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# The Poet in the Mirror: Epic and Autobiography in Dante's Inferno

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Simone Marchesi is Assistant Professor of French and Italian at Princeton University. This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University on April 7, 2006, as part of the College of Arts & Sciences Lecture Series on "The Real and Fabled Worlds of Dante Alighieri." All English translations in the text from Dante's Divine Comedy are by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, in their edition published by Doubleday/Anchor in 2000.

SIMONE MARCHESI

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*The Poet in the Mirror:  
Epic and Autobiography in Dante's Inferno*

Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi?

[Why do you reflect yourself so long in us?]

*Inferno* 32.54

Let me begin with an easy question: What is the *Divine Comedy*? Dante's poem has been and is many things. In the history of its reception, the poem has been used as a vehicle for a regional political statement, a blueprint for a narrative masterpiece, the basis for a political and cultural platform advocating Italian unification, an exemplary gallery of Romantic heroes, a non-partisan document of spirituality, a fulfilled self-justifying prophecy of Mussolini's advent to power, and a ghostly prequel to the infernal depiction of modern cityscapes. From Machiavelli's cultural linguistic politics in the Florentine *Quattrocento*, to Ariosto's imitative stance in the *Orlando Furioso*, from the patriotic celebrations of Dante's six-hundredth jubilee year, to De Sanctis's seminal university lectures in Italy and Longfellow's tormented first American translation at Harvard, from Terragni's projected homage to the Fascist leader Benito

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Mussolini as the prophesied DVX of *Purgatorio* 33.43 in Rome's *Danteum* to T.S. Eliot's portrayal of London's crowds in *The Wasteland*, Dante's poem has been the almost constant object of creative rereadings. It has behaved, to use T.S. Eliot's paradigmatic definition, like a true classic—a text able to respond, from generation to generation, to always new questions.

The diverse cultural meanings the *Divine Comedy* has successively acquired are no less the mirror of an ever-changing audience as they are the product of an original internal complexity. The poem is actually many things in itself. It is an encyclopedia of medieval theology, ethics, and law; it is a treatise on Florentine municipal, Italian peninsular, and European imperial politics; it is a compendium of military, civil, and cultural history as well as a history of humankind, stretching from the Biblical proto-human Adam to his most recent namesake Master Adam, from the first Roman Emperor (Caesar), to the last one (Henry the VII), from Peter, the first pope, to Clement the Fifth, the most recent death recorded in the poem. Most of all, however, the *Divine Comedy* is an autobiographical epic poem.

I am sure I have gotten some eyebrows raised with the last statement. How is it possible that a single work be at the same time an epic and an autobiography?

### *A Tale of Two Genres*

In Western classical and late-antique culture, there are only two types of canonized (that is, authorized) narratives: the “I-stories” of autobiography and the “we-stories” of epic, which are distinguished (and even opposed) on the basis of several essential features.

The differences are macroscopic. Stories told in epics are collective in scope: they focus on a hero at war or on a journey as the representative of and in conjunction with his people. They are remote in time: already old when they are conceived, epics address the past of one's culture past. They also treat their subject matter inside a frame of continuity: epics confirm present identity by

building several genealogical and topographical bridges with the origins of both a people and its claims on a territory it calls its own. On the contrary, the stories told in autobiographies are individual in scope: they focus on an individual insofar as he or she is different from the community that surrounds him. Also, they are rooted in chronological proximity, rounding the time of the story and that of narration in the brief individual chronotope of a life span. Paradoxically, autobiographies are discontinuous in their subject matter: while they project their author and protagonist as one, they also mark the difference between them. They insist on the chain of events that altered the initial condition of the subject. Autobiographies insist, in other words, on what made their protagonists suitable writers or objects of narration.

From the point of view of the readers, epic and autobiography radically differ because they foster two alternative modes of identification. In epic, the readers' identification is expected and it happens with the collectivity. An epic poem takes for granted that readers will find its subject matter relevant to them. In both national epics (such as the classical epic poems or modern epic novels and films) and transnational ones (such as the post-Pauline supersessionist Judeo-Christian Bible) readers identify with the story that is told because they are part of the same people that features in it as protagonist. Epics function only insofar as they are the epic of a people. Time does not necessarily affect epic's appeal. The text of an epic talks to us *because* it speaks of us: the lineage it describes is our own lineage, the space it maps is the one we inhabit, and the rituals it surveys are the same we practice today—though in a mutated form. Epic is inclusive because it tells our story.

Of course, readers may always borrow alien identities and enjoy other nations' epics. As Americans, you are not barred from reading and identifying with Greek and Latin epic poems; you have legitimate access to more than *Gone with the Wind*, a cinematic account of one of your nation's defining moment in history. Similarly, as a European, I am not limited to Tasso's *Jerusalem*

*Delivered*, a sixteenth-century Italian epic on the crusades. In both cases, however, a secondary set of parameters needs to be put at work. Readers may have access to other nations' epics if they suspend and redefine their own identity. They need to embrace the elements they share with a larger geopolitical community rather than focus on those that distinguish them. It is not merely by chance that Western Civilization courses include Homer and Virgil alongside Dante and Milton. Whatever extent we may be willing to grant to our transnational identity, however, the stories we read are still about the collective identity of a group. Epics of war are about the frontal clash of nations and identities alike; epics of travel are about the constant and subtler threat of assimilation that the encounter with "the other" poses to the small national cells which are isolated and wander off from their land of origin. Western civilization still awaits an inclusive epic, one that may embrace humanity in full and promote identification without confrontation, identity without conflict.

Autobiography is based on the opposite set of conditions. In autobiography the readers' identification is fully voluntary and contingent. It also happens only on an individual level. Autobiographical subjects may only matter to readers if they are able to dismiss as inessential, merely accessory, all the differences of time, location, gender, and profession that separate them from the protagonist. Paradoxically, autobiographical narrative is based on a double discontinuity. First, its protagonist is the subject of a story marked by change: either in the form of an abrupt conversion (in classical examples of the genre) or in that of a slow accretive process of evolution (in modern versions). Second, rather than genealogical continuity, autobiography relies on the possibility that typological relations may be established between individuals across time. The story of the narrated individual has common features or points of tangency with the lives of the readers. The text of an autobiography talks to each of us *although* it speaks of someone else. Autobiography is somebody else's story that we are invited to claim as our own.

A last detail: in the cultural frame of reference dominant in Dante's time, two distinct canonical registers contained each tradition. For him and his initial audience the epic canon was made up of Homer's poems (which were linguistically out of reach, but were still widely known of) together with their Latin offspring: Virgil's *Aeneid*, Lucan's *Civil War*, Statius's *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, and—in a special position—the peculiar epic of transformation, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. On the other hand, the central autobiographical examples were two: Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Augustine's *Confessions*. In sum, epic and autobiography function according to opposed sets of assumptions, embrace alternative canons, and ask their distinct audiences to perform very distinct interpretive acts. They rely on different hermeneutics.

All these differences notwithstanding, however, we know that Dante was immensely interested in the ways in which the two narrative modes worked. Let us bracket his first experiment with autobiographical narrative, the *Vita Nuova*, at least for the moment: the booklet has a programmatic (if at times inconsistent) non-classical pedigree. As direct models for its first-person account of a poet's progress in love, the work evokes only vernacular and relatively recent third-person narratives (the Provençal *vidas*). Dante's post-exilic works, with their higher awareness of the Latin classics and stronger biblical footing, are of more interest here: it is only in mature years that Dante appears particularly interested in having the two traditions work side by side. In his first major writing enterprise on which he embarks once banished from Florence, the *Convivio*, Dante practices a meditated kind of autobiography. In the first book of his philosophical treatise, he invokes the philosophical and moral authorities of Boethius and Augustine in order to legitimize his own vernacular attempt at cultural and autobiographical self-fashioning. In the *Divine Comedy*, on the other hand, he seems to explore more directly the possibilities of epic. Four out of five members of the epic canon detailed above are found at the center of the most highly self-aware

cantos of *Inferno* (canto 4) and the fifth, Statius, is absent only because destined to star in a later, and equally metapoetic episode in *Purgatorio* (cantos 21 and 22). Polarized between these two distinct writing projects, the two strains of narrative appear to be practiced in mutual isolation.

It is certainly true that in the *Convivio* (as it was true in the crucial twenty-fifth chapter of the *Vita Nuova* and will be even more true in the later *Monarchia*) Dante invokes epic poets as historical authorities all along, by prominently displaying in his prose several fragments from their poems, often at key junctures in the argumentation. And it is no less true that the two most authoritative autobiographical writers, Boethius and Augustine, appear as characters in the *Divine Comedy*, as protagonists of a long episode and a half-line, respectively. Yet Dante clearly distinguishes between the roles that the two traditions are allowed to play in each work. Whether evoked as authorities or recast as characters in the plot, both canons of writers play different roles. Dante keeps the traditional personnel of epic and autobiography carefully apart.

### *Mixed Signals*

If Dante is so careful in keeping the two canons separated, however, how can he produce a poem that partakes of both autobiography and epic? When I attribute to him the intention of producing an autobiographical epic, am I forcing the point? To judge at least from the first two lines of the *Divine Comedy*, I do not think so. If Dante seems interested in exploring both sides of the narrative tradition, the poem actually appears involved in bringing them together.

Unlike modern books, which can count on several external (or liminal) indicators to establish and make clear the genre to which they belong, medieval works had only their *incipit* to convey to the readers all the information necessary to orient them. Modern books tell us a lot about them, even before we read their first words: from



the cover design to the publisher's logo (to which we attach particular expectations), from the introduction or the advance-praise blurbs on the dust-jacket to the location in the bookstore where they are offered for sale, a large set of pointers guides our reading choice in advance. As well-trained book customers, we can spot a schoolbook from a college-level textbook, a scientific from a popularizing publication, a mystery novel from a self-help manual. We are even sophisticated enough that we make subtler distinctions, separating fiction from non-fiction, poetry from drama, reference from biography at a glance.

A medieval manuscript had very few of these informative thresholds and it was forced to rely on the first lines or sentences of its text in order to guide its first-time readers. The book's *incipit* was thus a privileged locus for displaying and recovering metapoetic signals, the essential tool for determining the generic status of the rest of the work. Accordingly, Dante's *Divine Comedy* entrusts to its first two lines the task of conveying its identity as a strange, radically innovative, narrative hybrid. The poem's opening lines read:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura.

[Midway in the journey of our life  
I came to myself in a dark wood.]

Evidently, the first line is all about a "we-story." In prominent position, it displays the strongest possible possessive pronoun: "*our* life." It clearly states that the story about to be narrated has a collective dimension; it is the story of a people, one to which the readers belong. There is nothing individual in the notion that life is a journey. Even the chronological detail that connects the poem's action and fictional date with the biographical circumstances of its author support a generalized reading. While it is true that the midpoint of canonical life-span of seventy years coincides with the Holy Year of 1300 (when the poem's action takes place) only for

someone born in 1265 like Dante, it is also true that the wording allows the widest possible generalization. What we today call “mid-life crisis” was a familiar notion to pre-modern cultures: the Pythagorean “Y” was an easily recognizable symbol of the life-altering decisions that every individual was bound to make once they had reached the midpoint of their existential journey. Having come to the fork in the road symbolized by the split in the letter “Y,” the moral subjects were asked to choose a new path: bearing left amounted to a sinister option in favor of pleasure (and vice), bearing right to a “rightful” option in favor of virtue (and honor). From literary and philosophical discourse to iconographic variations, the motif of Hercules at the crossroad symbolized this difficult choice.

In the same breath as they point to a universalizing dimension, the first words of the *Comedy* also contain specific formal signals reinforcing the notion that technically this poem is indeed an epic poem. The first word, “midway,” makes clear that the poem is starting *in medias res*, in the middle of the action. Structurally, this is a strong marker of epic. The *Iliad* does not begin with the first day of the Greek siege at Troy, but with the tenth year in the war; the *Odyssey* does not open with the day Ulysses sets sail toward Ithaca from the shores of the fallen city, but almost from the opposite point, in the tenth year in his wanderings; the *Aeneid* does not start with its protagonist leaving the burning city, but with his shipwreck on the coast of Libya in the seventh year of his Mediterranean peregrinations.

Epic narratives often go back to their chronological beginnings and recuperate what they have neglected to tell, by availing themselves of sophisticated narrative devices as the flashback (in the form of retrospective narrations in the voice of some character who summarizes his/her adventures until that day) or the flash-forward (usually in the form of prophetic and sometimes oracular utterances entrusted to divine or divinely inspired agents in the plot). As a rule, however, classical epics do not have to do so. Since they narrate a portion of a mythological or historical lore that is preserved in other

venues and that they assume it is well known by their audience, they do not need to be recapitulative or all-encompassing. It suffices that epic texts mark the point of entry into the traditional material, and move inside expected chronological and topographical confines. So does the *Divine Comedy*.

Autobiographies do the opposite: they start from the beginning; and Dante knows that. In his *Vita Nuova*, for instance, he had begun the narrative with the first encounter with Beatrice, when he was nine years old. The inauguration of his love story occupied only a few paragraphs in the book of his memory from which it is transcribed and it only took up two chapters in the booklet. Reproducing what already Augustine had done when he had summarized the first years of his life, starting as far back as his infancy, in the short span of one book, Dante also rapidly passed on to “a subject matter placed beneath larger rubrics” (*Vita nuova* 2). Although at a different pace, he had, however, conceived and carried out his narrative with an eye to completeness. The narrative of the salient points of his love for Beatrice stretched from its mysterious birth to its visionary plenitude, from its genesis to an unfulfilling, final revelation.

Given the first line of the poem and its abrupt opening on a collective dimension, readers hardly expect what comes next. The second line undoes any expectation that the first one had built. Shifting the focus of the narrative from a collective experience (our life) to an individual, first-person register, the poem continues: “I found *myself*.” In the Italian, the reflexive pronoun “mi” (myself) has exclusionary force: I, not we, have gone astray; I, not we, found myself or (as some translators prefer to render) came to myself in the dark wood. The “I-story” being told is not about everyone. Readers may identify with the protagonist only thanks to a mechanism of substitution. What is more, the protagonist moves through an uncharted territory and in complete isolation: no genealogical link may be established with him, no geographical identity may be formed. The poem's contradictory opening gambit does not allow, in other words, any univocal form of identification to be developed.

Neither “I-story” nor “we-story,” the *Divine Comedy* moves in a grey area. It invites the collective identification of epic only to defuse its invitation by evoking the personal identification of autobiography. Paradoxically, it solicits the collectivity of its readers, whose collective identity it evokes in line 1, to identify with an individual protagonist it singles out in line 2. How can it do so?

### *Shifting Paradigms*

If collective identification with an individual is to be fostered, the most natural way would be to empty out the protagonist of the story of all his specificity, to render him a transparent profile fitting all—an Everyman. Narratives that proceed along this path existed in Dante’s time. The French hybrid of epic and romance, the *Roman de la Rose*, provided an experimental (and quite successful) solution to the problem. Jean de Meung and Guillaume de Lorris, the authors of the *Roman*, had consistently chosen as protagonist an unspecific, fully generalized human being, Amant (the Lover) who entered the poem’s plot as a good-for-all proxy. In the *Roman*, any (male, adult, college-educated) reader had no trouble identifying with this kind of protagonist: the experiences narrated under a thin allegorical narrative veil have collective resonance. We all can have the same dream as Amant, embark on a quest for love along the same lines, face the same moral choices, and even miserably fail every intellectual or spiritual test as he does. There is nothing specific about him: the poem imposes very few age restrictions on the protagonist; as a psychomachia (a battle in the soul) of the moral subject, the poem’s geography has even fewer distinctive features; nothing is known of the social or intellectual status of the main character that would allow a reader to say “that’s not me!”

If the allegorical mode ensures identification, however, it also locates the plot at such a level of abstraction that its eventual exemplary quality is preemptively defused. In the end, little distinguishes the narrative text from its non-narrative argumentative

rendition. In the *Roman*, the logic cohesion of the story is based on the foundational sacrifice of any historical salience. The love story of the *Roman* may be phrased in medical terms, in a tract on love-sickness, or articulated through behavioral observations and maxims, in a manual of ethics. In their abstraction, all the characters in the poem and their reciprocal interactions may be rearranged in a system of psychological or moral oppositions that other discourses are able to incorporate. The deities as Venus or the God of Love, the vassals in their court as Idleness or Generosity, the sermonizing disputants as Nature and Reason, the minions in their train Genius and Danger, even the Lover and the Rose or the most “human” supporting actors in the plot as the Old Woman and False-seeming, have no individual and historical concreteness. They do not exist beyond the confines of the dream that creates them and the text in which they appear. In other words, the message contained in it makes narrative expendable: as it is true for any *roman a clef*, the key undoes the novel, more than simply unlocking it. When the allegory is reduced to its content, the narrative disappears: the enunciation of a narrative's thesis eliminates the need of any thesis-oriented narrative.

Bearing in mind the potential shortcomings of the *Roman de la Rose* (especially its potential reduction to prose and lack of exemplary force), in the *Divine Comedy* Dante chooses not to follow suit. He chooses, rather, to preserve the identity of the protagonist in full, and simply impose identification. The “I” in the poem is presented as a fully historical and fully historically determined human being. Were we in need of an intra-textual proof of Dante's daring and unexpected choice, it would suffice to look at how the poem's deuteragonist, Virgil, is introduced into the action. Far from being, as he has often been interpreted, an allegory of something—a thin veil for Reason or, more specifically, for the highest potential human rationality could reach before (and without) the essential aid of God's incarnation and self-sacrifice—the first of Dante's guides in the poem is an absolutely specific human being. The compact *curriculum vita* he details for Dante would make little sense otherwise:

Non omo, omo già fui,  
e li parenti miei furon lombardi,  
mantoani per patria ambedui.

Nacqui sub Iulio, ancor che fosse tardi,  
e vissi a Roma sotto 'l buono Augusto  
nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi.

Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto  
figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia,  
poi che 'l superbo Ilión fu combusto.

[Not a man, though once I was.  
My parents were from Lombardy —  
Mantua was their homeland.  
I was born *sub Julio*, though late in his time,  
and lived at Rome, under good Augustus  
in an age of false and lying gods.  
I was a poet and I sang  
the just son of Anchises come from Troy  
after proud Ilium was put to flame.]

(*Inferno*, ll. 67-75)

Readers immediately learn date and place of birth, parents' status, and record of literary achievements of the first guide. Virgil's brief autobiographical sketch reflects on the status of the protagonist too. It would be strange if the profile of the second character, who enters the poem and will be in command of two thirds of the narrative, were so specific while the protagonist were only a thin allegorical veil for humanity at large.

Just as Virgil is himself, so also Dante is himself, not only when Beatrice will name him in full in *Purgatorio* 30 and provide readers with a detailed (and critical) intellectual biography of the poet, but well before that point. The poem's protagonist enters the narrative stage with a whole set of biographical associations that render him a specific human being: he is Dante Alighieri, a Christian and a poet, a failed and exiled politician who had belonged to the Guelph

party, a fighter in the battles of Campaldino and probably also Caprona, a reader of the classics and an auditor in the schools of the philosophers. These data are not merely implied in the text. They are not some curious facts about the author that philologists have patiently teased out of the *Divine Comedy*: rather, they are the essential metapoetic postulates of the poem. They are the necessary ingredient for the correct functioning of the narrative. Without them several episodes in the *Comedy* would make little or no sense; in particular, they would lose the corrective effect they are supposed to have both on the protagonist and on the readers.

In the thirteenth *Epistle*, a cover-letter for and dedication of a portion of Dante's *Paradiso* to Cangrande della Scala (his Guibelline patron and ruler of Verona), Dante declares that the final cause of the poem, the goal it strives to reach is "to remove those who live in the present state of misery and lead them into a state of happiness" (*Ep.* 13.15). If this is the end of the poem, the means by which it achieves this end is the progressive and cathartic identification with the protagonist it promotes among the readers. Dante offers the narrative journey of his poem as the vehicle for the moral journey of the readers. The moral progress of the one depends on the narrative steps taken by the other. Just as readers are asked to recognize what unites all of them with the exemplary drama the character Dante plays out in the narrative, so is the Pilgrim asked to see himself in the characters he meets in hell. The poem repeats, at various stages of development, its metapoetic core: along his journey, the Pilgrim is put in a position to go beyond the differences that separate him from the "spiritual lives" that are shown to him. He is asked to meet with himself through the scattered fragments of his own autobiography.

### *The Fragments of the Mirror*

As a conclusion and an invitation to read further, I would like to explore, ever so briefly, three episodes from *Inferno* in which the mechanism of identification that embroils

protagonist and supporting characters is most evident. They are all famous and familiar moments in the *Divine Comedy*—actually, some of the most salient encounters that take place in hell—and they all revolve around Dante’s meeting with aspects of his own self. To their interpretation I will only add an invitation to observe how the poem inflects the foundational identification paradigm in three different ways. In all three instances, Dante’s career as a writer is evoked and obliquely reconsidered or criticized.

The first instance in which the Pilgrim meets a fragment of his own autobiography is *Inferno* 5. Dante’s encounter with Paolo and Francesca is with characters that represent more than two of his quasi-contemporaries, the chronologically last and geographically closest in a long series of “ancient women and knights” who have died for love. They are not simply members of the cross-cultural, westward *translatio amoris*, a literary line of development parallel to the political and cultural ones uniting the Greek-speaking ancient East, the Latin-speaking Roman West, and the vernacular-speaking Franco-Italian North. For Dante, the dynamics of Paolo and Francesca’s love-story and the language they use strike closer to home. Their story implicates him personally as both writer and reader of signs. Thanks to the Augustinian resonances that may be detected in the episode, which make it about literary hermeneutics as much as it is about misguided erotics, Dante’s encounter in the circle of lust is more than an abstract exercise in potentially perverse spectatorship. It becomes a preliminary essay on how not to read a work of fiction.

As the author of a booklet of love poetry himself, Dante is faced with two of his potential (and potentially perverse) readers. Francesca’s competence in the language of courtly love, the prowess she displays in detailing for the Pilgrim the threefold manifestation of Love’s overwhelming force in her life, implicates Dante as author of civic erotic poetry. Even if he is not the author of the text that seduces them, the person responsible for what Francesca calls the “sole point that defeated us,” Dante is not immune to their plea for



empathy. The episode's abrupt ending, in which the character of Dante momentarily dies and thus reenacts the death of the souls he meets, recapitulates the first literary achievement of the poet, his profile as young published author. The texts at stake are the varied experimental lyric poems leading up to the *Vita Nuova*, the first entry on Dante's *curriculum vita* as man of letters. The book remains innocent, unscathed by any potential perverse reading, but its author acknowledges the danger inherent in the perverse practice of a code he had endorsed in his work.

The *Divine Comedy* offers a further moment of protagonist-character identification a few cantos later. In *Inferno* 13 Dante finds himself in a second, ominous wood: from the wood of worldly error of canto 1 he has passed into the fully infernal wood of the suicides. The invitation to a parallel reading that these two distinct but resonating woods contain may be heeded, and a suicidal temptation (if not even a tendency) may be read back from the text to the author, but only as a preliminary general frame for the central episode starring Pier delle Vigne, the disgraced chancellor of Frederick II. That is, Dante might have really been suicidal in the indistinct and un-narrated time that precedes the poem's *incipit* (or, better yet: the author of the *Divine Comedy* might have been interested in suggesting that the poem's authorial persona be one lost in the temptation of suicide); yet, an autobiographical reading of the infernal landscape may be legitimate only if other elements in the canto are shown to contain autobiographical resonances.

As a matter of fact, the Dante-Piero connection suggested by the parallel landscapes is not too far-fetched. Several facets of their public personalities appear as mutual reflections. For the former Guelph Prior, fallen out of grace with his constituency and cast in exile, the disgraced and jailed Piero is a fitting negative model. For the post-exile Dante, who has progressively moved from a pure Guelph to a qualified Guibelline political allegiance, the example of Piero's blind and exclusive faith in his (worldly) Lord is just as fitting. But there is more: if Pier delle Vigne's final destination

clearly betrays the tragic fault in his character, the poem also intimates the shortcomings of his rhetoric. In his admittedly convoluted autobiographical and auto-apologetic speech, Piero proves that he has rhetorically convinced himself not only that the best course of action for him was suicide, but also that the christological metaphors he had applied to his rhetorical renditions of Frederick II, a feature of the chancery-style for which he was famous in life, contained a core of truth. In this light, the example of Piero is both pertinent and implicating for Dante. As the author of *De vulgari eloquentia*, a treatise on language and poetics (an unfinished tract that in the Renaissance will perceptively be labeled *Rhetorica Dantis*), the model of a master rhetorician who falls prey to his own figurative language and daring artifices of style is for Dante almost inescapable.

Finally, an entire, if idiosyncratic and harshly debated, category (or sub-category) of sinners in the Malebolge appears to have been intended as a partial mirror of Dante's own moral autobiography: the so-called fraudulent counselors. Both examples of sinners punished in the *bolgia*—the ancient Greek Ulysses and his anti-type, the modern Italian Guido da Montefeltro—preserve some of the traits of the post-exile Dante. Guido is a military man, versed both in diplomacy and its continuation with other means. In his culminating and eventually damning achievement, he acted as counselor to Pope Boniface VIII. As an advisor to the pope Dante portrays as an autocrat, illegitimately involved in the political affairs of the Italian Peninsula, Guido is a large-scale proxy for Dante. He too, in an attempt to carve a niche as a man of culture and of action outside of Florence, had marketed himself as a diplomat and advisor to rulers and city-councils. Guido's career before the cloth must have appeared to the exiled Dante as an ever-present temptation in very practical terms. So could have the mythological parable of Ulysses.

Nowhere as here will my argument be more reductive, for which I apologize. Ulysses is the character to which I perhaps can do the least justice in a short time, especially by insisting only on

the political and rhetorical aspects of Dante's multifaceted fascination with him. Although often overshadowed, however, these aspects of the character's and author's profiles deserve to be mentioned. As a political and intellectual guide for his companions on their last voyage, Ulysses had reunited in him the roles of the equally misguided and overreaching demagogue. Presented as a man skilled in words and in organizing consensus, he too anticipated a potential political and cultural role Dante seemed to have contemplated for himself once his exile had proven irreversible by force.

It is not a coincidence that both Guido, as a historical personality (*Inferno* 27.79-81), and Ulysses, in the philosophical maxim to which he appeals in his final oration (*Inferno* 26.118-120), find a proleptic echo in Dante's *Convivio*, the book to which he had entrusted his hopes of constructing an image as leading intellectual for political communities and worthy advisor to rulers. Guido appears in Dante's prose-treatise as an example of praiseworthy moral conduct, a judgment that the author of the *Divine Comedy* reverses as he evokes the dominating metaphor of life as a sea voyage he had already used in *Convivio*. The central postulates of Ulysses' harangue to his crew, with their insistence on the intellectual dignity of Man, the only creature born to follow virtue and knowledge, also resonate with Dante's own postulate in the *Convivio*, that all man naturally desire knowledge. In the poem, the narrator and character's attention to curb their *ingegno*, their intelligence, is not out of place in a context in which the protagonist is exposed to the dangers inherent in the author's career as a political intellectual.

Just as all these characters (no matter how much individualized they are) resonate with some of Dante's own literary autobiographical traits, so should the story in which the character (in all his specificity) is the protagonist invite the same kind of dynamic identification on the part of the reader. If the exemplary system to which the poem's protagonist is exposed works, the exemplary system that this text constructs for its readers should work as well.

The actor's identification with the characters he encounters on his journey should guide us in our own identification with the actor as we journey through the text. Imposing on its readers such a hermeneutic burden is the *Divine Comedy's* most daring wager, one on which most of its eventual success depends. If we are still talking about this text today, if we are still reading it, we may safely assume the poem won it.