The Poets' Dante

Edited by
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NOW DO U UNDERSTAND WHAT HEAVEN IS
IT IS THE SURROUND OF THE LIVING
James Merrill, The Changing Light at Sandover

In memory of
David Kalstone and James Merrill
Poetic discourse is a hybrid process, one which crosses two sound modes: the first of these is the modulation we hear and sense in the prosodic instruments of poetic discourse in its spontaneous flow; the second is the discourse itself, i.e. the intonational and phonological performance of these instruments.

Understood in this way, poetry is not a part of nature, not even its best or choicest part, let alone a reflection of it—this would make a mockery of the axioms of identity; rather, poetry establishes itself with astonishing independence in a new extra-spatial field of action, not so much narrating as acting out in nature by means of its arsenal of devices, commonly known as tropes.

It is only with the severest qualifications that poetic discourse or thought may be referred to as "sounding"; for we hear in it only the crossing of two lines, one of which, taken by itself, is completely mute, while the other, abstracted from its prosodic transmutation, is totally devoid of significance and interest, and is susceptible of paraphrasing, which, to my mind, is surely a sign of non-poetry. For where there is amenability to paraphrase, there the sheets have never been rumpled, there poetry, so to speak, has never spent the night.

Dante is a master of the instruments of poetry; he is not a manufacturer of tropes. He is a strategist of transmutation and hybridization; he is least of all a poet in the "general European" sense or in the usage of cultural jargon.

Wrestlers tying themselves into a knot in the arena may be viewed as an instance of the mutation of instruments into harmony:

These naked, glistening wrestlers who walk
Back and forth, strutting about
And showing off their physical
Prowess before grappling in the decisive
Fight . . .

(Inf. 16.22-24)

whereas the modern film, metamorph of the tapeworm, turns into the wickedest parody of the use of prosodic instruments in poetic discourse, for its frames simply move forward without conflict, merely replacing one another.

Imagine something intelligible, grasped, wrested from obscurity, in a language voluntarily and willingly forgotten immediately after the act of intellection and realization is completed . . .

What is important in poetry is only the understanding which brings it about—not at all the passive, reproducing, or paraphrasing understanding. Semantic adequacy is equivalent to the feeling of having fulfilled a command.

The signal waves of meaning vanish, having completed their work; the more potent they are, the more yielding, and the less inclined to linger.

Otherwise stereotypes are inevitable, the hammering in of those manufactured nails known as images of cultural history.

Superficial explanatory imagery is incompatible with suitability as an instrument of poetic discourse.

The quality of poetry is determined by the speed and decisiveness with which it embodies its schemes and commands in diction, the instrumentless, lexical, purely quantitative verbal mat-
Poetic discourse is a carpet fabric containing a plethora of textile warps differing from one another only in the process of coloration, only in the partitura of the perpetually changing commands of the instrumental signaling system.

It is an extremely durable carpet, woven out of fluid: a carpet in which the currents of the Ganges, taken as a fabric theme, do not mix with the samples of the Nile or the Euphrates, but remain multicolored, in braids, figures, and ornaments—not in patterns, though, for a pattern is the equivalent of paraphrase. Ornament is good precisely because it preserves traces of its origin like a piece of nature enacted. Whether the piece is animal, vegetable, steppe, Scythian or Egyptian, indigenous or barbarian, it is always speaking, seeing, acting.

Ornament is stanzaic. Pattern is of the line.

The poetic hunger of the old Italians is magnificent, their youthful, animal appetite for harmony, their sensual lust after rhyme—il disio!

The mouth works, the smile nudges the line of verse, cleverly and gaily the lips redden, the tongue trustingly presses itself against the palate.

The inner form of the verse is inseparable from the countless changes of expression flitting across the face of the narrator who speaks and feels emotion.

The art of speech distorts our face in precisely this way; it disrupts its calm, destroys its mask...

When I began to study Italian and had barely familiarized myself with its phonetics and prosody, I suddenly understood that the center of gravity of my speech efforts had been moved closer to my lips, to the outer parts of my mouth. The tip of the tongue suddenly turned out to have the seat of honor. The sound rushed toward the locking of the teeth. And something else that struck me was the infantile aspect of Italian phonetics, its beautiful childlike quality, its closeness to infant babbling, to some kind of eternal dadaism.

E consolando, usava l’idioma
Che prima i padri e le madri trastulla;
... Favoleggiava con la sua famiglia
De’Troiani, de Fiesole, e di Roma.
(Par. 15.122–26)

Would you like to become acquainted with the dictionary of Italian rhymes? Take the entire Italian dictionary and leaf through it as you will... Here every word rhymes. Every word begs to enter into concordanza.

The abundance of marriageable endings is fantastic. The Italian verb increases in strength toward its end and only comes to life in the ending. Each word rushes to burst forth, to fly from the lips, to run away, to clear a place for the others.

When it became necessary to trace the circumference of a time for which a millennium is less than a wink of an eyelash, Dante introduced infantile “trans-sense” language into his astronomical, concordant, profoundly public, homiletic lexicon.

Dante’s creation is above all the entrance of the Italian language of his day onto the world stage, its entrance as a totality, as a system.

The most dadaist of the Romance languages moves forward to take the first place among nations.
We must give some examples of Dante's rhythms. People know nothing about this, but they must be shown. Whoever says, "Dante is sculptural," is influenced by the impoverished definitions of that great European. Dante's poetry partakes of all the forms of energy known to modern science. Unity of light, sound and matter form its inner nature. Above all, the reading of Dante is an endless labor, for the more we succeed, the further we are from our goal. If the first reading brings on only shortness of breath and healthy fatigue, then equip yourself for subsequent readings with a pair of indestructible Swiss hobnailed boots. In all seriousness the question arises: how many shoe soles, how many oxhide soles, how many sandals did Alighieri wear out during the course of his poetic work, wandering the goat paths of Italy.

Both the Inferno and, in particular, the Purgatorio glorify the human gait, the measure and rhythm of walking, the footstep and its form. The step, linked with breathing and saturated with thought, Dante understood as the beginning of prosody. To indicate walking he utilizes a multitude of varied and charming turns of phrase.

In Dante philosophy and poetry are constantly on the go, perpetually on their feet. Even a stop is but a variety of accumulated movement: a platform for conversations is created by Alpine conditions. The metrical foot is the inhalation and exhalation of the step. Each step draws a conclusion, invigorates, syllogizes.

Education is schooling in the swiftest possible associations. You grasp them on the wing, you are sensitive to allusions—therein lies Dante's favorite form of praise.

The way Dante understands it, the teacher is younger than the pupil, for he "runs faster."

When he turned aside he appeared to me like one of those runners who chase each other over the green meadows around Verona,

and his physique was such that he struck me as belonging to the host of winners, not to the losers . . .

The metaphor's rejuvenating power brings the educated old man, Brunetto Latini, back to us in the guise of a youthful victor at a Veronese track meet.

What is Dantean erudition? Aristotle, like a double-winged butterfly, is edged with the Arabian border of Averroes.

Averois, che il gran commento feo
(Inf. 4.144)

Here the Arab Averois accompanies the Greek Aristotle. They are both components of the same drawing. They can both find room on the membrane of a single wing.

The conclusion of canto 4 of the Inferno is truly an orgy of quotations. I find here a pure and unalloyed demonstration of Dante's keyboard of references.

A keyboard stroll around the entire horizon of Antiquity. Some Chopin polonaise in which an armed Caesar with a gryphon's eyes dances alongside Democritus, who had just finished splitting matter into atoms.

A quotation is not an excerpt. A quotation is a cicada. Its natural state is that of unceasing sound. Having once seized hold of the air, it will not let it go. Erudition is far from being equivalent to a keyboard of references for the latter comprises the very essence of education.

By this I mean that a composition is formed not as a result of accumulated particulars, but due to the fact that one detail after another is torn away from the object, leaves it, darts out, or is chipped away from the system to go out into a new functional space or dimension, but each time at a strictly regulated mo-
ment and under circumstances which are sufficiently ripe and unique.

We do not know things themselves; on the other hand, we are highly sensitive to the facts of their existence. Thus, in reading Dante's cantos we receive communiqués, as it were, from the battlefield and from that data make superb guesses as to how the sounds of the symphony of war are struggling with each other, although each bulletin taken by itself merely indicates some slight shift of the flags for strategic purposes or some minor changes in the timbre of the cannonade.

Hence, the thing emerges as an integral whole as a result of the simple differentiating impulse which transfixed it. Not for one instant does it retain any identity with itself. If a physicist, having once broken down an atomic nucleus, should desire to put it back together again, he would resemble the partisans of descriptive and explanatory poetry for whom Dante represents an eternal plague and a threat.

If we could learn to hear Dante, we would hear the ripening of the clarinet and the trombone, we would hear the transformation of the viola into a violin and the lengthening of the valve on the French horn. And we would be able to hear the formation around the lute and the theorbo of the nebulous nucleus of the future homophonic three-part orchestra.

Furthermore, if we could hear Dante, we would be unexpectedly plunged into a power flow, known now in its totality as a "composition," now in its particularity as a "metaphor," now in its indirectness as a "simile," that power flow which gives birth to attributes so that they may return to it, enriching it with their own melting and, having barely achieved the first joy of becoming, they immediately lose their primogeniture in merging with the matter which is rushing in among the thoughts and washing against them.

The beginning of canto 10 of the Inferno. Dante urges us into the inner blindness of the compositional clot:

We now climbed up the narrow path between the craggy wall and the martyrs—my teacher and I right at his back . . .

All our efforts are directed toward the struggle against the density and darkness of the place. Illuminated shapes cut through it like teeth. Here strength of character is as essential as a torch in a cave. Dante never enters into single combat with his material without having first prepared an organ to seize it, without having armed himself with some instrument for measuring concrete time as it drips or melts. In poetry, where everything is measure and everything derives from measure, revolves about it and for its sake, instruments of measure are tools of a special kind, performing an especially active function. Here the trembling hand of the compass not only indulges the magnetic storm, but makes it itself.

And thus we can see that the dialogue of canto 10 of the Inferno is magnetized by the forms of verb tenses: the perfective and imperfective past, the subjunctive past, even the present and the future are all categorically and authoritatively presented in the tenth canto.

The entire canto is constructed on several verbal thrusts which leap boldly out of the text. Here the table of conjugations opens like a fencing tournament, and we literally hear how the verbs mark time.

First thrust:

La gente che per li sepolcri giace
Potrebbesi veder? . . .

"May I be permitted to see those people laid in open graves?"

Second thrust:

... Volgiti: che fai?
The horror of the present tense is given here, some kind of terror praesentis. Here the unalloyed present is taken as a sign introduced to ward off evil. The present tense, completely isolated from both the future and the past, is conjugated like pure fear, like danger.

Three nuances of the past tense (which has absolved itself of any responsibility for what has already occurred) are given in the following tercet:

I fixed my eyes on him,
And he drew himself up to his full height,
As if his great disdain could disparage Hell.

And then, like a mighty tuba, the past tense explodes in Farinata's question:

... Chi fuor li maggior tui?

"Who were your forefathers?"

How that auxiliary verb is stretched out here, that little truncated fuor instead of fuor! Wasn't it through the lengthening of a valve that the French horn was formed?

Next comes a slip of the tongue in the form of the past perfect. This slip felled the elder Cavalcanti: from Alighieri, a comrade and contemporary of his son, the poet Guido Cavalcanti, still thriving at the time he heard something—it little matters what—about his son using the fatal past perfect: ebbe.

And how astonishing that precisely this slip of the tongue opens the way for the main stream of the dialogue: Cavalcanti fades away like an oboe or clarinet, having played its part, while Farinata, like a deliberate chess player, continues his interrupted move, and renews the attack:

"E se," continuando al primo detto,
"S'egli han quell'arte," disse, "male appresa,
Ciò mi tormenta più che questo letto."

The dialogue in the tenth canto of the Inferno is an unanticipated explicator of the situation. It flows out all by itself from the interstices of the rivers.

All useful information of an encyclopedic nature turns out to have been already communicated in the opening lines of the canto. Slowly but surely the amplitude of the conversation broadens; mass scenes and crowd images are obliquely introduced.

When Farinata rises up contemptuous of Hell, like a great nobleman who somehow landed in jail, the pendulum of the conversation is already swinging across the full diameter of the gloomy plain now invaded by flames.

The scandal in literature is a concept going much further back than Dostoevsky; however, in the thirteenth century and in Dante's writings it was much more powerful. Dante collides with Farinata in this undesirable and dangerous encounter just as Dostoevsky's rogues run into their tormentors in the most inopportune places. A voice floats forward; it remains unclear to whom it belongs. It becomes more and more difficult for the reader to conduct the expanding canto. This voice—the first theme of Farinata—is the minor Dantean arioso of the suppliant type—extremely typical of the Inferno:

O Tuscan, who travels alive through this fiery city and speaks so eloquently! Do not refuse to stop for a moment... Through your speech I recognized you as a citizen of that noble
understanding him and to a profound study of his work, and this situation shall continue for a long time to come. His lapidary quality is no more than a product of the enormous inner imbalance which expressed itself in dream executions, in imagined encounters, in elegant retorts prepared in advance and fostered on bile, aimed at destroying his enemy once and for all and invoking the final triumph.

How often did the kindest of fathers, the preceptor, reasonable man, and guardian snub the internal raznochinites of the fourteenth century who found it such agony to be a part of the social hierarchy, while Boccaccio, practically his contemporary, delighted in the same social system, plunged into it, gamboled about in it?

"Che fai?" (What are you doing?) sounds literally like a teacher's cry: you've lost your mind! ... Then the sounds of the organ come to the rescue, drowning out the shame and concealing the embarrassment.

It is absolutely false to perceive Dante's poem as some extended single-line narrative or even as having but a single voice. Long before Bach and at a time when large monumental organs were not yet being built and only the modest embryonic prototypes of the future wonders existed, when the leading instrument for voice accompaniment was still the zither, Alighieri constructed in verbal space an infinitely powerful organ and already delighted in all its conceivable stops, inflated its bellows, and roared and cooed through all its pipes.

Come avesse lo inferno in gran dispitto

(Inf. 10.36)

is the line which gave birth to the entire European tradition of demonism and Byronism. Meanwhile, instead of raising his sculpture on a pedestal as Hugo, for instance, might have done, Dante envelops it in a sordine, wraps it round with gray twilight, and conceals it at the very bottom of a sack of mute sounds.
It is presented in the diminuendo stop, it falls to the ground out of the window of the hearing.
In other words, its phonetic light is turned off. The gray shadows have blended.

The *Divina Commedia* does not so much take up the reader's time as augment it, as if it were a musical piece being performed.

As it becomes longer, the poem moves further away from its end, and the very end itself approaches unexpectedly and sounds like the beginning.

The structure of the Dantean monologue, built like the stop mechanism of an organ, can be well understood by making use of an analogy with rock strata whose purity has been destroyed by the intrusion of foreign bodies.

Granular admixtures and veins of lava indicate a single fault or catastrophe as the common source of the formation.

Dante's poetry is formed and colored in precisely this geological manner. Its material structure is infinitely more significant than its celebrated sculptural quality. Imagine a monument of granite or marble whose symbolic function is intended not to represent a horse or a rider, but to reveal the inner structure of the marble or granite itself. In other words, imagine a granite monument erected in honor of granite, as if to reveal its very idea. Having grasped this, you will then be able to understand quite clearly just how form and content are related in Dante's work.

Any unit of poetic speech, be it a line, a stanza or an entire lyrical composition, must be regarded as a single word. For instance, when we enunciate the word "sun," we do not toss out an already prepared meaning—this would be tantamount to semantic abortion—rather we are experiencing a peculiar cycle.

Any given word is a bundle, and meaning sticks out of it in various directions, not aspiring toward any single official point. In pronouncing the word "sun," we are, as it were, undertaking an enormous journey to which we are so accustomed that we travel in our sleep. What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech is that it rouses us and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word. Then it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road.

The semantic cycles of Dantine cantos are constructed in such a way that what begins, for example, as "honey" (*med*), ends up as "bronze" (*med*), what begins as "a dog's bark" (*lai*), ends up as "ice" (*led").

Dante, when he feels the need, calls eyelids "the lips of the eye." This is when ice crystals of frozen tears hang from the lashes and form a shield which prevents weeping.

Gli occhi lor, ch'eran pria pur dentro molli,
Gocciar su per le labbra ...

*(Inf. 32.46-47)*

Thus, suffering crosses the sense organs, producing hybrids, and bringing about the labial eye.

There is not just one form in Dante, but a multitude of forms. One is squeezed out of another and only by convention can one be inserted into another.

He himself says:

*Io premerei di mio concetto il sucio—*

*(Inf. 32.4)*

"I would squeeze the juice out of my idea, out of my conception"—that is, he considers form as the thing which is squeezed out, not as that which serves as a covering.

In this way, strange as it may seem, form is squeezed out of the content-conception which, as it were, envelops the form. Such is Dante's precise thought.

But whatever it may be, we cannot squeeze something out of anything except a wet sponge or rag. Try as we may to twist the
conception even into a plait, we will never squeeze any form out of it unless it is already a form itself. In other words, any process involving the creation of form in poetry presupposes lines, periods, or cycles of sound forms, as is the case with individually pronounced semantic units.

A scientific description of Dante's *Commedia*, taken as a flow, as a current, would inevitably assume the look of a treatise on metamorphoses, and would aspire to penetrate the multitudinous states of poetic matter, just as a doctor in making his diagnosis listens to the multitudinous unity of the organism. Literary criticism would then approach the method of living medicine.

-III-

Examining the structure of the *Divina Commedia* as best I can, I come to the conclusion that the entire poem is but one single unified and indivisible stanza. Rather, it is not a stanza, but a crystallographic figure, that is, a body. Some incessant craving for the creation of form penetrates the entire poem. It is strictly a stereometric body, one continuous development of the crystallographic theme. It is inconceivable that anyone could grasp with the eye alone or even visually imagine to oneself this form of thirteen thousand facets, so monstrous in its exactitude. My lack of even the most obvious information about crystallography, an ignorance in this field as in many others common in my circle, deprives me of the pleasure of grasping the true structure of the *Divina Commedia*, but such is the marvelously stimulating power of Dante that he has awakened in me a concrete interest in crystallography, and as a grateful reader—letitore—I shall try to satisfy him.

The process of creating this poem's form transcends our conceptions of literary invention and composition. It would be much more correct to recognize instinct as its guiding principle. The exemplary definitions proposed here are hardly intended to show off my own metaphorical capacity. Rather, I am engaged in a struggle to make the work comprehensible as an entity, to graphically demonstrate that which is conceivable. Only through metaphor is it possible to find a concrete sign to represent the instinct for form creation by which Dante accumulated and poured forth his terza rima.

We must try to imagine, therefore, how bees might have worked at the creation of this thirteen-thousand-faceted form, bees endowed with the brilliant stereometric instinct, who attracted bees in greater and greater numbers as they were required. The work of these bees, constantly keeping their eye on the whole, is of varying difficulty at different stages of the process. Their cooperation expands and grows more complicated as they participate in the process of forming the combs, by means of which space virtually emerges out of itself.

The bee analogy is suggested, by the way, by Dante himself. Here are three lines, the opening of canto 16 of the *Inferno*:

Ӡя ера в loco ove s'udia il rimombbo
Dell' acqua che cadea nell' altro giro,
Simile a quel che l'arnie fanno rombo . . .

Dante's comparisons are never descriptive, that is, purely representational. They always pursue the concrete task of presenting the inner form of the poem's structure or driving force. Let us take the very large group of "bird" similes—all of them extensive caravans now of cranes, now of grackles, now of swallows in classical military phalanxes, now the anarchically disorderly crows so unsuited to the Latin military formation—this entire group of extended similes always corresponds to the instinct for the pilgrimage, the journey, colonization, migration. Or, for example, let us take the equally large group of river similes, portraying the rise in the
Apennines of the river Arno which irrigates the valley of Tuscany, or the descent of the Alpine wet nurse, the river Po, into the valley of Lombardy. This group of similes is distinguished by its extraordinary breadth and its graduated descent from tercet to tercet, always leading to a complex of culture, homeland and settled civilization, to a political and national complex, so conditioned by the watersheds and, in addition, by the power and the direction of the rivers.

The force of a Dantean simile, strange as it may seem, operates in direct proportion to our ability to do without it. It is never dictated by some beggarly logical necessity. Tell me, if you can, what necessitated Dante's comparing the poem as it was being concluded with part of a donna's attire (what we call a "skirt" nowadays, but in old Italian would, at best, have been called a "cloak" or in general, a "dress"), or comparing himself with a tailor who had, excuse the expression, exhausted his material?

—I V—

In succeeding generations, as Dante moved further and further beyond the reach of the public and even of the artists themselves, he became shrouded in ever greater mystery. Dante himself was striving for clear and precise knowledge. He was difficult for contemporaries, exhausting, but he rewarded their efforts with knowledge. Later everything became much worse. An ignorant cult of Dantean mysticism was elaborately developed, devoid, like the very concept of mysticism, of any concrete substance. There also appeared the "mysterious" Dante of the French engravings, consisting of a monk's hood, an aquiline nose, and his procuring of something among the mountain crags.

Among us in Russia none other than Alexander Blok fell victim to this voluptuous ignorance on the part of the ecstatic adepts of Dante who never read him:

Dante's shade with his aquiline profile
Sings to me of the New Life ... 

The inner illumination of Dantean space derived from structural elements alone was of absolutely no interest to anyone.

I will now show how little concern Dante's early readers indicated for his so-called mysticism. I have in front of me a photograph of a miniature from one of the very earliest copies of Dante, dating from the middle of the 14th century (from the collection of the Perugia library). Beatrice is showing Dante the Trinity. There is a bright background with peacock designs, like a gay calico hanging. The Trinity in a willow frame is ruddy, rose-cheeked, and round as merchants. Dante Alighieri is depicted as a dashing young man, and Beatrice as a vivacious, buxom young girl. Two absolutely ordinary figures, a scholar brimming over with health courts a no less flourishing city maiden.

Spengler, who dedicated some superb pages to Dante, nevertheless viewed him from his loge at the German State Opera Theater, and when he says "Dante," we must nearly always understand "Wagner" on the Munich stage.

The purely historical approach to Dante is just as unsatisfactory as the political or theological approach. The future of Dante criticism belongs to the natural sciences when they will have achieved a sufficient degree of refinement and developed their capacity for thinking in images.

With all my might I would like to refute that loathsome legend which depicts Dante's coloring as either indisputably dull or of an infamous Spenglerian brownish hue. First of all, I will cite the testimony of a contemporary, an illuminator. This miniature is from the same collection of the museum in Perugia. It belongs to canto 1: "I saw a beast and turned back."

Here is a description of the coloring of that remarkable miniature, of a higher quality than the preceding one, and fully in accord with the text:
“Dante’s clothing is bright blue (adzhuna chiara). Virgil’s beard is long and his hair is gray. His toga is also gray; his cloak is rose colored; the denuded mountains are gray.”

In other words, we see here bright azure and rosy flecks against smoky-gray nature.

In canto 17 of the Inferno there is a monster of conveyances by the name of Geryon, something on the order of a super tank equipped with wings.

He offers his services to Dante and Virgil, having obtained from the ruling hierarchy proper orders for transporting the two passengers to the lower, eighth circle.

Due branche avea pilose infin l’ascelle;
Lo dosso e il petto ed ambedue le coste
Dipinte avea di nodi e di rotelle.
Con più color, sommese e sopraposte,
Non fer mai drappo Tartari né Turchi,
Né fur tai tele per Aragone imposte.
(Inf. 17.13-18)

Here the subject is the color of Geryon’s skin. His back, chest and sides are variously colored, ornamented with small knots and shields. Dante explains that neither the Turkish nor Tartar weavers ever used brighter colors for their carpets . . .

The textile brilliance of this comparison is blinding, but the commercial perspectives of textiles revealed in it are completely unexpected.

With respect to its theme, canto 17 of the Inferno, devoted to usury, is very close to both the commercial inventory and to the turnover of the banking system. Usury, which made up for a deficiency in the banking system where a constant demand was already being experienced, was a crying evil of that age; however, it was also a necessity which eased the flow of goods in the Mediterranean region. Usurers were condemned both in the church and in literature; nevertheless, people still ran to them. Even the noble families practiced usury, peculiar bankers with major landholdings and an agrarian base—this especially peeved Dante.

Scorching hot sands make up the landscape of canto 17, that is, something reminiscent of the Arabian caravan routes. The most exalted usurers are sitting on the sand: the Gianfigliacci and the Ubriachi from Florence, the Scrovegni from Padua. Each one wears a small sack around his neck or an amulet or little purse embroidered with the family coat-of-arms outlined against a colored background: one wears an azure lion on a gold ground; another wears a goose, whiter than freshly churned butter, against a bloodred background; the third bears a blue swine on a white background.

Before plunging into the abyss, gliding down on Geryon’s back, Dante examines this strange exhibit of family crests. I call your attention to the fact that the usurers’ sacks are presented as emblems of color. The energy of the color epithets and the way in which they are placed in the verse line muffles the heraldry. The colors are listed with a kind of professional harshness. In other words, the colors are presented at that stage when they are still found on the artist’s palette, in his studio. And what is so astonishing about that? Dante felt right at home in the world of painting; he was a friend of Giotto, and attentively followed the struggle between the various schools of painting and the fashionable trends.

Credette Cimabue nella pittura . . .
(Purg. 11.94)

Having observed the usurers long enough, they embarked on Geryon. Virgil threw his arms around Dante’s neck and cried out to the official dragon: “Descend in broad, flowing circles: remember your new burden . . .”

The craving to fly tormented and exhausted the men of Dante’s era no less than alchemy. A hunger after cloven space. All
sense of direction vanished. Nothing was visible. Only the Tartar's back lay before them, that terrifying silk dressing gown of Geryon's skin. Speed and direction can be judged only by the air whipping across the face. The flying machine was not yet invented, Leonardo's plans did not yet exist, but the problem of gliding to a safe landing was already resolved.

Then at last, falconry bursts in with an explanation. Geryon's maneuvers in slowing down his descent resemble the return of a falcon from an unsuccessful flight, who having flown up in vain, slowly returns at the call of the falconer and having landed, flies away offended, assuming a perch somewhere off in the distance.

Now let's try to grasp all of canto 17 as a whole, but from the point of view of the organic chemistry of Dantean imagery, which has nothing in common with allegory. Instead of merely retelling the so-called content, we will look at this link in Dante's work as a continuous transformation of the substratum of poetic material, which preserves its unity and aspires to pierce its own internal self.

Dante's thinking in images, as is the case in all genuine poetry, exists with the aid of a peculiarity of poetic material which I propose to call its convertibility or transmutability. Only in accord with convention is the development of an image called its development. And indeed, just imagine an airplane (ignoring the technical impossibility) which in full flight constructs and launches another machine. Furthermore, in the same way, this flying machine, while fully absorbed in its own flight, still manages to assemble and launch yet a third machine. To make my proposed comparison more precise and helpful, I will add that the production and launching of these technically unthinkable new machines which are tossed off in mid-flight are not secondary or extraneous functions of the plane which is in motion, but rather comprise a most essential attribute and part of the flight itself, while assuring its feasibility and safety to no less a degree than its properly operating rudder or the regular functioning of its engine.

Of course, only by stretching the point can one apply the term "development" to this series of projectiles constructed in flight, which fly away, one after the other, in order to maintain the integrity of movement itself.

Canto 17 of the *Inferno* is a brilliant confirmation of the transmutability of poetic material in the above-mentioned sense of the term. The figures of this transmutability may be drawn approximately as follows: the little flourishes and shields on Geryon's mottled Tartar skin—silken carpets woven with ornaments, spread out on Mediterranean counters—a perspective of maritime commerce, of banking and piracy—usury and the return to Florence via the heraldic sacks with specimens of fresh colors that had never been used—the craving for flight underscored by Eastern ornament, which turns the material of the canto toward the Arabic fairytale with its technique of the flying carpet—and, finally, the second return to Florence with the aid of the falcon, irreplaceable precisely because he is unnecessary.

Not being satisfied with this truly miraculous demonstration of the transmutability of poetic material, which leaves all the associative gambits of modern European poetry far behind, Dante, as if to mock his slow-witted reader, after everything has been unloaded, played out, given away, brings Geryon down to earth and graciously equips him for a new journey, like the tuft of an arrow released from a bowstring.

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Dante's drafts, of course, have not come down to us. There is no opportunity for us to work on the history of his text. But it does not follow, of course, that there were no inkstained manuscripts or that the text hatched out full grown like Leda out of the egg or Pallas Athena out of the head of Zeus. But the unfortunate interval of six centuries plus the quite excusable fact of the absence of rough drafts have played a dirty trick on us. For how many cen-
turies have people been talking and writing about Dante as if he had expressed his thoughts directly on official paper?

Dante's laboratory? That does not concern us! What can ignorant piety have to do with that? Dante is discussed as if he had the completed whole before his eyes even before he had begun work and as if he had utilized the technique of moulage, first casting in plaster, then in bronze. At best, he is handed a chisel and allowed to carve or, as they love to call it, "to sculpt." However, one small detail is forgotten: the chisel only removes the excess, and a sculptor's draft leaves no material traces (something the public admires). The stages of a sculptor's work correspond to the writer's series of drafts.

Rough drafts are never destroyed.

There are no ready-made things in poetry, in the plastic arts or in art in general.

Our habit of grammatical thinking hinders us here—putting the concept of art in the nominative case. We subordinate the very process of creation to the purposeful prepositional case, and we reason like some robot with a lead heart, who having swung about as required in a variety of directions, and having endured various jolts as he answered the questionnaire—about what? about whom? by whom and by what?—finally established himself in the Buddhist, schoolboy calm of the nominative case. Meanwhile, a finished thing is just as subject to the oblique cases as to the nominative case. Moreover, our entire study of syntax is the most powerful survival of scholasticism and, by being in philosophy, in epistemology, it is put in its proper subordinate position, and completely overwhelmed by mathematics which has its own independent, original syntax. In the study of art this scholasticism of syntax still reigns supreme, causing colossal damage by the hour.

Precisely those who are furthest from Dante's method in European poetry and, bluntly speaking, in polar opposition to him, go by the name Parnassians: Heredia, Leconte de Lisle. Baudelaire is much closer. Verlaine is still closer, but the closest of all the French poets is Arthur Rimbaud. Dante is by his very nature one who shakes up meaning and destroys the integrity of the image. The composition of his cantos resembles an airline schedule or the indefatigable flights of carrier pigeons.

Thus the safety of the rough draft is the statute assuring preservation of the power behind the literary work. In order to arrive on target one has to accept and take into account winds blowing in a somewhat different direction. Exactly the same law applies in tacking a sailboat.

Let us remember that Dante Alighieri lived during the heyday of sailing ships and that sailing was a highly developed art. Let us not reject out of hand the fact that he contemplated models of tacking and the maneuvering of sailing vessels. He was a student of this most evasive and plastic sport known to man since his earliest days.

Here I would like to point out one of the remarkable peculiarities of Dante's psyche: he was terrified of the direct answer, perhaps conditioned by the political situation in that extremely dangerous, enigmatic and criminal century.

While as a whole the Divina Commedia (as we have already stated) is a questionnaire with answers, each of Dante's direct responses is literally hatched out, now with the aid of his midwife, Virgil, now with the help of his nurse, Beatrice, and so on.

The Inferno, canto 16. The conversation is conducted with that intense passion reserved for the prison visit: the need to utilize, at whatever cost, the tiny snatch of a meeting. Three eminent Florentines conduct an inquiry. About what? About Florence, of course. Their knees tremble with impatience, and they are terrified of hearing the truth. The answer, lapidary and cruel, is received in the form of a cry. At this, even Dante's chin quivers, although he made a desperate effort to control himself, and he tosses back his head, and all this is presented in no more nor less than the author's stage direction:
Cosi gridai colla faccia levata  
*(Inf. 16.76)*

Sometimes Dante is able to describe a phenomenon so that not the slightest trace of it remains. To do this he uses a device which I would like to call the Heraclitean metaphor; it so strongly emphasizes the fluidity of the phenomenon and cancels it out with such a flourish, that direct contemplation, after the metaphor has completed its work, is essentially left with nothing to sustain it. I have already taken the opportunity several times to state that Dante's metaphorical devices exceed our conception of composition inasmuch as our critical studies, fettered by the syntactic mode of thinking, are powerless before them.

When the peasant, climbing up the hill  
During that season when the being who illuminates the world,  
Is least reticent to show his face to us,  
And the water midges yield their place to the mosquitoes,  
Sees the dancing fireflies in the hollow,  
In the same spot, perhaps, where he labored as a reaper or plowman—
So with little tongues of flame the eighth circle gleamed,  
Complete visible from the heights where I had climbed;  
And as the one who took his revenge with the aid of bears,  
Upon seeing the departing Chariot of Elijah,  
When the team of horses tore away into the heavens,  
Stared as best he could but could make out nothing  
Except one single flame  
Wasting away, like a small cloud rising in the sky—
So the tongue-like flame filled the chinks in the tombs,  
Appropriating the wealth of the graves as their profit,  
While enveloped in each flame a sinner was concealed.  
*(Inf. 26.25-42)*

If your head is not spinning from this miraculous ascent, worthy of Sebastian Bach's organ music, then try to indicate where the first and second members of the comparison are to be found, what is compared with what, and where the primary and secondary explanatory elements are located.

An impressionistic preparatory introduction awaits the reader in a whole series of Dante's cantos. Its purpose is to present in the form of a scattered alphabet, in the form of a leaping, sparkling, well-splashed alphabet the very elements which, in accord with the laws of the transformability of poetic material, will be united into formulas of meaning.

Thus, in this introduction, we see the extraordinarily light, glittering Heraclitean dance of the summer midges which prepares us to apprehend the serious and tragic speech of Odysseus.

Canto 26 of the *Inferno* is the most oriented toward sailing of all Dante's compositions, the most given to tacking, and by far the best at maneuvering. It has no equals in versatility, evasiveness, Florentine diplomacy and Greek cunning.

Two basic parts are clearly distinguishable in this canto: the luminous, impressionistic preparatory introduction and the well-balanced, dramatic tale, which Odysseus tells about his last voyage, about his journey out into the deeps of the Atlantic and his terrible death under the stars of an alien hemisphere.

In the free flow of its thought this canto comes very close to improvisation. But if you listen more attentively, you will see that the poet is improvising inwardly in his beloved, secret Greek, using only the phonetics and the fabric of his native Italian idiom to carry out his purpose.

If you give a child a thousand rubles and then suggest that he make a choice of keeping either the coins or the banknotes, he will of course choose the coins, and in this way you can retrieve the entire sum by giving him some small change. Exactly the same experience has befallen European literary criticism which nailed Dante to the landscape of Hell familiar from the engravings. No
one has yet approached Dante with a geologist's hammer to ascertain the crystalline structure of his rock, to study its phenocryst, its smokiness, or its patterning, or to judge it as rock crystal subject to the most varied of nature's accidents.

Our criticism tells us: distance the phenomenon and I will deal with it and absorb it. "Holding something at a distance" (Lomonosov's expression) and cognoscibility are almost identical for our criticism.

Dante has images of parting and farewell. It is most difficult to descend through the valleys of his verses of parting.

We have still not succeeded in tearing ourselves away from that Tuscan peasant admiring the phosphorescent dance of the fireflies, nor in closing our eyes to the impressionistic dazzle of Elijah's chariot as it fades away into the clouds before the pyre of Eteocles has been cited, Penelope named, the Trojan horse flashed by, Demosthenes lent Odysseus his republican eloquence, and the ship of old age fitted out.

Old age, in Dante's conception of the term, means, above all, breadth of vision, heightened capacity, and universal interests. In Odysseus's canto the earth is already round.

It is a canto concerned with the composition of human blood which contains in itself the salt of the ocean. The beginning of the voyage is located in the system of blood vessels. The blood is planetary, solar and salty...

With all the convolutions of his brain Dante's Odysseus despises sclerosis just as Farinata despised Hell.

Is it possible that we are born merely to enjoy animal comforts and that we will not devote the remaining portion of our vanishing senses to an act of boldness—to Westward sailing, beyond the Gates of Hercules, where the world unpopulated, continues on?

The metabolism of the planet itself takes place in the blood, and the Atlantic sucks in Odysseus, swallowing up his wooden ship.

It is inconceivable to read Dante's cantos without directing them toward contemporaneity. They were created for that purpose. They are missiles for capturing the future. They demand commentary in the futurum.

For Dante time is the content of history understood as a simple synchronous act; and vice-versa: the contents of history are the joint containing of time by its associates, competitors, and codiscoverers.

Dante is an antimodernist. His contemporaneity is continuous, incalculable and inexhaustible.

That is why Odysseus's speech, as convex as the lens of a magnifying glass, may be turned toward the war of the Greeks and Persians as well as toward Columbus's discovery of America, the bold experiments of Paracelsus, and the world empire of Charles V.

Canto 26, dedicated to Odysseus and Diommed, is a marvelous introduction to the anatomy of Dante's eye, so perfectly adjusted alone for the revelation of the structure of future time. Dante had the visual accommodation of predatory birds, but it was unadjusted to focussing in a narrow radius: his hunting grounds were too large.

The words of the proud Farinata may be applied to Dante himself:

Noi veggiam, come quei ch'ha mala luce.

(Inf. 10.100)
That is, we, the souls of sinners, are capable of seeing and distinguishing only the distant future, but for this we have a special gift. We become absolutely blind as soon as the doors to the future slam shut before us. And in this respect we resemble those who struggle with the twilight, and, in discerning distant objects, fail to make out what is close by.

In canto 26 dance is strongly expressed as the origin of the rhythms of the terza rima. Here one is struck by the extraordinary light-heartedness of the rhythm. The meter is organized according to waltz time:

E se già fosse, non saria per tempo.
Così foss' ei, da che pure esser dee;
Chè più mi graverà com' più m'atempo.
(Inf. 26.10-12)

It is difficult for us as foreigners to penetrate the ultimate secret of foreign poetry. We cannot be judges, we cannot have the last word. But it seems to me that it is precisely here that we find the enchanting pliability of the Italian language which only the ear of a native Italian can perceive completely.

Here I am quoting Marina Tsvetaeva, who once mentioned the "pliability of the Russian language ..."

If you attentively watch the mouth of an accomplished poetry reader, it will seem as if he were giving a lesson to deaf-mutes, that is, he works with the aim of being understood even without sounds, articulating each vowel with pedagogical clarity. And thus it is enough to see how canto 26 sounds in order to hear it. I would say that in this canto the vowels are anxious and twitching.

The waltz is primarily a dance of undulation. Nothing even remotely resembling it was possible in Hellenic or Egyptian culture. (I am indebted to Spengler for this juxtaposition.) The very foundation of the waltz is the purely European passion for peri-

odic undulating movements, the very same close listening to sound and light waves found in all our theory of sound and light, in all our scientific study of matter, in all our poetry and music.

-O Poetry, envy crystallography, bite your nails in anger and impotence! For it is recognized that the mathematical formulas necessary for describing crystal formation are not derivable from three-dimensional space. You are denied even that element of respect which any piece of mineral crystal enjoys.

Dante and his contemporaries did not know geological time. Paleontological clocks were unknown to them: the clock of coal, the clock of infusorial limestone, the clocks of sand, shale and schist. They circled round in the calendar, dividing up days into quarters. However, the Middle Ages did not fit into the Ptolemaic system: they found shelter in it.

Aristotle's physics were added to Biblical genetics. These two poorly matched things did not want to merge. The enormous explosive power of the Book of Genesis (the idea of spontaneous generation) fell upon the tiny island of the Sorbonne from all sides, and we will not be mistaken if we say that the men of Dante's age lived in an antiquity which was completely awash in modernity, like the globe embraced by Tyutchev's ocean. It is already very difficult for us to imagine how things which were familiar to absolutely everyone—school trots, which became a part of the obligatory elementary school program—how the entire Biblical cosmogony with its Christian appendages could have been accepted by the educated people of that time so literally, as if it were a special edition of the daily newspaper.

And if we approach Dante from this point of view, it will appear that he saw in Biblical tradition not so much its sacred, daz-
zing aspects as subject matter which, with the help of zealous reporting and passionate experimentation, could be turned to his advantage.

In canto 26 of the Paradiso, Dante goes so far as to have a private conversation with Adam, to conduct a real interview. St. John the Divine, the author of the Apocalypse, acts as his assistant.

I maintain that every element of the modern experimental method may be found in Dante’s approach to Biblical tradition. These include the creation of specially contrived conditions for the experiment, the use of instruments of such precision that there is no reason to doubt their validity, and clear verification of the results.

The situation in canto 26 of the Paradiso can be defined as a solemn examination performed on optical instruments in concert hall surroundings. Music and optics create the basis of the situation.

The major antimony of Dante’s experience is to be found in his rushing back and forth between the example and the experiment. Examples are extracted from the patriarchal bag of ancient consciousness with the understanding that they be returned as soon as they are no longer needed. Experiments, the drawing of certain required facts out of the total sum of experience, no longer return them in accord with some promissory note, but rather launch them into orbit.

The Evangelical parables and the little examples of the scholastics are but cereal grains to be consumed and destroyed. Experimental science, on the other hand, drawing facts out of coherent reality, forms a kind of seed-fund out of them, an inviolable preserve, which comprises, as it were, the property of a time as yet unborn but already indebted.

The position of the experimenter with respect to factology, insofar as he aspires toward a trusting union with it, is by nature unstable, agitated and off balance. It brings to mind the above-mentioned figure of the waltz, because after each half-turn on the toes, in coming together the dancer’s heels always meet on a new square of the parquetry and in a qualitatively different way. The dizzying Mephisto Waltz of experimentation originated in the Trecento, or perhaps even long before that; furthermore, it originated in the process of poetic formation, in the undulations of formulating procedure, in the transformability of poetic matter, the most precise, prophetic and indomitable of all matter.

Because of theological terminology, scholastic grammar, and our ignorance of allegory, we have overlooked the experimental dances in Dante’s Commedia. In keeping with the formulas of outmoded scholarship, we made Dante look better, and at the same time used his theology as a vessel for the dynamics of his poetry.

To the sensitive palm placed on the neck of a warm pitcher, the pitcher gains form precisely because of its warmth. Warmth in this case is felt before form, thus it fulfills the sculptural function. In its cold state, forcibly torn from its incandescence, Dante’s Commedia is suitable only for analyses by mechanistic tweezers; it is unsuitable for reading, for performing.

**Come quando dall’acqua o dallo specchio**
Salta lo raggio all’opposta parte,
Salendo su per lo modo parecchio
A quel che scende, e tauto si diparte
Dal cader della pietra in egual tratta,
Si come mostra esperienza ed arte ...

(Purg. 15.16–21)

“Just as a ray of sunlight striking the surface of water or a mirror is reflected back at an angle corresponding to the angle of incidence, which differentiates it from a falling stone bouncing up at a perpendicular from the earth—a fact attested by both science and art...”

When the need for empirical verification of Biblical tradition first dawned on Dante, when he first indicated a taste for what I
propose to call a “sacred induction,” the conception of the Divina Commedia had already taken shape, and its success was virtually assured.

The poem, when most densely covered with foliage, is directed toward authority; its sound is fullest; it is most concert-like at that point when it is caressed by dogma, by canon, by the firm eloquent word. But therein lies the problem: in authority, or to be more exact, in authoritativeness, we can see only insurance against error and we are not at all equipped to understand that grandiose music of trustfulness, of trust, to make out those nuances of probability and conviction as delicate as an Alpine rainbow, which Dante has under his control.

Col quale il fantolin corre alla mamma——
(Purg. 30.44)

So Dante fawns upon authority.

A number of the cantos of the Paradiso are enclosed in the hard capsule of an examination. In certain passages one can clearly make out the examiner’s basso and the candidate’s shy tinkling response. The insertion of the grotesque and the genre picture (“the examination of a candidate for the Baccalaureate”) comprises a necessary attribute of the elevated and concert-like composition of the third part. However, the first example of it is presented as early as the second canto of the Paradiso (Beatrice’s argument about the origin of spots on the moon).

In order to grasp the very nature of Dante’s intercourse with the authorities, that is, the forms and methods of his cognition, it is necessary to take into account both the concert-like circumstances of the scholastic cantos of the Commedia and the very preparation of the organs of perception. Here I am not even speaking about that most remarkably staged experiment with the candle and three mirrors, where it is proven that the reverse path of light has as its source the refraction of the ray, but I must not fail to mention the preparation of the eye for the apperception of new things.

This preparation is developed into an actual dissection: Dante divines the layered structure of the retina: di gonna in gonna . . .

Music here is not merely a guest invited to step indoors, but a full participant in the argument; or to be more precise, it promotes the exchange of opinions, coordinates it, and encourages syllogistic digestion, stretches premises and compresses conclusions. Its role is both absorptive and resorptive: it is a purely chemical role.

When you read Dante with all your powers and with complete conviction, when you transplant yourself completely to the field of action of the poetic material, when you join in and coordinate your own intonations with the echoes of the orchestral and thematic groups continually arising on the pocked and undulating semantic surface, when you begin to catch through the smoky-crystalline rock the sound-forms of phenocryst inserted into it, that is, additional sounds and thoughts conferred on it no longer by a poetic but by a geological intelligence, then the purely vocal, intonational and rhythmical work is replaced by a more powerful coordinating force—by the conductor’s function—and the hegemony of the conductor’s baton comes into its own, cutting across orchestrated space and projecting from the voice like some more complex mathematical measure out of a three-dimensional state.

Which comes first, listening or conducting? If conducting is no more than the nudging along of music which rolls forth of its own accord, then of what use is it when the orchestra is good in itself, when it performs impeccably by itself? An orchestra without a conductor, as a long-cherished hope, belongs to the same order of vulgar pan-European “ideals” as the international language Esperanto, symbolizing the linguistic teamwork of all mankind.

Let us investigate how the conductor’s baton first appeared and we will see that it arrived neither sooner nor later than when it was needed; what is more, it arrived as a new and original form of activity, creating in the air its own new domain.
Let us listen to how the conductor's baton was born, or better, how it was hatched out of the orchestra.

1732: Time (tempo or beat)—formerly tapped out with the foot, now usually with the hand. Conductor—*condukteur, der Anführer* (Walther, *Musical Dictionary*).

1753: Baron Grimm calls the conductor of the Paris Opera a woodcutter due to his habit of beating time aloud, a habit which since the time of Lully has reigned at the Paris Opera (Shumenmann, *Geschichte des Dirigierens*, 1913).

1810: At the Frankenhausen musical festival Spohr conducted with a baton made of rolled-up paper, "without the least noise and without any grimaces" (Spohr, *Autobiography*).

The conductor's baton was badly overdue when it was born: the chemically radioactive orchestra anticipated it. The usefulness of the conductor's baton is far from being its only justification. The chemical nature of orchestral sounds finds its expression in the dance of the conductor who stands with his back to the audience. And this baton is far from being an external, administrative accessory or a distinctive symphonic police which could be done away with in an ideal state. It is no less than a dancing chemical formula which integrates reactions perceptible to the ear. I beg of you not to regard it merely as a supplementary mute instrument, invented for greater visibility and to provide additional pleasure. In a certain sense this invulnerable baton qualitatively contains in itself all the elements in the orchestra. But how does it contain them? It gives no smell of it, nor can it. It does not smell of chlorine, as the formula of ammonium chloride or ammonia does not smell of ammonium chloride or of ammonia.

Dante was chosen as the theme of this conversation not because I wanted to focus attention on him as a means to studying the classics and to seat him alongside of Shakespeare and Lev Tolstoi, as some kind of Kirpotin-style *table d'hôte*, but because he is the greatest, the unrivaled master of transmutable and convertible poetic material, the earliest and simultaneously the most powerful chemical conductor of the poetic composition existing only in the swells and waves of the ocean, only in the raising of the sails and in the tacking.

--- VII ---

Dante's cantos are scores for a particular chemical orchestra in which the external ear can easily distinguish comparisons identical with the impulses and solo parts, that is, the arias andariosos, peculiar self-avowals, self-flagellations or autobiographies, sometimes brief and capable of fitting into the palm of the hand, sometimes rhythmic, like a tombstone inscription, sometimes unrolled like a certificate awarded by some medieval university, sometimes welledeveloped, articulated, and capable of achieving a dramatic, operatic fullness, as, for instance, Francesca's famous cantilena.

Canto 33 of the *Inferno*, containing Ugolino's tale about how he and his three sons died of starvation in the prison tower of Archbishop Ruggieri of Pisa, is enveloped in the dense and heavy timbre of a cello like rancid, poisoned honey.

The density of the cello timbre is best for communicating expectation and agonizing impatience. There is no power on earth which can hasten the movement of honey pouring out of a tilted jar. Hence, the cello could only take shape and be given form when the European analysis of time had made sufficient progress, when sundials were superseded and the ancient observer of the shadow stick moving around Roman numerals drawn in the sand had been transformed into an impassioned participant of differential torture, into a martyr to the infinitesimal. A cello retards sound, no matter how it hurries. Ask Brahms—he knew it. Ask Dante—he heard it.

Ugolino's tale is one of the most remarkable of Dante's arias, one of those events when a man, who has been offered some singular never-to-be-repeated opportunity to audition, is completely
transformed right in front of his audience; he plays on his unhappiness like a virtuoso, and draws out of his misfortune a timbre completely unheard of before and unknown even to himself.

We must remember that timbre is a structural principle much like the alkalinity or acidity of some chemical compound. However, the chemical retort is not the space in which the chemical reaction takes place. That would be far too simple.

Ugolino's cello-like voice, overgrown with a prison beard, starving and locked up with his three fledgling sons, one of whom bears the sharp, violin-like name of Anselmuccio, flows out of a narrow crack:

Breve pertugio dentro dalla muda

It matures in the box of the prison resonator, and thus, in this instance, the cello fraternizes in all seriousness with the prison.

Il carcere—the prison—supplements and acoustically conditions the vocal work of the autobiographical cello.

In the subconscious of the Italian people prison played a prominent role. Nightmares of prison life were imbibed with the mother's milk. The Trecento tossed men into prison with astonishing unconcern. Ordinary prisons were open for viewing; like our churches and museums. The interest in prisons was exploited by the prison wardens as well as by the fear-inspiring machinery of the small states. There was a lively intercourse between the prisons and the free world outside resembling diffusion, mutual infiltration.

And thus Ugolino's story is one of those migratory anecdotes, one of those horror stories which mothers used to frighten their children, one of those entertaining horror tales which are mumbled with great satisfaction as a remedy for insomnia while tossing and turning in bed. It is well known as a ballad, like Bürger's Lenore, the Lorelei, or the Erlköning.
counting the dripping of the water as a measure of time which brings the father and his three sons closer to the mathematically conceivable threshold of death by starvation, no matter how impossible it may seem to the father's consciousness. The same rhythm of the mad dash emerges here in disguise, in the mute wailing of the cello, which strives with all its might to break out of the situation and gives a sound picture of a still more terrifying, slow chase, breaking speed down into the most delicate fibers.

Finally, just as the cello is wildly conversing with itself and squeezing out of itself questions and answers, Ugolino's story is interpolated with the touching and helpless rejoinder of his sons:

... ed Anselmuccio mio
Disse: "Tu guardi si, padre! Che hai?"
(Inf. 33.50-51)

... And my Anselmuccio said: "Father, where art thou looking? What is the matter?"

That is, the dramatic structure of the story flows out of the timbre itself, for the timbre is in no way sought after and stretched over the story as over the last of a shoe.

-VIII-

It seems to me that Dante made a careful study of all speech defects, listening closely to stutterers and lispers, to nasal twangs and inarticulate pronunciation, and that he learned much from them.

I would very much like to speak about the auditory coloration of canto 32 of the Inferno.

A peculiar labial music: "abbo"—"gabbo"—"babbo"—

"Tebe"—"plebe"—"zebe"—"converrebbe." It's as if a nurse had participated in the creation of phonetics. Now the lips protrude in a childish manner, now they extend into a proboscis.

The labials form some kind of "numbered bass"—basso continuo, namely, the chordal basis of harmonization. They are joined by smacking, sucking and whistling sounds, and also by dental "zz" and "dz" sounds.

I pulled out a single thread at random: cagnazzi—riprezzo—guazzi—mezzo—gravezza.

The tweaking, smacking and labial explosives do not cease for a single second.

The canto is interlarded with a vocabulary which can best be termed an assortment of seminary student insults and cruel schoolboy taunts: coticagna (nape); dischiomi (to pull out hair, locks); sonar con le mascelle (to bawl, to bark); pigliare a gabbo (to brag, to loaf about). With the aid of this blatantly shameless, intentionally infantile orchestration, Dante grows the crystals for his auditory landscapes of Giudecca (the circle of Judas) and Caina (the circle of Cain).

Non fece al corso suo si grosso velo
D'inverno la Danoia in Osteric,
Nè Tana'i la sotto il freddo cielo,
Com' era quivi; chè, se Tambemerc
Vi fosse su caduto, o Pietrapana,
Non avria pur dall'orlo fatto cric.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, a Slavic duck begins quacking: Osteric, Tambemerc, cric (the onomatopoeic word for crackling).

The ice explodes phonetically and is scattered across the names of the Danube and the Don. The cold-generating tendency of canto 32 arises from the intrusion of physics into a moral idea—betrayal, a frozen conscience, the ataraxia of shame, absolute zero.
Canto 32 is written in the tempo of a modern scherzo. But what is that? An anatomical scherzo which is studying the degeneration of speech based on onomatopoeic infantilisms.

A new link is revealed here between food and speech. Shameful pronunciation is turned back to where it came from; it is turned back to champing, biting, gurgling and chewing.

The articulation of food and speech almost coincide. A strange locust-like phonetics is created:

*Mettendo i denti in nota di cicogna—*

"Working with their teeth like grasshopper's jaws."

Finally, we must note that canto 32 is overflowing with anatomical lust.

"That same famous blow which simultaneously destroyed the wholesomeness of the body and injured its shade..." There is also purely surgical satisfaction: "The one whose gorget was sawed by Florence..."

*Di cui segò Fiorenza la gorgiera...*

And further: "Just as a hungry man greedily falls upon bread, so one of them fell on the other, sinking his teeth into the very place where the nape becomes the neck..."

*Là ve il cervel s'aggiunge con la nuca...*

All this danced about like a Dürer skeleton on hinges and leads you off to German anatomy.

After all, isn't a murderer something of an anatomist? Didn't an executioner in the Middle Ages slightly resemble a scientific worker?

The art of war and the art of execution remind you a bit of the threshold of a dissecting room.

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The *Inferno* is a pawnshop in which all the countries and cities known to Dante were left unredeemed. This extremely powerful construct of the infernal circles has a framework. It cannot be conveyed in the form of a crater. It cannot be portrayed on a relief map. Hell hangs suspended on the wire of urban egoism.

It is incorrect to think of the *Inferno* as something with three dimensions, as some combination of enormous circuses, of deserts with scorching sands, of stinking swamps, of Babylonian capitals with mosques burning red-hot. Hell contains nothing inside itself and has no dimensions; like an epidemic, an infectious disease or the plague, it spreads like a contagion, even though it is not spatial.

Love of the city, passion for the city, hatred for the city—these serve as the materials of the *Inferno*. The rings of Hell are no more than Saturn's circles of emigration. To the exile his sole, forbidden and irretrievably lost city is scattered everywhere—he is surrounded by it. I would like to say that the *Inferno* is surrounded by Florence. Dante's Italian cities—Pisa, Florence, Lucca, Verona—these precious civic planets, are drawn out into monstrous rings, stretched into belts, restored to a nebulous, gasiform state.

The anti-landscape nature of the *Inferno* forms, as it were, the conditions of its graphic character.

Imagine Foucault's grandiose experiment carried out not with one pendulum, but with a multitude of pendulums all swinging past one another. Here space exists only insofar as it is a receptacle for amplitudes. To make Dante's images more precise is as unthinkable as listing the names of all the individuals who participated in the migration of peoples.

Just as the Flemish between Wissant and Bruges, protecting themselves from the sea's floodtide, erect dikes to push the sea back;
and just as the Paduans construct embankments along the shores of the Brenta to assure the safety of their cities and castles in the expectation of spring with its melting snows on the Chientana [part of the snowy Alps]—so these dams were built, though not so monumental, almost despite the engineer ...

(Inf. 15.4-12)

Here the moons of the polynomial pendulum swing from Bruges to Padua, teaching a course in European geography, lecturing on the art of engineering, on the techniques of urban safety, on the organization of public works, and on the significance of the Alpine watershed for the Italian state.

What have we, who crawl on our knees before a line of verse, preserved from these riches? Where are its godfathers, where are its enthusiasts? What will become of our poetry which lags so disgracefully behind science?

It is terrifying to think that the blinding explosions of contemporary physics and kinetics were used 600 years before their thunder sounded. Indeed, words do not suffice to brand the shameful, barbarous indifference shown toward them by the pitiful composers of clichéd thought.

Poetic speech creates its own instruments on the move and cancels them out without halting.

Of all our arts painting alone, and in particular modern French painting, has not yet ceased to hear Dante. This is the painting which elongates the bodies of horses as they approach the finish line at the hippodrome.

Whenever a metaphor raises the vegetable colors of existence to an articulate impulse, I gratefully remember Dante.

We describe the very thing that cannot be described. That is, nature's text comes to a standstill, but we have unlearned how to describe the single thing which, by its structure, yields to poetic representation, that is, the impulses, intentions and amplitudes of fluctuation.

Ptolemy has returned via the back door. Giordano Bruno was burned in vain! ...

While still in the womb our creations become known to everyone, but Dante's multinomial, multi-sailed and kinetically kindled comparisons preserve to this day the charm of the as-yet-unsaid.

His "reflexology of speech" is astonishing—a science, still not completely established, of the spontaneous psycho-physiological influence of the word on those who are conversing, on the audience surrounding them, and on the speaker himself, as well as on the means by which he communicates his urge to speak, that is, by which he signals with a light his sudden desire to express himself.

Here he comes closest to approaching the wave theory of sound and light, determining their relationship.

Just as an animal covered with a cloth grows nervous and irritable, only the moving folds of the material indicating his displeasure, so the first created soul [Adam's] expressed to me through the covering [light] the extent of its pleasure and sense of joy in answering my question ...

(Par. 26.97-102)

In the third part of the Commedia (the Paradiso), I see a genuine kinetic ballet. Here we see every possible kind of luminous figure and dance, down to the tapping of heels at a wedding celebration.
Four torches glowed before me, 
and the nearest one suddenly came 
to life and grew as rosy as if Jupiter 
and Mars were suddenly 
transformed into birds and were 
exchangeing feathers. 

(Par. 27.10-15)

Isn't it strange that a man who is preparing to speak should 
arm himself with a tautly strung bow, a full supply of feathered ar-
wrows, prepare mirrors and convex lenses, and squint at the stars like 
a tailor threading a needle? ... 

I devised this composite quotation, merging various passages 
from the Commedia, in order to best exhibit the characteristics of 
the speech-preparatory moves of Dante's poetry. 

Speech preparation is even more within his sphere than articu-
lation, that is, than speech itself. 

Remember Virgil's marvelous supplication to the wiliest of the 
Greeks. 

It is completely suffused with the softness of Italian diph-
thongs. 

These are the writhing, ingratiating and sputtering tongues of 
small unprotected oil lamps, muttering about the greasy wick ... 

O voi, che siete due dentro ad un foco, 
S'io meritai di voi, mentre ch'io visi, 
S'io meritai di voi assai o poco ...  

(Inf. 26.79-81)

Dante ascertains the origin, fate and character of a man ac-
cording to his voice, just as the medicine of his day diagnosed a 
man's health according to the color of his urine.

He is filled with a sense of the ineffable gratitude toward the cop-
ious riches falling into his hands. For he has no small task: space 
must be prepared for the influx, the cataract must be removed 
from the rigid vision, care must be taken that the bounty of poetic 
material pouring out of the cornucopia does not flow through the 
fingers, does not flow away through an empty sieve.

Tutti dicean: "Benedictus qui venis!" 
E, fior gittando di sopra e d'intorno: 
"Manibus o date lilia plenis!"  

(Purg. 30.19-21)

The secret of Dante's capacity resides in the fact that he intro-
duces not a single word of his own fabrication. Everything sets 
him going except fabrication, except invention. Indeed, Dante and 
fantasy are incompatible! ... You should be ashamed of yourselves, 
O French Romantics, you unfortunate incroyables in red vests, for 
slandering Alighieri! What fantasy can you find in him? He writes 
to dictation, he is a copyist, he is a translator ... He is completely 
bent over in the posture of a scribe casting a frightened sidelong 
glance at the illuminated original he borrowed from the prior's 
library.

It seems that I have forgotten to say that preceding the Com-
media there was some presage, some kind of hypnotic séance, as it 
were. But this, I suppose, is too implausible. If one considers this 
astonishing work from the angle of written language, from the 
viewpoint of the independent art of writing which in the year 
1300 was on an equal footing with painting and music, and was 
regarded as among the most venerated professions, then we may 
add yet one more analogy to all the analogies proposed above—
taking dictation, copying, transcribing.

Sometimes, but very rarely, Dante shows us his writing tools.
His pen is termed *penna*, that is, it participates in a bird's flight; his inks are called *inchiostro*, that is, monastery accessories; his verse lines are also called *inchiosti*, although sometimes they are designated as Latin school *versi*, or even more modestly, *carte*, which is an astonishing substitution, “pages” instead of “verse lines.”

But even when written down and ready, this is still not the end of the process, for then the written object must be taken somewhere, must be shown to someone to be checked and “praised.”

It is not enough to say “copying,” for what we are involved with here is calligraphy in response to dictation by the most terrifying and impatient dictators. The dictator-overseer is far more important than the so-called poet.

... Now I must labor a little longer, and then I must show my notebook, bathed in the tears of a bearded schoolboy, to my most severe Beatrice, who radiates not only beauty but literacy.

Long before Arthur Rimbaud’s alphabet of colors, Dante linked color with the pleophany of articulate speech. But he is a dyer, a textile-maker. His ABC is the alphabet of fluttering fabrics dyed with chemical powders and vegetable dyes:

*Sopra candido vel cinta d’oliva*  
*Donna m’apparve, sotto verde manto,*  
*Vestita di color di fiamma viva.*  
*(Purg. 30.31-33)*

His impulses toward color may sooner be called textile than alphabet impulses. Color is for him only in the fabric. For Dante the greatest intensity of material nature as a substance defined by color is found in textiles. And weaving is the occupation closest to qualitativeness, to quality.

Now I will attempt to describe one of the innumerable conductorial flights of Dante’s baton. We shall take this flight as if immersed in the actual setting of precious and instantaneous labor.

Let us begin with the writing. The pen draws calligraphic letters, tracing out both proper and common nouns. The quill pen is a small bit of bird’s flesh. Dante, who never forgets the origin of things, remembers this, of course. His technique of writing with broad strokes and curves is transmuted into the figured flight of a flock of birds.

*E come augelli surti di rivera*  
*Quasi congratulando a lor pastura,*  
*Fanno di sé or tonda or altra schiera*  
*Si dentro ai lumi sante creature*  
*Volitando cantavano, e faciensi*  
*Or D, or I, or L, in sue figure.*  
*(Par. 18.73-78)*

Just as the letters emanating from the hand of a scribe who is obedient to the dictation and who stands outside literature as a finished product, chase after the bait of meaning, as after sweet fodder, so precisely do birds, magnetized by green grass—sometimes separately, sometimes together—peck at what befalls them, sometimes coming together in a circle, sometimes stretching out into a line...

Writing and speech are incommensurate. Letters correspond to intervals. The grammar of Old Italian exactly like our new Russian grammar partakes of the same fluttering flock of birds, the same motley Tuscan *schiera*, that is, the Florentine mob which changes laws like gloves, and forgets by evening those laws promulgated the same morning for the general welfare.
There is no syntax—merely a magnetized impulse: a yearning for the stern of a ship, a yearning for worm's fodder, a yearning for an unpromulgated law, a yearning for Florence.

-X I-

Let us return once more to the question of Dante's colors.

The interior of mineral rock, the Aladdin-like space concealed within, the lantern-like, lamp-like, chandelier-like suspension of piscine rooms deposited within, is the best key to understanding the coloration of the *Commedia*.

The most beautiful organic commentary to Dante is provided by a minerological collection.

I permit myself a small autobiographical confession. Black Sea pebbles tossed up on shore by the rising tide helped me immensely when the conception of this conversation was taking shape. I openly consulted with chalcedony, cornelians, gypsum crystals, spar, quartz and so on. It was thus that I came to understand that mineral rock is something like a diary of the weather, like a meteorological blood clot. Rock is nothing more than weather itself, excluded from atmospheric space and banished to functional space. In order to understand this you must imagine that all geological changes and displacements can be completely decomposed into elements of weather. In this sense, meteorology is more fundamental than mineralogy, for it embraces it, washes over it, ages it and gives it meaning.

The fascinating pages which Novalis devotes to miners and mining make concrete the interconnection between mineral rock and culture. This interconnection is illuminated out of rock—weather in both the formation of culture and in the formation of mineral rock.

Mineral rock is an impressionistic diary of weather accumulated by millions of natural disasters; however, it is not only of the past, it is of the future: it contains periodicity. It is an Aladdin's lamp penetrating the geological twilight of future ages.

Having combined the uncombinable, Dante altered the structure of time or, perhaps, to the contrary, he was forced to a glossolalia of facts, to a synchronism of events, names and traditions severed by centuries, precisely because he had heard the overtones of time.

Dante's method is anachronistic—and Homer, who emerges with his sword at his side in the company of Virgil, Horace and Lucan from the dim shadows of the Orphic choirs, where the four of them while away a tearless eternity together in literary discussion, is its best expression . . .

Indices of the standing still of time in Dante's work are not only the round astronomical bodies, but positively all things and all personalities. Everything mechanical is alien to him. He is disgusted by the idea of causality: such prophecies are suited only for bedding down swine.

Faccian le bestie Fiesolane strame
Di lor medesme, e non tocchin la pianta,
S'alcuna surge ancor nel lor letame . . .

(Inf. 15.73–75)

I would answer the direct question, “What is a Dantean metaphor?” saying, “I don't know,” because a metaphor can be defined only metaphorically, and this can be substantiated scientifically. But it seems to me that Dante's metaphor designates the standing-still of time. Its roots are not to be found in the little word "how," but in the word "when." His *quando* sounds like *come*. Ovid's rumbling was far more congenial to him than Virgil's French elegance.

Again and again I find myself turning to the reader and beg-
giving him to "imagine" something; that is, I must invoke analogy, having in mind but a single goal: to fill in the deficiency of our system of definition.

Hence, just try to imagine that Patriarch Abraham and King David, the entire tribe of Israel including Isaac, Jacob, and all their kin, as well as Rachel, for whom Jacob endured so much, have entered a singing and roaring organ, as if it were a house with its door left ajar, and have concealed themselves within.

And, imagine that even earlier, our forefather Adam with his son Abel, old Noah, and Moses, the lawgiver and the law-abiding, had also entered...

Trasce l'ombra del primo parente,
D'Abel suo figlio, e quella di Noè,
Di Moisè legista e ubbidente;
Abraam patriarca, e David re,
Israël con lo padre e co' suoi nati,
E con Rachelè, per cui tanto fe'...

(Inf. 4.55-60)

Following this, the organ acquires the capacity to move—all its pipes and bellows become extraordinarily agitated, when suddenly, in a frenzied rage, it begins to move backwards.

If the halls of the Hermitage were suddenly to go mad, if the paintings of all the schools and great masters were suddenly to break loose from their nails, and merge with one another, intermingle and fill the air of the rooms with a Futurist roar and an agitated frenzy of color, we would then have something resembling Dante's *Commedia*.

To wrest Dante from the grip of schoolroom rhetoric would be to render a major service to the history of European culture. I hope that centuries of labor will not be required for this, but only joint international endeavors which will succeed in creating an original anti-commentary to the work of generations of scholars, creeping philologists and pseudo-biographers. Insufficient respect for the poetic material which can be grasped only through performance, only through the flight of the conductor's baton—this was the reason for the universal blindness to Dante, to the greatest master and manager of this material, to the greatest conductor of European art, who forestalled for many centuries the formation of an orchestra adequate (to what?)—to the integral of the conductor's baton...

The calligraphic composition realized through means of improvisation—such, approximately, is the formula of a Dantesque impulse, taken simultaneously as flight and as something finished. His similes are articulated impulses.

The most complex structural passages of the poem are performed on the fife, like a bird's mating call. The fife is nearly always sent forth to scout ahead.

Here I have in mind Dante's introductions, released by him as if at random, as if they were trial balloons.

Quando si parte il gioco della zara,
Colui che perde si rimane dolente,
Ripetendo le volte, e tristo impara;
Con l'altro se ne va tutta la gente:
Qual vi dinanzi, e qual di retro il prende,
E qual da lato gli si reca a mente.
Ei non s'arresta, e questo e quello intende;
A cui porga la mano più non fa pressa;
E così dalla calca si difende.

(Purg. 6.1-9)

When the dice game is ended, the loser in cheerless solitude replays the game, despondently throwing the dice. The whole group tags along after the lucky gambler; one runs up ahead, one pulls at him from behind, one curries favor at his side, reminding him of himself. But fortune's favor-
ite walks right on, listening to all alike, and with a hand-
shake for each, he frees himself from his importunate
followers ...  

And there goes the "street" song of the Purgatorio (with its
throng of importunate Florentine souls demanding above all, gos-
sip, secondly, protection, and thirdly, gossip again), enticed by the
call of the genre, resounding on the typical Flemish fife which,
only three hundred years hence, would become wall paintings.

Another curious consideration arises. The commentary (ex-
planatory) is integral to the very structure of the Commedia. The
miracle-ship left the shipyard with barnacles adhering to its hull. 
The commentary derives from street talk, from rumor, from
Florentine slander passing from mouth to mouth. The commen-
tary is inevitable like the halcyon circling about Batyushkov's ship.

... There now, look: it's old Marzzuco ...
How well he held up at his son's
funeral! A remarkably staunch old man ...
But have you heard, Pietro de la
Borgia’s head was cut off for no
reason whatsoever—he was as clean
as a piece of glass ...
Some woman’s evil hand was
involved here... O yes, by the way,
there he goes himself—let's go
up and ask him ...

Poetic material does not have a voice. It does not paint with
bright colors, nor does it explain itself in words. It is devoid of
form just as it is devoid of content for the simple reason that it ex-
ists only in performance. The finished poem is no more than a cal-
ligraphic product, the inevitable result of the impulse to perform.

If a pen is dipped in an inkwell, then the resultant thing is no
more than a set of letters fully commensurate with the inkwell.

In talking about Dante it is more appropriate to bear in mind
the creation of impulses than the creation of forms: impulses pert-
taining to textiles, sailing, scholasticism, meteorology, engineering,
municipal concerns, handicrafts and industry, as well as other
things; the list could be extended to infinity.

In other words, syntax confuses us. All nominative cases must
be replaced by the case indicating direction, by the dative. This is
the law of transmutable and convertible poetic material existing
only in the impulse to perform.

... Here everything is turned inside out: the noun appears as
the predicate and not the subject of the sentence. I should hope
that in the future Dante scholarship will study the coordination of
the impulse and the text.

(1933)

(Translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link)