Ginzburg's article opens the section and explores the possibility of applying psychoanalytic paradigms to the past and of investigating textuality as manifesting the author's unconscious. His analysis focuses on the monstrous figure of Geryon in *Inferno* XVI–XVII, which is at once presented as a metaphor of Dante's poem and defined as a 'foul image of fraud'. Rather than following the interpretation that relates the allusion to fraud to the deceptive character inherent in any narrative, Ginzburg relates it to Geryon's connection, first indicated by Ezra Pound, with usury, and argues that Geryon is a 'biological metaphor' associated not only with the poem itself, but also with usury. This double association is the puzzle addressed in the following analysis, where Ginzburg argues that while from a historical perspective Geryon's relationship with usury may be the expression of the fact that Dante's poem originated in a society deeply affected by money economy, from a personal perspective it is related to Dante's hatred for Florence's golden currency. Yet, it is at an unconscious level that the constellation Geryon-usury-poem appears interesting and reveals the author's deep motivations. By referring to Aristotelian and medieval discussions of the relationship between nature, art, and usury, Ginzburg shows that, in this case, the poem's association of the monstrous figure of Geryon with both usury and the poem itself expresses the 'unspeakable truth' that 'the offspring of poetry is comparable to the offspring of money — usury'. Ginzburg concludes that even Dante, who seems otherwise always in control of every single detail of his poetry, has an ego which is — using Freud's famous phrase — 'not master in his own house'.

Lino Pertile explores the connection between Dante's definition of himself as 'trasmutabile [...] per tutte guise' in *Par.* V, 99 and the acrostic 'PESCE' appearing in the same group of tercets, and questions the by now classic distinction between Dante as character and Dante as narrator, to which several critics have also added the further distinction of Dante as author. By pointing to some passages disregarding the poem's chronological assumptions, Pertile argues that — against what has become a *fait accompli* of Dante criticism — a continuous and progressive change, both psychological and moral, does *not* take place in Dante the character throughout the journey, and that the only real 'conversion' in the poem occurs after the encounter with Virgil at the very beginning of the journey. In particular, Pertile argues that of the two major narrative lines of the poem, the private one of Dante's return to Beatrice after ten years of wrongdoings and the public/political/prophetic one of Dante's encounter with the dead, Dante admits some mistakes

and changes only with respect to the former, while he does not recognize any in the latter. Indeed, the public theme is not concerned with Dante's own regeneration but with the denunciation of the evil of the world that has rejected him. Pertile also indicates that in the extant poem the possibly original idea of an orphic 'journey to Beatrice' is intertwined with a public and prophetic theme inspired by Aeneas's descent to the realm of the dead and Saint Paul's visit to Heaven. He stresses that the private theme, where some change is indeed envisioned, functions as what keeps together the poem's complexity.

While Pertile's emphasis on transmutability links together the dimension of individuality with Dante's general anthropological view, Gary Cestaro introduces the concept of 'queer' within a historic-anthropological dimension. In particular, he argues that *Inferno* XV and XXVI express a tension between an ancient concept of pedagogical *eros* centred on intergenerational male–male desire and a concept of sodomy connected to literary humanism and emerging in the late Middle Ages which strictly opposes male–male sexuality. Cestaro refers to Lee Edelman's recent critical exploration of queer's relation to time, according to which a significant feature of queer is its potential to contest the 'reproductive futurism' typical of the heteronormative obsession with biological reproduction and a forward-moving, linear concept of time. By connecting his previous reading of *Inferno* XV, which showed the homoerotic undertones of the encounter between Brunetto and Dante, with an analysis of *Inferno* XXVI, Cestaro argues that, like Brunetto, Ulysses also enacts sodomitical hubris concerned with queer power of pedagogical insemination and productive potential of words rather than with heteronormative biological reproduction. Cestaro indicates that the Brunetto and Ulysses episodes abound in figures of retroaction and deploy a 'poetics of the behind' which characterizes the queer and homoerotic in Dante and, in this cases, challenges a linear concept of time, expressing the morally dangerous fantasy of male–male, pedagogical reproduction as an alternative to biological procreation. When focussing on the tragic conclusion of the Ulysses episode, Cestaro shows that on the one hand the queer fascination with the Greek hero is tightly connected to Dante's deepest ambitions, while, on the other hand, the ancient humanist *ethos* that it represents and that is the expression of an older sex–gender system ends up being suppressed by the more modern, Christian mode and its moralizing, heteronormative attempt to limit intellectual hubris and erotic exuberance, and straighten history and time.

On the one hand, the idea of the dangerous fantasy of male–male, pedagogical reproduction as an alternative to biological procreation resonates with Ginzburg's analysis of Geryon as an image of usury and with the identification of Dante's poem with a form of reproduction antithetical to the biological one. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the *Inferno*'s rejection of queer paradigms seems to contrast with what will happen in *Paradiso*, where — as Cestaro himself has noticed — the re-emergence of the maternal, affective, bodily dimension and of a special and temporal circularity seem to replace any linear, paternal and heteronormative form of 'reproductive futurism'.

Francesca Southerden's paper engages with some of the central questions and problems arising from the articulation of subjectivity in language in the Earthly

Paradise cantos of *Purgatorio*, and offers a rereading of the episode of Dante and Beatrice's confrontation in Eden from the point of view of Dante's inability to speak in the moment immediately preceding his confession. Showing how the pilgrim's voice is 'mortified' — 'humiliated', 'put to death', as well as 'purged' — Southerden argues that the experience of aphasia is a form of linguistic *contrapasso* that forces poet and character to confront the voice as a site of loss, negativity and fallenness before it can be recuperated as a language of confession and thus of grace.

This 'fallen' voice is shown to coincide with a particular response to loss, located temporally in the period following Beatrice's death, which could be viewed as melancholic. Recalling an earlier mode of 'broken speech' that was the 'voice of grief', it symbolizes the condition — documented by the *Rime*, *Vita Nuova* and *Convivio* — of being in thrall to loss or somehow masking or denying the reality of death, pursuing the phantasm of 'cose fallaci' that deceive precisely because they conceal the fact that they will also die, as transient and mutable as the desire that bent in their direction. Discussing these phenomena in light of Dante's own theories of language in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, as well as contemporary discourses on mourning and melancholia in the works of Sigmund Freud and Ernesto De Martino, Southerden shows how the 'memorie triste' that the penitent subject is called upon to purge also incorporate the poetic memory of Dante's earlier transgressions and the necessity of laying aside the 'seme del piangere' that has been the greatest obstacle to salvation. By forcing the 'I', in Eden, to confront again the reality of that loss, Dante suggests that the negativity of language and desire can, and must, be overturned, redeeming the sign and restoring the subject to himself.

Manuele Gragnolati's paper also inquires into the relationship between desire, corporeality, and language, exploring the tension between two seemingly different understandings of identity in Dante's oeuvre: an emphasis on the body and the body's materiality in the *Commedia*, and an interest in the performative and discursive construction of identity in the *Vita Nuova*. By establishing a connection between *Purgatorio* II's reworking of the Classical motif of the failed embraces between the living and the dead, and *Paradiso* XIV's praise of the resurrected body, Gragnolati shows that the *Commedia* displays a corporeal sense of identity which is not discursive and cannot be constructed or, using today's terminology, is irreducible to language. On the other hand, Gragnolati discusses the complex way in which the autobiographical 'I' relates to language in the *Vita Nuova*, which gives new meanings to poems previously written and thereby creates a new, different author. In particular, Gragnolati argues that Dante's *libello* not only stages an increasingly disembodied sense of identity, but also emphatically confirms Roland Barthes's thesis that the author does not pre-exist the text but is performed by it. Gragnolati moves then to discuss what makes it possible for the *Commedia* and the *Vita Nuova* to perform such different emphases, and argues that one of the reasons lies in the texts' different concept and use of the *volgare*, as experimental and innovative but still limited and 'tamed' in the *Vita Nuova*, which still thinks of Latin as a model of linguistic authority, and innovative and 'fluid' in the *Commedia*, which goes beyond medieval categories of rhetoric and embraces the vernacular in all its openness, extension and corporeality.

Engaging with the connection between bodily appearance, poetic language and self-reflectivity, Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati explore Dante's poetic and philosophical use of the word 'aspetto' in Dante's oeuvre — and in particular in *Paradiso* — in connection with Ludwig Wittgenstein's conceptual constellation of aspect, aspect-change, seeing-as and human physiognomy. Their hypothesis, which pushes further a connection between Dante and Wittgenstein indicated first by Stanley Cavell and more recently by Christian Moevs, is that in both authors an original ethics of language takes the shape of a particular form of writing. Philosophical and poetic languages are rooted in the ordinary language but must go beyond the inherent lack of ordinary communication, which is limited by its practical character and can only express the individual aspects of reality as disconnected from one another. After a first section which compares Wittgenstein's ethics of language to Dante's linguistic meditation, a second one focuses on Wittgenstein's reflections on 'seeing-as', as a perceptive, aesthetic and linguistic phenomenon and, in particular, on his idea that a 'poetic' and a truly philosophical use of language can not only have access to the multi-layered character of reality, but also give a 'perspicuous representation' of it, that is, make visible the formal complexity of language while performing it. The authors move then to explore the complex use of 'aspetto' in *Convivio* and *Commedia*, where it appears in the enantiosemic sense of both the subject's gaze and the object's appearance. In particular, by also referring to Teodolinda Barolini's image of the *Paradiso's* 'jumping textuality' and, via Gary Cestaro, to Julia Kristeva's idea of 'revolution of poetic language', they explore the *Paradiso's* success in combining different, and often opposite, meanings, showing that Wittgenstein's conceptual frame on perception and language helps to understand the original role that the use of 'aspetto' in *Paradiso* plays in the simultaneous attempt to create a new language capable of expressing the heavenly experience of 'trasumanar' and reflecting about this attempt.

Linguistic subjectivity is declined by Dante in many different ways until a final poetic conversion in *Paradiso* which enacts the convergence of linguistic elements previously deemed as irreconcilable. All the contributions of this section indicate that the subjective dimension introduces a relevant tension both within the evolution of Dante's production and in the *Commedia*: whereas Dante's staging himself as a 'perfect' author also presupposes a complete mastery of his poetic intentions, as it is shown by Ginzburg, a fully accomplished manifestation of subjectivity includes at least the possibility that unconscious elements emerge, conflicting with the author's conscious mastery. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the very expression of subjectivity seems to be necessarily linked — in all of Dante's poetic works in the vernacular — with the most personal, individual and affective experiences — as for instance, his love for Beatrice, which, according to Pertile's interpretation of the *Commedia*, would even represent the only element inducing a real change in Dante. But even the form of linguistic subjectivity evolves along Dante's poetic development, and for instance, while Barański is interested in showing the similarities between the *libello* and the *Commedia*, Gragnolati distinguishes between the discursive and increasingly disembodied concept of identity in the former and the corporeal experience staged in the latter, and Southerden explores how the

*Commedia* offers a different kind of model for the subject's and the poet's voice than the *Vita Nuova*. Furthermore, the polysemic extension of the word 'aspetto' in *Paradiso* analysed by Fortuna and Gragnolati is tightly linked to Dante's exchange with Beatrice and includes the sense of complete bodily appearance.

With the greater space given to subjectivity in the *Commedia*, a new model of plurilingualism emerges, which is different from the language of the works more concerned with theoretical speculation and/or issues of authority. Indeed, a more direct and complementary relation links the theory of language with the concept of authority: Dante, who reflects as a philosopher on the possibility of solving the inherent variability of human languages through the creation of an exemplary form of *volgare*, is always aware of the deep connection between these theoretical issues and the endeavour to create a language for both his enterprise as a poet in *volgare* and his intellectual activity as *volgarizzatore*. By contrast, the increasing emphasis on the subjective dimension in Dante's last work seem to introduce a caesura in his development, opening up new possibilities for his language and poetry.

The volume concludes with the discussion of the legacy that the *Commedia's* original negotiation between a personal, individual level and a collective or even universal one, has left in a very recent appropriation of Dante's *Inferno*: Giorgio Pressburger's *Nel regno oscuro*. Like all the previous prose works by the 1937 Hungarian-born Jewish author who emigrated to Italy in 1956, *Nel regno oscuro* is written in Italian. It is the first part of a planned trilogy inspired by the *Commedia* which integrates the Mittel-European mode of Pressburger's previous works with the attempt to engage with, or even rewrite, the first part of Dante's *magnum opus*.

The discussion, held during the conference at the ICI between the author and Emma Bond, Manuele Gragnolati and Laura Lepschy, focuses on the relationship between language, psychoanalysis and representation expressed by the novel and investigates the original way in which it captures the Dantean model to mediate between a subjective and a collective level: Dante's descent to Hell metamorphoses into a phantasmagoric voyage into the most intimate and obscure dimensions of the human psyche and also a journey through the tragic events of the twentieth century, and the *Shoah* in particular. The role of Virgil, Dante's guide in the *Inferno*, is taken by Sigmund Freud, and the journey of the melancholic protagonist begins as a psychoanalytical therapy to come to terms with the loss of his father and twin brother, but soon takes the shape of a series of encounters with the shades of historical figures. Like Dante, Pressburger uses language to build a world, but this world is not the realm of justice as in the *Inferno*. Rather, Hell is on Earth and is the condition of gratuitous and senseless suffering to which History has damned many innocent people, mostly Jews and other victims of Nazism and other Fascist dictatorships: Rosa Luxemburg, Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, Anne Frank, Edith Stein, Federico Garcia Lorca, Marina Tsvetaeva, Aby Warburg, Antonio Gramsci, and many others, including relatives of the narrator and the women and children exterminated in the concentration camps of Ravensbrück and Theresienstadt.

Pressburger explains that in his novel psychoanalysis has a 'technical function' that allows to stage 'degli incontri impossibili', impossible encounters with dead people without recurring to 'theology': many figures, especially those whose lives

remain in some way unresolved or unexplained, have marked the narrator so much that they have become part of his psyche, and he encounters them in his fantasy during the psychoanalytical therapy. In this way, the analysis of the narrator's psyche can take the shape of a series of encounters with people who died in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thereby acquiring the collective dimension which is a significant component of the novel.

While several essays in this volume have shown that approaches drawing on psychoanalysis can offer significant insights on Dante's texts, *Nel regno oscuro* is explicitly modelled upon a psychoanalytic paradigm. Indeed the text is presented as 'una specie di magazzino dell'inconscio' — a sort of deposit for the unconscious of its disturbed protagonist. In this Freudian context, the novel is structured as a veritable journey into the narrator's psyche, and the narrative is not linear or structured along the lines of Dante's ordered systematization, where everything has its own place and the reader is given the sense of a universe where *tout se tient* (although, as Ginzburg shows, Dante's control over his text could also exceptionally fail), but through the method of free associations in a circular movement, always revolving around the same issues and conveying the way in which the unconscious works or at least is manifested on the couch during the therapy. In *Nel regno oscuro* a psychoanalytical concept of subjectivity has become an experimental form of narrative where the idiosyncratic character of the narrator's associations is pushed to its extreme. Yet while it may seem that Pressburger's hyper-subjective novel may contrast with the *Commedia's* universal character, it is psychoanalysis itself that in the twenty-first century allows it to mediate between the personal and the exemplary and emerge, in this sense, as profoundly Dantean.

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