

**FROM THE “ALLORA” TO THE “NON ANCORA:”
LUZI’S ESSAYS ON DANTE**

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In five critical essays on Dante extending from 1945 to 1999 Mario Luzi presents his view of the *Divina Commedia* as a living work that requires its readers to enter into its internal creative process in order to comprehend its moral and teleological meanings. At the center of the essays is the figure of Dante, identical to the poem’s protagonist, whose absolute identification with the objects of his thought gives rise to a poetry of prophecy, proclamation and testimony rooted in the experience of exile. Dante sees exile as the universal condition of humanity, which presupposes a spiritual struggle and itinerary on the part of the individual: from the “allora” of sin and perdition to the “non ancora” of penitence and expiation, and hence to the prospect of salvation. In closing, the essay considers the relation between Luzi’s critical Dantism and the impact of Dante on his poetry.

Keywords: Mario Luzi, Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Exile, Salvation, Testimony

In his writings on Dante, Mario Luzi provides an inspired view of the poet as a master who integrated science, faith and daily life, primarily in the *Commedia*, a work that never stopped inspiring Luzi in his poetry and his life. While much has been written of Luzi’s poetic derivations from Dante, little attention has been paid to the intense though circumscribed group of essays that he compiled over the years on his fellow Florentine. While the total number of pages dedicated to Dante in Luzi’s essays is not great, the ideas are seminal and deserving of a systematic examination. In his essays on Dante Luzi presents a unique reading of the *Commedia* as a universal text that integrates ethics, politics and theology into a prophetic vision, but also as a recondite and nonlinear text that resists comprehension by the simple gloss, requiring a committed reader who is willing to enter into its internal creative process. For only in that way is one apprised of the centrality to Dante’s poem of the soul’s struggle for freedom.

I treat Luzi's Dante essays sequentially, proceeding from the earliest to the latest. By amply citing the texts, I show how Luzi integrates the languages of the spirit, history and poetry in order to provide a limpid interpretative pathway for today's reader. Warning against the critical anachronisms that arise if one does not heed the radical differences between the Middle Ages and the modernity, Luzi adopts a metahistorical approach to the *Commedia* that recovers its moral urgency for the present and shows it to be a living, dynamic and actionable text. The title of my essay in fact refers to such a metahistorical conception, as Luzi proposes in his 1987 essay *L'esilio, Dante, la poesia*. As I articulate below, the "allora" concerns the time of loss and the painful memory of sin that spurs one to expiation, while the "non ancora" designates a higher place in the purgatorial itinerary, a stage of sublimation where one still remains excluded from the supreme joy of Paradise.

Already as a schoolboy, Luzi recognized the magic of the *Vita nuova* and the network it established between love, the verbal sign and spiritual transformation.¹ In 1935 he wrote: "Mi piace amplificare quella ingenua induzione della *Vita nuova* in cui Dante riduce la nascita del nuovo linguaggio italiano a un semplice atto di amore."² One can say that from the earliest years forward, Luzi's writings on Dante focus on the parallel development of the poet's life and work and the impossibility of separating them. After forging a new poetic language in his early poetry, Dante is prepared to combine within a single cosmic narrative the facts of the immanent world of history and those of the transcendent world of faith. Luzi's insight is that these two worlds are coextensive, that matter and spirit are interdependent in the *Commedia*, and that to read the poem accurately is to participate in both spheres, intellectually and affectively. It is to enter into Dante's poematic process as a sentient subject and to recognize the text as being historically rooted in its time but also existing in an eternal present: "[Q]uesto presente inesorabile se non trascende e non si stempera in alcuna metafisica ciclicità non ha nulla a che vedere con il nostro desolato o presuntuoso *hic et nunc*. È un presente che risponde direttamente

¹ In the 1989 essay, "Dante, da mito a presenza," in *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, ed. Stefano Verdino (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992), Luzi notes how Tuscans have such an integral relationship with Dante as to be unable to separate the writings from the man and his historical experience.

² Luzi, "Note sulla poesia italiana" (1942), in *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 61. Luzi goes on in this essay to identify love as the primary theme of Italian poetry, in parallel with the form of the poem, characterized by "il mirabile equilibrio che esiste tra la quantità affettiva e la quantità ritmica nelle composizioni più chiare." The example Luzi cites to support this claim is Dante's sonnet "Guido vorrei che tu e Lapo e io...".

nell'eternità.”³ This idea of an eternal present, which is conveyed by the aoristic present tense (“in un tempo aoristo sempre presente”) is, according to Luzi, one of the most difficult things for modern readers of Dante to grasp, as the current age is a fallen age, poorly suited to comprehend the role of the absolute in Dante’s philosophical culture.⁴ Indeed, one detects throughout Luzi’s critical work on Dante the need to guard against the anachronistic reading.

The passage I cited above is from Luzi’s first essay on Dante, *L’inferno e il limbo* (1945), a celebrated text in which Luzi asserts that, after Dante, the contestative culture of that poet was quickly marginalized by the literary tradition, which began to model itself on Petrarch, growing elegiac, renouncing history and lapsing into a melancholy sense of time. In other words, despite the introduction by Boccaccio of the practice of the *lectura Dantis*, an important development in the history of Dante studies, generations of poets after Dante did not retain his theological poetics and its dynamic relation to the poetic word.⁵ Rather, the tradition of Italian poetry entered into a “limbo,” a state of aesthetic and formalistic suspension not unlike the one reserved for the classic poets in *Inferno*, a place of lofty but vain hopes. In contrast, “inferno” – “il luogo e il tempo in cui la speranza è stata definitivamente delusa” – was Dante’s way of indicating “la transitorietà del male, la sofferenza come episodio.”⁶ This idea, that suffering is a means but not an end, will be a mainstay in Luzi’s writings about Dante and will eventually lead him to his modern reading of *Purgatorio*.⁷ It also motivates his critique of the poetic tradition, for which suffering

³ Mario Luzi, *Naturalzza del poeta* (Milan: Garzanti, 1995), 193.

⁴ Mario Luzi *Vero e verso. Scritti sui poeti e sulla letteratura*, eds. Daniele Piccini and Davide Rondoni (Milan: Garzanti, 2002), 44.

⁵ For Luzi the interior sense of the *lectura dantis* is that of Dante’s text seeking its fulfillment through active participation. See *ibid.*, 45: “Ma più interiormente è la poesia di Dante che cerca il suo adempimento; è la sua essenza-forma profetica che si attua attraverso la partecipazione. Questa partecipazione non è commemorativa così come non è commemorativa, ma attiva, attuale la lingua poetica di Dante. Il suo è un poema che si sta facendo sulla forza portante del suo *ductus* che a sua volta è generato dalla sua necessità super personale, e paradossalmente ultra personalizzata.” Luzi’s use of the medieval concept of *ductus* reflects the intentionality of the work itself, as the self-generating entity that guides the author in the creative process.

⁶ Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 9.

⁷ In appraising Luzi’s poetry, Franco Fortini, *I poeti del Novecento* (Rome: Laterza, 1988), 143, singles out “una moderna lettura del *Purgatorio*.”

had become an end in itself, resulting in the loss of the image of Providence:⁸

Non si parla qui dei petrarchisti, ma tutta la poesia italiana è stata dopo Petrarca privata dell'orgoglio della scoperta, dei contatti più freschi e magari più bruschi dell'anima con le circostanze episodiche della vita e, volendo ancora estendere il termine, con l'inferno.⁹

This paradigm shift is also reflected in the changed status of musicality, metrics and rhythm in establishing the poem's concrete relation to the world. Luzi contrasts in this regard

la metrica ricchissima di combinazioni ritmiche di Dante [...] su cui la diversità dell'oggetto ha il potere di incidere, frutto variabile d'un incontro fra l'immagine e la voce umana [...] a [...] quella di Petrarca, non meno varia e ricca, ma sempre inventata all'interno di un suono generale che non è più quello della voce umana, ma quello di un moto spirituale continuo, chiuso e segreto, che si risveglia secondo i movimenti altrettanto interni e segreti della memoria perfetta nel suo mondo formale.¹⁰

Because of the imitability of Petrarch's language there develops in the Italian tradition a kind of formal closure based on the internal movements of spirit and memory; the prevalence of this mode in certain periods had made the world of Dante virtually inaccessible, in Luzi's view.¹¹

Twenty years later after *L'inferno e il limbo*, Luzi publishes *Dante, scienza e innocenza* (1965). Here the poet continues to write of Dante as a man rooted in the material events and languages of the Middle Ages, but as one who chose to mediate that historic reality with the principles of his faith, without being weighed down by excessive precepts. Luzi does not assume Dante's adherence to

⁸ For Luzi, the poets of modernity pushed happiness back into memory, back to a past where they were presumably happy, while projected salvation forward into an indeterminate future, supported by vain hopes. See Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 7: "È avvenuto che il fantasma della felicità ha trovato posto solo nell'irreparabile e che un richiamo straordinariamente energico ci ha distolti una volta per sempre dal vagheggiarlo."

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16. The poetic-linguistic opposition of the plurilingual Dante to the monolingual Petrarch seems to anticipate the position taken by Gianfranco Contini in his 1951 "Preliminari sulla lingua del Petrarca," in *Varianti e altra linguistica. Una raccolta di saggi (1938-1968)* (Turin, Einaudi: 1970), 169-92.

¹¹ Though Luzi's early poetry shows the considerable influence of the very Petrarchan language he is critiquing here in 1945, what will follow – as I discuss in the final section of this essay – is a clear turn toward Dante and his embrace of the material world.

particular questions of scholastic doctrine, sensing that such an assumption is too restrictive and leaves the mistaken impression that Dante shaped his poem around Thomist orthodoxy rather than around his actual biographical experience. Moreover, Dante's thought is seen to evolve over the years of his exile and acquire greater density.

For Luzi, the daring spontaneity of Dante's poem is due to his reliance on experience and the science of rhetoric, a commitment that allows him to identify completely with the object of his thought: "[I]l genio che favorisce la creatività e la germinazione perpetua della poesia dantesca è [...] l'immedesimazione. L'immedesimazione con l'oggetto del pensiero, del senso, del giudizio, del sentimento che non lascia intervallo tra il poeta e la cosa..."¹² Though a great disparity exists between the anguished culture of modernity and the ordered systems of the Middle Ages, it is through Dante's absolute identification with the world that the modern reader is able to identify with his "impensabile associazione di scienza, consapevolezza e innocenza che ha vigore su tutti i piani, intellettuale, morale e artistico," provided, that is, one does not reduce Dante to a simple "personaggio":¹³

Dante in quanto individuo è parte essenziale dell'oggetto che ha occupato il poeta. Non è una sottigliezza questa che vi propongo. Già altri hanno parlato di Dante come personaggio del suo poema e hanno designato come il personaggio che dice: io. Ma in questa trovata ingegnosa c'è a mio modo di vedere un vizio di anacronismo, e cioè un allineamento con la finzione moderna capace di simili sdoppiamenti. Chi dice: io è Dante poeta il quale parla in proprio e non per interposta persona.¹⁴

If one is able to avoid the anachronism of splitting the protagonist into different fictional entities, one will recognize that the character is identical to the man himself: "Non solo quel Dante è Dante, ma lo è allo stato nudo, umilmente corrispondente a sé, esitante, soggetto a errore, ora pari ora inferiore alla situazione, suscettibile di smarrimenti, esposto alle violenze e alle debolezze del suo carattere."¹⁵ This is a man whose confession we have before us, a poet who constructed the poem as he lived it, a fragile man without vanity or pride who realized it was only through grace that he could rise above himself in the midst of his worldly struggles. For Luzi,

¹² Luzi, *Naturalizza del poeta*, 194.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

this Dante 'in process' can only be brought into focus by the discussion of time: "[Dante] non solo non attribuisce alla poesia una dimensione temporale continua, che le sia propria, ma non le riconosce nemmeno un tempo distinto da quello dell'esperienza concreta del vivere e del conoscere."¹⁶ If the first half of *Dante, scienza e innocenza* is concentrated on this concept of time, as wed to the cognitive sense of knowledge of the world, the second half argues that it is only by means of such a conception that one can gain access to its opposite, the vertical and the eternal. It is in that vein that Luzi praises the more innovative Dante criticism of his day, which has elevated the "prodigious" and wondrous aspects of the poem, underscoring the authenticity of Dante's confession and his humble recognition of the role that grace had played in his life:

[Dante] rimanda tutto alla grazia se ha potuto elevarsi al di sopra di se stesso. [...] Dante sa [...] che codesta altezza è superiore a lui e in quanto elargizione della grazia gli è stata accordata per l'umiltà e la realtà della sua sofferenza umana; quando scrive non ne tradisce l'origine, rimane fedele, resta, per dir meglio, all'interno della sofferenza che gliel'ha meritata.¹⁷

It is this dual sense of the contingent and the eternal, enabled by the humility of the poet, that render his embodiment of the Bonaventuran *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* authentic, as that journey is undertaken over the actual physical landscapes of Dante's decades-long wanderings.

The question of time will return in force in Luzi's *L'esilio, Dante, la poesia* (1987). But before I examine that late essay I wish to introduce another essay, not specifically on Dante but of critical importance to our argument. In the 1972 essay "L'incanto dello scriba" Luzi poses the negative model of the "scribe" who is monastically locked away from the world, practicing poetry as a pure "ascesi tecnica." Such a scribe is under a spell of sorts dreaming that their writing will protect them from their fate:

[...] l'incanto dello scriba occupato dai segni e dalle carte di cui dispone [è] lo stato elettivo che lo scrittore vagheggia quando, per un arbitrio del desiderio, immagina di poter correggere il suo destino che invece non lo preserva dal confronto continuo con l'oscuro processo creativo del mondo; processo nel quale egli stesso è immerso.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

Dante is the antitype of such a scribe, as he realizes that the confrontation with the dynamic forces of nature and the cosmos are the very fuel which allow him to activate the spirit within the letter:

Supporre l'esistenza di un universo concluso della scrittura dove al singolo autore sia consentito solo una inedita combinazione delle componenti è una metafora in auge, ma essa è fondata sul presupposto che tra il cosmo della scrittura e quello della natura e dell'esistenza non ci sia alcun contatto; un presupposto che penso contrasti con il primo principio della poesia che è nell'ordine del linguaggio, d'inventare la parola dov'era il segno e la cifra (sia pure la stessa parola caduta a segno e a cifra convenzionale) e insomma di portare lo spirito dov'era la lettera.¹⁹

It is clear that, even without referring to Dante by name, Luzi is defining the existential, historical and formal contours of a Dantean poetics. And once again he is elevating a poetry in which the cosmic and absolute are juxtaposed, through the intermediary of nature, to the particular experience of history.

As stated, the question of time in Dante is central to the late essay *L'esilio, Dante, la poesia*. Here Luzi reflects on the vast differences between his generation of poets and the world of Dante. While in the latter the experience of exile was concrete and irreversible, in the former the *topos* of exile is often used as a metaphor detached from reality.²⁰ The culture of Dante's time was proudly and jealously situated, located in fixed places: in the city, in the guild, in one's home. To be forcibly ejected from those places was to be denied one's reality, one's identity: "La perdita di questo fondamento è di estrema gravità sotto parecchi riguardi, il morale e il politico in primo luogo."²¹

It was quite exceptional, therefore, that Dante was able to overcome the humiliation of exile and appropriate that condition mentally and spiritually so as to redefine exile as "il processo di sublimazione intellettuale e morale di tutto l'universo."²² In such a way exile became a foundation on which to build; it signified separation, not from the actual Florence mired in corruption, but from the just and awaited Florence of Dante's utopian ideal. Thus, in exile, Dante was able to imagine his repatriation or return as being convergent with the supernatural experience of salvation.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128-29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

²¹ Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 37.

²² Luzi, *Naturalità del poeta*, 203. See *ibid.*: "L'allontanamento accidentale sarà infatti duplicato dal disconoscimento sostanziale e anche più irreparabile dalla ragione fiorentina."

This teleological vision is richly purgatorial. It is precisely the second cantica that seems to draw Luzi's most fervent attention. In the concluding pages of *L'esilio, Dante, la poesia*, he writes of the upward itinerary of the soul as it moves from the "allora" of loss and regret, and the painful memory of sin, to the "non ancora" of sublimation and the awareness that one still remains excluded from the "sommo gaudio" of paradise.²³ As the corporality of the subject grows less, and as its absorption in time is attenuated, cleansed of the historical experience of violence, the promise of redemption grows imminent. And while the sense of the "non ancora" still refers to a privation, once one reaches the latter cantos of *Purgatorio* the anticipation of paradise is palpable. That is consistent with what Luzi had written in *L'inferno e il limbo*, that salvation cannot be assigned to a remote future by a vain hope, but is something that must be conceived as imminent.

As Luzi would note, *Purgatorio* is the most earthlike of the canticas and is the one in which the relationship between contingency and substance is most pressing. It is the cantica most concerned with poetry, the only one where time is in force and the only one with an ascent.²⁴ Most importantly perhaps, it is the cantica in which nature is most present, a fact dramatized by the poetic word, the *verbum*, which is intrinsic to the Creation itself. The idea of naturalness is basic to Dante's idea of the sacred, since the natural order is connected to the Incarnation as a continuous event; nevertheless there are limitations. Since the natural order and the human perception of that order are quite different, humans are expected to accept reality as it is, a truth conveyed to his charge by Virgil: "State contenti, umana gente, al *quia*" (*Purg.* 3, 37). In line with this dictum, one must accept the need for suffering just as one accepts the mystery of the Incarnation (which Virgil, ironically, cannot know).

In *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* the civic power of Dante's thought intensifies as does his passionate opposition to the secular powers of the Church (powers that Aquinas had asserted were absolute). One might keep this idea in mind if one is to grasp Luzi's understanding of *Purgatorio*, since it is predicated on the upheaval of exile that leads Dante to a superior self-discovery. It was the second cantica that Luzi came to recognize as "la porta di accesso

²³ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁴ See Mario Luzi, "Notizia," in *Teatro* (Milan: Garzanti, 1993), 492: "Il *Purgatorio* è l'unico regno e l'unica cantica in cui il tempo vige: e vige nel suo doppio potere di nostalgica rammemorazione del passato e di tormentosa remora all'eterno su cui il desiderio, in forma di attesa sempre più bruciante, si sposta. Tempo che divide dal mondo e tempo che divide da Dio."

alla cattedrale dantesca,” since it is there that the exile of humanity is dramatized.²⁵ Already dissociated before his exile (after Beatrice’s death, Florence was but the sign of her absence), once in exile Dante would not be spared the hardest physical difficulties. Even the welcomes he received from princes only emphasized the treacherous precariousness of his condition. But it is precisely through suffering this condition as a partisan man, whose individual dignity and civic dignity are inseparable, that he comes to understand that the experience of exile is concretized in the Eucharist.²⁶

There is a passage from the book of John that Luzi often refers to, according to which the word stands at the origins of life: “In lei [la parola] era la vita; e la vita era la luce degli uomini” (John 1, 4).²⁷ He cites this passage as the epigraph to the poems of *Per il battesimo dei nostri frammenti* and he cites a related passage from St. Augustine as the epigraph to *Viaggio terrestre e celeste di Simone Martini*: “Ascolta tu pure: è il Verbo stesso che ti grida di tornare...” (*Confessioni* iv, 11).²⁸ In Luzi’s view, there is a word that serves thought and a word that generates thought; only the latter – the *Verbum* of John and Augustine – is critical to poetry, while the former belongs to other pursuits, such as the sciences: “[C]redo che ogni pensiero che conti nasca nella parola che lo esprime, nasca esprimendolo, nasca manifestandolo nella parola, così come accade nel Verbo giovanneo per ritornare appunto al principio di tutte le cose.”²⁹ The *Verbum* that generates and creates is also vulnerable, as the historical world corrupts its purity. It becomes the role of the poet, therefore, who is able to exploit “il valore creante della parola,” to enter into the world and accept “la sofferenza agonica per restituire [la parola] a se stessa, alla sua dignità, alla sua interezza.”³⁰ This idea of a return to the honor and legitimacy of the word, undertaken through the process of suffering, is the task of *Purgatorio*.³¹

In the 1989 essay *Dante, da mito a presenza*, Luzi again reflects on Dante from the standpoint of modernity, arguing that, af-

²⁵ Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 55.

²⁶ See Luzi, *Naturalezza del poeta*, 203, 205.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.

²⁸ Mario Luzi, *Per il battesimo dei nostri frammenti* (Milan: Garzanti, 1985) and Id., *L’opera poetica*, ed. with introductory essay by Stefano Verdino (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 951.

²⁹ Luzi, *Naturalezza del poeta*, 294.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 294, 296.

³¹ See *ibid.*, 302: “Certi processi impliciti alla creatività dell’uomo alla creatività della parola [...] si avverano attraverso l’esperienza individuale ma sono superpersonali, sono [...] trascendentali.”

ter World War II, a Dantesque *Stimmung* had emerged in the collective consciousness, a dialectic of the soul that drew moral connections between words and ideas, words and things. Luzi recalls how Dante was appreciated as an agonistic poet who wrote from within the suffering of his characters:

Scrivere da dentro il patema, essendovi mescolato, attribuendo diritto di parola e di grido a ogni eroe o vittima, a ogni larva, perché la parola ritrovi la causa e il fine, la genesi e la teleologia del dire [...]: ecco che cosa mi affascinava.³²

This struggle-based approach to the word was perfectly suited to the infirmity and destitution of the *dopoguerra*; it was precisely this Dantesque approach to the word that the Italians needed in order to recognize their institutional crisis as a moral crisis and a crisis of knowledge. To recall Luzi's language from *L'inferno e il limbo*, by writing from within the suffering of himself and his contemporaries Dante was able utilize suffering as a means and not an end: "La virtù poetica che più colpiva noi usciti da atroci delusioni e sconvolgimenti era, in Dante, quella aderenza e inerenza nel suo tempo che venivano potenziate dalla trascendenza della visione."³³

What Dante communicated was the state of *humilitas*, characterized as "quella discesa nell'accidentale e nel discontinuo che è sempre ma tanto più oggi il tenore della creatura umana."³⁴ Thus, despite the vast difference in historical realities, this poetry, "che retenti la via della sua legittimità primaria dall'interno del mondo e della sua lacerazione," was exactly what modernity needed, as it confronted the brokenness of the world and attempted to make it whole again.³⁵ Yet in contrast to Dante, who found a place for every fragment ("lacerto") in the magnificent architecture of his poem, for the modern poet – and clearly Luzi is speaking of himself – "Il [...] poema è solo paradossalmente un poema, è fatto più di lacune che di testo."³⁶ While the example of the *Commedia* remains central to any poet seeking to restore and reconcile the spirit in today's situation of poverty, frailty and brokenness, there remains an unbridgeable divide between the universal belief system of Dante's day, by means of which he incorporated the details of his

³² Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 55.

³³ Mario Luzi, *La porta del cielo. Conversazioni sul cristianesimo*, ed. Stefano Verdino (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1997), 56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁶ Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 57.

historical and personal reality into the poem's verbal texture and representation of time, and the situation of our modern world.

The difference in cultural realities does not justify, however, the tendency to speak of Dante's poem monolithically as a seamless representation of the medieval view of the cosmos, as a completely ordered system supported by an authoritative and rationalistic theology. The assumption that an objective understanding of the poem is possible is, in Luzi's view, antithetical to Dante's message. Too often, in fact, the received truths about the poem have worked against the understanding of it as a prophetic and dynamic work. Dante's theoretical awareness of poetry did not conform to any rhetorical orthodoxy, being perennially creative and flexible. As Luzi writes: "Entro i fermi e ricchissimi contorni di una retorica-prodigio non c'è stato poeta più libero di Dante nei confronti di quella che noi diremmo la sua poetica."³⁷

There is in Luzi's appropriation of Dante a profound respect for the complexities and mysteries of the text, and the need to learn *how* to read it (much in the way advocated by Giacomo Debenedetti, considered by Luzi to be "forse il più grande" of contemporary Italian critics).³⁸ The heuristic theme of recognition that pervades Luzi's writings on Dante is intrinsic to the moral and cognitive basis of Dante's thought. Similarly, Luzi's use of the Aristotelian terms "accidente" and "sostanza" follows in the track of Dante, for whom potentiality and actuality were not conceived as a static dichotomy, but as phases of a single process involving contingent historical events and transcendent verities. The most dramatic instance of historic contingency in Dante's life was his exile, an occurrence that was not simply endured but transmuted so as to become the impetus for life-change and the profound alteration of the poem underway.³⁹

In the 1999 essay, *Dante: per la salvezza*, Luzi states that we never *reread* Dante: it is always the first time. This is because the test or challenge that the reader faces is analogous to the one faced by the author. That "prova" concerns the missionary purpose of the poem:

[È] una prova [...] aderente al processo poematico in corso, che è animato di spirito missionario e obbedisce a un disegno salvifico così implicito e immedesimato con il testo, che si può essere agli antipodi dalle

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁸ Mario Luzi, "Il mestiere del critico: Una intervista a Mario Luzi," *Forum Italicum* 32, no. 1 (1998): 192 (177-195).

³⁹ Luzi, *Naturalizza del poeta*, 207.

motivazioni dottrinali e dalle credenze di Dante e non per questo estraniarsi dall'avvenimento continuo e profetico della voce del poeta.⁴⁰

What Luzi means is that while the modern scientific mind cannot accept the medieval hierarchy of Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso, what remains intact are the aspirations and convictions implicit in this scheme: "l'aspirazione e i convincimenti profondi che sono sottesi a questa figurazione [...] permangono nel profondo. Non è una perdita di fede, ma un mutamento di concezioni e di immagini."⁴¹ In short, the esoteric theories contained in Dante's poem matter little in comparison to the poem's dynamic form, which is that of a pronouncement and a prophecy: "la *forma*, intesa [...] nella sua accezione dantesca e aristotelica di suprema qualità teleologica della lettera e della sostanza."⁴² The form of the poem is that of a "proferire" and a "profetizzare" in the Pauline sense of a charism that is intensified during Dante's exile. It is precisely this form of the poem that leads the reader to the message of salvation. Moreover, it is by means of this form that the poem's meaning is made accessible by degrees and by successive revelations to a select group of readers.

As in his earlier essays, Luzi insists that the essence of Dante's text is its dynamic, creative and regenerative principle, and that this "fervore operante" cannot be circumscribed by the poem's rhetorical arguments or doctrinal systems.⁴³ Instead the poem comes alive through the active response of its readers: "Opera dunque di salvezza allo stesso tempo che di rivelazione e di ammonimento: e la vibrazione vocale della profezia è continua e percorre tutta quanta la lettera."⁴⁴ As an inspired work, the *Commedia* employs the word in order to transmit a mystery:

Ciò che distingue Dante da ogni altro poeta è questa attività segreta della parola, oltre il senso e il sovrasenso, che sovrasta l'autore e il lettore e pure si manifesta e si esprime mediante la sua lettera: una lettera [...] estremamente perforante nello spessore della materia che designa, a qualunque livello di densità esso sia situato.⁴⁵

It should be apparent from this remark that comprehension of the *Commedia* is difficult, that there is a narrow gate of admission to

⁴⁰ Luzi, *Vero e verso*, 44-45.

⁴¹ Luzi, *La porta del cielo*, 86.

⁴² Luzi, *Vero e verso*, 43.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45 and 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

its mysteries. The Dantean word, Luzi argues, is prophetic and contains within it the desire for salvation.⁴⁶

One of the great merits of Luzi's writings on Dante is to have placed into relief the notion of the text as testimony in a deeply personal sense, which coincides with the intention of the text as it was written, dialogically, to a reader that Dante addressed directly, and which includes posterity, the "voi" that is implicit in the "nostra" of the first line of the *Commedia*. By emphasizing the virtuality of a poem that waits to be actualized by its readers, Luzi takes issue – as noted above – with the modern tendency to separate the Florentine from the protagonist of the poem, whether as poet or pilgrim. He insists that the I-voice in the *Commedia* in all its manifestations is Dante himself, a position that is consistent with "quella straordinaria forza d'immedesimazione che è la sua prima musa."⁴⁷

Dante does this, specifically, through his approach to the word, the *Verbum*, as a revelation that demands the reader's participation: "È un'attitudine e un modo della proposizione e della pronuncia: che non è propriamente quella del maestro né quella del discepolo [...] ma quella della rivelazione partecipata."⁴⁸ It is through this participation that the poem is fulfilled, precisely because the reader joins with Dante as a co-witness of something extraordinary: "È il presente di una eternità sorpreso dall'emozione di un testimone; il quale parla per condividere con altri quella emozione; perché quella emozione diventi desiderio efficace di salvezza."⁴⁹ The critical nature of experiential and expiational time that guides Dante in this process – which I have codified as the passage from the "allora" to the "non ancora," and beyond that to the "sommio gaudio," is accompanied by the act of testimony, the reception of which requires an elevated appreciation of poetic language's capacity to deal with the sacred and ineffable.

It can hardly be considered coincidental that Luzi closes this, his final essay on Dante with three citations from the *Commedia*, one from each cantic: the first, *Inf.* 5, 31-49, concerns the "bufera infernal" in which the "spiriti mali" of the lustful "bestemmian [...] la virtù divina" and are compared, in two avian similes, to the "stornei" and "gru," a demarcation of the extinguished time of the sinful past, the "allora" of those trapped for eternity in their perverse passion; this is followed by the opening lines of *Purg.* 25, 1-15, where Virgil, Statius and Dante must climb single-file along the steep and

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁷ Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 24.

⁴⁸ Luzi, *Vero e verso*, 44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

narrow passage, Dante, who wishes to ask a question but is fearful, again employs an avian simile, comparing himself to a “cicoginin” who lifts his wing from the nest but relents, knowing he would fall to the ground, this being a figuration of the “non ancora,” the in-between time of hope, expiation and expectation; and finally, the opening lines of the third cantica, *Par.* 1, 1-12, where the poet lays out the necessary limits to his narration – “e vidi cose che ridire / né sa né puó chi di la sù discende” – insofar as humans who are within the heavenly glory, who have reached the end, have no memory of the passage. This then is the teleological time of salvation, the “sommo gaudio” of heaven. Luzi concludes his essay as follows: “Il *telos* del poema è la salvazione del mondo attraverso la salvazione del poeta che prende su di sé questo compito.”⁵⁰ Needless to say, with his own *humilitas*, the poet that Carlo Ossola has called “il più dantesco dei nostri poeti” has taken on a similar “compito” in his own life.⁵¹

As regards the humility of Dante – a trait that might not be the first to come to mind to a modern reader – Luzi has some essential words. He finds commonality between the experience of his generation, which had witnessed the devastation of World War II, and Dante, whose experience of war, continual social crises and exile are everywhere apparent in the *poema sacro*; at the same time he notes the stark differences between his generation, sunken in a deep crisis of knowledge, and Dante’s, which was supported by a firm and universal belief system. And it is precisely this condition of vulnerability and weakness, at once comparable to Dante and diametrically opposed to him, that allowed Luzi to discover that humility is the great wellspring of Dante’s poetry:

In effetti eravamo e siamo indifesi. Solo così abbiamo potuto scoprire e valutare la più grande e recondita sorgente della poesia di Dante, cioè l’umiltà: fondamentale, intrinseca, non gestuale. L’*humiltas* di Dante: questa era l’altra anche più grande invenzione che ci veniva incontro e ci confortava.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵¹ Carlo Ossola, *Il Purgatorio di Luzi* (December 30, 2013), Università della Svizzera Italiana <http://www.isi.com.usi.ch/lectura-dantis-purgatorio.htm> in *Lecturae Dantis 2013*. In this *lectura Dantis* Ossola singles out the wall of flames of Canto XXVII, beyond which lie Matelda and Beatrice. It is here the spirits pass, “per elidere proprio tutto ciò che di spurio c’è nella loro esperienza.” Ossola draws many parallels between this place of repentance, “un luogo in cui l’umanità vampa,” and Luzi’s verse, notably the late collections *Sotto specie umana* and *Viaggio terrestre e celeste di Simone Martini*, and Luzi’s theatrical version of the second cantica, *La notte lava la mente*, which was performed in Prato in 1990.

⁵² Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi*, 56.

The recognition of Dantean humility is not simply a personal discovery set in the context of a particular historical condition, but is a Purgatorial insight, as humility is the key trait and virtue of that cantica.

As Ossola remarks in a *lectura Dantis*, “Il *Purgatorio* di Luzi,” the second cantica occupies a central position in Luzi’s poetry. Furthermore, as the critic clarifies, the moral domain of Purgatory has its own life. Apart from the tribulation of the souls passing through it, the mountain is the sign in memory of the guilt of hell, and the fact that “il peccato non è interamente cancellato fin che rimane la memoria del peccato.”⁵³ Luzi’s strong affinity with the second cantica is obvious in his 1990 theatrical version: *Il Purgatorio. La notte lava la mente. Drammaturgia di un’ascensione*. Invited by Federico Tiezzi to compose this script and rendition, Luzi and the director agreed on a set number of emblematic episodes to include verbatim. These episodes are linked together by short interventions by a voice called the *Poema*: “Tra le mie poche invenzioni ascrivo quella del *Poema* – ne feci una persona come entità trascendente e continua che assume e macina in sé l’episodico e il conflittuale, una sorta di sovraumano nell’umano.”⁵⁴ Luzi created this part in recognition of the fact that while much of *Purgatorio* presents itself in theatrical scenes, there are non-dramaturgic components as well that need to be staged. Thus he invented this character, not an expeditious narrator but “il poema come voce trascendentale che sovrasta la stessa azione poetica attuale della profezia dantesca.”⁵⁵ Through his writing of this script, Luzi wishes to emphasize, once again, the actionable essence of the *Commedia*, the fact that it remains today “un’opera da fare, voglio dire proposta al continuo facimento dell’uomo e alla sua inesauribile perfettibilità.”⁵⁶

Luzi’s title for the theatrical rendition, *La notte lava la mente*, was the title of a poem published in *Onore del vero* (1957), a simple lyric comprised of two tercets having a distinct Purgatorial resonance:

La notte lava la mente.

Poco dopo si è qui come sai bene,
file d’anime lungo la cornice,
chi pronto al balzo, chi quasi in catene.

⁵³ Ossola, *Il Purgatorio di Luzi*.

⁵⁴ Luzi, *Vero e verso*, 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

Qualcuno sulla pagina del mare
traccia un segno di vita, figge un punto.
Raramente qualche gabbiano appare.

The six hendecasyllables (AXA, BXB) present an ambiguous situation in time ("Poco dopo," "Raramente") with references to diverse individual destinies where the souls are in progress "lungo la cornice," analogous to those of the second cantica, where a slow and painful ascent is in progress, fueled by hope and humility. The avian and scribal metaphors have a Dantean flavor as well.

I make these remarks realizing that a discussion of the Dantism of Luzi's poetry falls outside the prescribed parameters of this study. But given the porosity of the boundary between these bodies of work, it seems fitting, if only in closing, to attempt to characterize their relationship. To begin with, I would note that the same projected temporal space between the "allora" and the "non ancora," between the memories of a sinful past and the labors and suffering of penitence, as well as the perennial hope for salvation, are structurally present in Luzi's verse. Indeed, among the numerous critics who have studied Luzi's poetic relations to Dante, one can see this as a common theme.⁵⁷

While Luzi's earliest, hermetic poetry is laden with the Petrarchist style Luzi would criticize in *L'inferno e il limbo*, the reader of that essay should recognize its hyperbolic character in juxtaposing the Petrarchan to the Dantean poetics, and realize that the truer inheritance of the two Tuscan masters is to be conceived less programmatically. What is clear is that the Dantism that emerges in Luzi's poetry of the 1950s – as in the poem just cited, "La notte lava la mente" – remains largely implicit until *Nel magma* (1963, expanded in 1966), the book in which it becomes thematically central to the work, as seen in the opening poem, "Presso il Bisenzio."

⁵⁷ The bibliography on this topic includes the following: Alfredo Luzi, "Dante nella poesia di Mario Luzi," in *Lectura Dantis 2002-2009*, ed. Anna Cerbo (Naples: Università degli studi di Napoli, 2011), 283-90; Noemi Corcione, "Mario Luzi con Dante e Cavalcanti," *Critica letteraria* 43, 168-169 (2015): 703-23; Stefano Verdino, "Luzi da Leopardi a Dante," *Cuadernos de Filologia Italiana* 18 (2011): 195-202; Giorgio Orelli, "Sul 'mentre' nella poesia di Mario Luzi," *Strumenti critici* 11 (1970): 92-105; Andrea Ciccarelli, "Dal frammento all'unità: per una lettura dantesca della poesia di Luzi," *Italica* 71, no. 1 (1994): 78-95; Giancarlo Quiriconi, *Il fuoco e la metamorfosi: la scommessa totale di Mario Luzi* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1980); Lorenza Gattamorta, *La memoria delle parole: Luzi tra Eliot e Dante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); Marco Marchi, "Il patema e il sorriso. Luzi e Dante," in *Per Luzi* (Florence: Le lettere, 2012), 43-74; Laura Toppan, "Da Primize del deserto a Su fondamenti invisibili: il dantismo 'ideologico' di Luzi," *Studi novecenteschi* 24, no. 53 (1997): 147-74.

It becomes evident at this point that Luzi's poetic Dantism is not merely a question of stylistic appropriation but is rooted in the sort of personal testimony one finds in the *sacro poema*. Here I refer to the depiction of life situations that bear witness to the spiritual struggle of humanity, teleologically, practically and poetically. Like Dante, Luzi recognizes the fallen condition of mankind but, in his awareness of the absolute, aspires to an ascension and charts an upward trajectory toward reconciliation, purgation and peace.

It is also critical to note, on a formal plane, that in Luzi's final period he takes on the project of the long poem, *il poema*, in *Viaggio terrestre e celeste di Simone Martini* (1994). Here the journey in question is the final passage of the elderly Tuscan painter from Avignon to his native Siena. Structurally, the poem has the shape and coherence of the second cantic with certain of its sections resembling individual cantos. Several passages in the *Viaggio* reflect Luzi's view of Dante's poem as an embodiment of the process of artistic creation. Through his alter-ego, Simone Martini, Luzi documents, from within the position of the character's suffering, his own soul-journey. (Simone's home city of Siena was also Luzi's childhood home.) In the passage cited below Simone's journey is reaching its end, Siena looms, a city on a hill; it is commanding but also ephemeral; it appears and disappears in his consciousness. While the perceptual space is rendered abstractly in terms of motivations, preoccupations and sensations, one senses oneself at a threshold comparable to Dante's *Paradiso terrestre*:

Mi guarda Siena
mi guarda sempre
dalla sua lontana altura
o da quella del ricordo –
[...]

Ti perdo, ti rintraccio,
ti perdo ancora, mio luogo,
non arrivo a te.
Vanisce
 nel celeste
della sua distanza
Siena, si ritira nel suo nome,
s'interna nell'idea di sé, si brucia
nella propria essenza
e io con lei in equità,
perduto
alla sua e alla mia storia...
 Oh unica
suprema purità... Oh beatitudo.

Estrema sua vecchiezza
o un'incipiente
divina gratuità lo invade
vena dopo vena
fino alla sua cima?
Si lanciano come da una torre
al largo i desideri. Svagano
gioiosamente nell'aperto
essi, non è grazia per loro
il pieno adempimento. Non lo vogliono
infatti, non lo cercano
il termine, l'approdo,
il nido. Si diffondono
vibranti del vigore loro
in tutto il luminoso spazio
umano ed extraumano
liberi da causa, forse,
perché tutto è causa e insondabile il principio.⁵⁸

In these lines Simone Martini is confronting his suffering but also the condition of letting go, of renunciation and liberation. While the verse does not have the mimetic character of Dante's representation, being closer to that of the modern long poem that Luzi described as "fatto piú di lacune che di testo," it is clear that in the figure of Siena, the native city, the illuminated city on the hill, one has a parallel to the mountain of Purgatory. As is known, in Dante's final threshold before entering Paradise he is led by Beatrice to confess and is then dipped in the rivers Lethe and Eunoe, after which the only desires remaining to him are virtuous ones, primarily the desire for God.⁵⁹ The threshold space that Simone is experiencing is comparable. He has seen Siena appear and disappear – or rather he internalized its divine qualities, its "cima" – whereupon his desires are released "come da una torre" as separate entities that no longer seek out the endpoint, "il termine, l'approdo, / il nido," calling to mind Dante's term for the Paradiso terrestre, "questo luogo eletto / a l'umana natura per suo *nido*" (*Purg.* 27 77-78). The city is the place of an origin that is free of causation, because all has become causation: "liberi da causa, forse, perché tutto è causa." In addition, one can perceive in the overlay between Luzi's poem and *Purgatorio* a salient connection between the imagery of

⁵⁸ Luzi, *Earthly and Heavenly Journey of Simone Martini*, trans. Luigi Bonaffini, introd. Barbara Carle (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2003), 288, 328, 330.

⁵⁹ Luzi, *Dante e Leopardi, o, Della modernità*, 57.

the mountain illuminated by the sun that Dante derived from Sant'Anselmo, and the quintessential virtue of Purgatory, humility:

[P]er quel che riguarda in particolare l'umiltà, non solo corrisponde all'immagine di Anselmo la figura del monte illuminato dal sole che bisogna ascendere per gradi [...], ma ad Anselmo risalgono la definizione dantesca del peccato, identificato con la superbia [...] e l'insistenza sul fatto che l'umiltà è volta in alto, laddove la superbia è “demissa”.⁶⁰

As I have shown in this essay, Luzi's Dantism is a philosophical one *sui generis* that blends teleology and history, theology and testimony. It does not enter into the academic interpretation of particular passages, episodes or characters. As it would seem from our cursory assessment of Luzi's poetry, his critical writings on Dante exist in a complementary relation to his poetic *oeuvre*, not as self-exegesis but as an expansive philosophical and spiritual endeavor deserving of attention in its own right, a concise group of essays that declares in no uncertain terms the perennial necessity of poetry as an art form based in experience and committed to the potentially sacred character of the poetic word.

⁶⁰ Francesco Tateo, “Umiltà,” *Enciclopedia dantesca*, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/umilta_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/. (accessed 7/23/2021).