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## Reclaiming *Paradiso*

Dante in the Poetry of James Merrill and Charles Wright

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**ABSTRACT:** The 'fortuna di Dante' among English and American poets of the twentieth century is a rich story that continues on into this millennium with new permutations and undiminished energies. Pound and Eliot canonized Dante for more than one generation of poets and readers. Although Eliot famously rewrote Dante's infernal encounter with Brunetto Latini in 'Little Gidding', it was *Purgatorio* rather than *Inferno* that both Pound and Eliot valorized, its charged and affectionate poetic encounters serving as a model for key moments in both their works. Both poets especially loved *Purgatorio* XXVI, in which Dante's meeting with Guinizelli and then with Arnaut Daniel is staged as an encounter between languages as well as poets, with Dante incorporating Provençal into his *terza rima*. For others such as Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott the theme of poetic encounter in the afterlife, or between the dead and the living, remained a dominant trope, leading to important scenes in several Walcott poems and to Heaney's great purgatorial poem, *Station Island*.

# RECLAIMING *PARADISO*

Dante in the Poetry of James Merrill and Charles Wright

Rachel Jacoff

The ‘fortuna di Dante’ among English and American poets of the twentieth century is a rich story that continues on into this millennium with new permutations and undiminished energies. Pound and Eliot canonized Dante for more than one generation of poets and readers. Although Eliot famously rewrote Dante’s infernal encounter with Brunetto Latini in ‘Little Gidding’, it was *Purgatorio* rather than *Inferno* that both Pound and Eliot valorized, its charged and affectionate poetic encounters serving as a model for key moments in both their works. Both poets especially loved *Purgatorio* XXVI, in which Dante’s meeting with Guinizelli and then with Arnaut Daniel is staged as an encounter between languages as well as poets, with Dante incorporating Provençal into his *terza rima*. For others such as Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott the theme of poetic encounter in the afterlife, or between the dead and the living, remained a dominant trope, leading to important scenes in several Walcott poems and to Heaney’s great purgatorial poem, *Station Island*.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it was two American poets, James Merrill and Charles Wright, who focused their attention and delight specifically on the *Paradiso*, a much less common predilection for both poets and general readers.<sup>2</sup> Merrill, early in ‘The Book of Ephraim’, the first part of his trilogy, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, imagined a dream sequence in which the avant-garde film maker Maya Deren, one of the poem’s key figures, was taken up into heaven for a night and replaced briefly by the soul of a person who had lived long ago in the house she now occupied. Merrill’s guide figure Ephraim explains Maya’s celestial dream experience by invoking Dante:

This dream, he blandly adds, is a low-budget  
Remake – imagine – of the *Paradiso*.  
Not otherwise its poet toured the spheres  
While Someone very highly placed up there,

Donning his bonnet, in and out through that  
Now famous nose haled the cool Tuscan night.  
The resulting masterpiece takes years to write;  
More, since the dogma of its day  
Calls for a Purgatory, for a Hell,  
Both of which Dante thereupon, from footage  
Too dim or private to expose, invents.  
His Heaven, though, as one cannot but sense,  
Tercet by tercet, is pure Show and Tell.<sup>3</sup>

Merrill responds to the great conviction manifested in Dante's imagination of heaven. In *Mirabell* (2.2) he speaks of 'Dante's strength and that of his time' as 'fierce credulity'.<sup>4</sup> Reviewing Allen Mandelbaum's translation in 1980, Merrill again spoke of the visionary authenticity of the *Paradiso*. Taking note of the way Eliot had 'taught us how to reconcile Dante's passionate faith and our intrepid doubts by triangulations with the text itself', Merrill moved in another direction, while acknowledging the discomfort that arose in doing so:

To believe, however, that Dante had in any real sense seen God threatened both the poem and us. Who wanted song to curdle overnight into mere scripture, or himself to be trivialized in the glare of too much truth? Yet we must – or so I begin to think, decades later – allow that something distinct from mere 'inspiration' came to Dante. It had come to others: he is not after all our only mystic, just more literary and more fortunate than many. [...] The *Comedy's* energy and splendor suggest that Dante indeed 'saw the light' in a timeless moment. Its prophetic spleen and resonant particulars hint at something not quite the same, that like Milton or Yeats he had mediumistic powers – a sustaining divinatory intelligence which spoke to him, if only (as Julian Jaynes would have it) from that center of the brain's right hemisphere which corresponds to Weinecke's area on the left. This much granted, it would still remain to be amazed in the usual fashion when faced by a masterpiece: How on earth was it brought safely into being and on the page?<sup>5</sup>

Dante's model of visionary courage was enabling for Merrill. Rather than lamenting that things could no longer cohere – as Pound did at the end of the *Cantos*, and as almost everyone did when confronting Dante's more theologically ordered worldview – Merrill thought of the *Comedy* as authorizing his own ambitious trilogy. But with a difference: Merrill's *donné* was not a respectable Christian afterlife but rather a Ouija board that enabled converse with 'the other side'. Each of the three parts of the trilogy utilizes the structure of the Ouija board (the

alphabet, numbers, and ‘Yes & No’) to organize the discourses that arose from the years in which the poet and his friend David Jackson (referred to as JM and DJ) made contact with a great variety of otherworldly figures – mythical, fictional, and historical – through the board. The transcripts of these encounters became the basis for the poem, which deploys them in a dazzling variety of poetic forms and moods, both playful and serious.<sup>6</sup>

Merrill’s favourite moment in *Paradiso* was Dante’s vision in Canto XXVIII of the ‘punto’, the point of light surrounded by the encircling angelic orders. More abstract and impersonal than the Christological vision at the poem’s conclusion, for Merrill this vision is the source of the poem’s authenticity: ‘The vision as reported sets the mind reeling. What must it have been like to experience?’<sup>7</sup> Speaking of ‘the hallucinatory wonder of this little point’, Merrill found contemporary analogies for it: ‘We may picture it partly as a model of electrons whirling round the atomic nucleus – in our day, the point on which all nature and its destruction depend; partly as an abstracted solar system – only with the relative planetary speeds reversed, since these intelligences turn physics inside out.’<sup>8</sup> Just as Dante had incorporated the ‘science’ of his day, so Merrill attempts to incorporate contemporary scientific insights and terminology into his work.

That ‘punto’ finds its way into Merrill’s own vision. It is recalled in the second part of the trilogy, *Mirabell* (2.2), as ‘that uncanny shining tininess | Ringed with decelerating zones of light | (*Paradiso* XXVIII) on which, says Beatrice, | The heavens and all nature are dependent’,<sup>9</sup> and it forms part of the conclusion of the final section, *Scripts for the Pageant*, whose penultimate words are: ‘Up, far up, O whirling point of light.’<sup>10</sup> The allusions to the *Comedy* in Merrill’s trilogy, few in number but strategic, are all to the *Paradiso*, as is the epigraph to ‘The Book of Ephraim’, which is drawn from Cacciaguida’s speech on heavenly cognition in *Par.* XV, 61–63:

Tu credi’ l vero; che i minori e ‘ grandi  
 di questa vita miran ne lo spoglio  
 in che, prima che pensi, il pensier pandi.  
 [You believe the truth, for the lesser and the great  
 of this life gaze into that mirror  
 in which, before you think, you display your thought.]

Aside from allusions to the figure of Dante and to passages in the *Paradiso*, the most important trace of Merrill's reading of Dante comes in his dazzling deployment of Dante's *terza rima*. Merrill links the three parts of his trilogy by placing, within each of them, a near-climactic sequence in this privileged form. The first and third of these *terza rima* sequences are set in Venice and are linked thematically to each other and to the celestial dream sequence of Maya Deren that we have looked at. That dream is recalled and given its apotheosis in the *terza rima* section of *Scripts for the Pageant*, where it is 'rerun' when the poet and his friend watch a Deren film in Venice. The film becomes a momentary 'resurrection' of their dead friend, leading the poet to say: 'We are the ghosts, hers the ongoing party'.<sup>11</sup> The second of the *terza rima* sequences contains an elegy for the poet's recently dead friend Robert Morse and is linked to the Venetian theme of the other two sequences by mention of 'Maria's Himmelfahrt', her Assumption – the subject of the great Titian painting in the church of the Frari. Merrill's masterstroke, of course, is his decision to end of each of the three sequences with the word 'stars', the final word of each of the *Comedy's* three canticles.

Charles Wright, like Merrill, made the *Paradiso* the focus of his comments on Dante. Like much else in his private poetic canon, Dante came to Wright via Pound, whom he calls 'the great highway into Città Dante in our time'.<sup>12</sup> Wright spoke of himself as writing a 'trilogy of trilogies', collecting his smaller books of poetry into three larger collections, *Country Music*, *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*, and *Negative Blue*. He went on writing after *Negative Blue*, and no doubt these later books, almost one a year, will find their way into a compilation, even if such a gathering would overflow and give the lie to the trilogy structure. The structure is, in fact, already a fiction, since each collection gathers up more than three previous books – as one can see from their tables of contents.

Wright first studied Dante as a Fulbright student in Rome; he also read Montale, another formative influence and a poet whom he later translated. In 1978 he spent three months reading his way slowly through the Singleton translation and then the Italian, a canto a day. 'It was', he says, 'the most glorious three months of reading I've ever done. I didn't write a line of my own during that entire time, I was so completely filled and fulfilled. [...] By the time I got to the great Rose of Paradise, I realized the *Inferno*, which I had loved so much, was merely gossip. Inspired but gossip nonetheless'.<sup>13</sup>

Wright's reverence for Dante is articulate and convincing:

Dante remains the great Buddhistic center of absolute attention and regard, the true magnetic field of seriousness toward which all real poems gravitate. [...] Dante makes you think seriously about your own life. He makes you want to *have* your own life, and to do the best you can with it.<sup>14</sup>

Wright speaks of both Pound and Montale as poets who wrote in Dante's shadow, as he himself tried to. Wright is close to Montale in many ways; they are both, I think, religious poets without a religion, sharing a yearning towards both transcendence and immanence. They are also both quintessentially lyric poets who created sequential structures in order to grant their lyrics a richer context of quasi-narrative. Wright talks about trying to create a 'subnarrative' or '*sottonarrativa*',<sup>15</sup> a story line that would be both hidden and exposed. Wright found the model of Montale's *Mottetti* fruitful when he began to write in sequences, and for a time he kept to the same number of poems – twenty – in each of his sequences.

After the publication of *La bufera ed altro*, Montale said about his own work, 'My poetry is to be read together as one single poem. I don't want to make the comparison with the *Divina Commedia*, but I consider my three books as three canticles, three phases of a human life'.<sup>16</sup> (This comment seems to invite exactly the comparison it abjures.) One could read Wright's poetry, too, as one single poem, since he continually braids together the key moments and places in his life in an ongoing meditation on their meaning. Each of his books recalls and rewrites many of the same episodes, making them part of the reader's memory bank as well. One of the most resonant of these moments is the story of Wright's first time in Italy when he was sent to Verona by the army in 1959. This is a story Wright tells many times in both poetry and prose and it comes back yet again near the close of his most recent book of poetry, *Sestets*. He went one day to Sirmione, Catullus's beloved 'venusta Sirmio' (Carmen 31), on Lake Garda, carrying with him the *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound* and reading them in what legend claimed were the ruins of Catullus's villa. Reading Pound's 'animula' poem 'Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula' in the very place that the poem speaks of as an earthly paradise was epiphanic. Wright dates his birth as a poet from this moment.

The Pound poem begins, 'What hast thou, O my soul, with paradise?' and goes on to celebrate 'terrene delight' in opposition to any

'havens more high'.<sup>17</sup> It is Pound's version of Wallace Stevens's 'Sunday Morning', another fabulous poem about the possibility of earthly paradise rather than the dream of heavenly bliss that also haunts Wright's work. Lago di Garda and some of its towns, Sirmione, Desenzano, and Riva, return in many of Wright's poems, and the word Riva is actually the last word of the Pound poem. The other major 'pieces' of Wright's Italian constellation are Verona (especially the church of San Zenò), Venice, the painter Giorgio Morandi, Campana, and Leopardi.

Allusions to Dante in Wright's poetry are usually brief and knowing. They first show up in the 1981 collection *The Southern Cross*, the first part of *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* which contains poems written from 1980–90. The first comes in a poem called 'Laguna Dantesca' and recalls Piccarda Donati in *Paradiso* III. It begins:

I want, like a little boat, to be isolate,  
slipping across one element  
Toward the horizon, whose lips know something but stay sealed  
under the heaven of the moon.

There's something I want to look on, face to face.

Like a rock, or some other heavy thing, I want to descend through  
clear water  
Endlessly,  
disappearing as she did,  
Line after leached line, into the lunar deeps.<sup>18</sup>

These final lines rewrite Dante's description of Piccarda's vanishing at the end of their encounter 'come per acqua cupa cosa grave' (as a weighty thing vanishes in deep water) (*Par.* III, 123).

Later there is a brief poem called 'Hawaii Dantesca' which touches lightly on the notion of the otherworld with a reference to the opening cantos of *Purgatorio*:

I hope the one with the white wings will come.  
I hope the island of reeds is as far away as I think it is.

When I get there, I hope they forgive me if the knot I tie is the wrong  
knot.<sup>19</sup>

The title poem, 'The Southern Cross', makes the connection between the *Comedy* and the world of the dead that is a central concern of Wright's poetry:

Thinking of Dante, I start to feel  
What I think are wings beginning to push out from my shoulder  
blades,  
And the firm pull of water under my feet.

Thinking of Dante, I think of La Pia,  
And Charles Martel  
And Cacciaguida inside the great flower of Paradise,  
And the thin stem of Purgatory  
rooted in Hell.

Thinking of Dante is thinking about the other side,  
And the other side of the other side.  
It's thinking about the noon noise and the daily light.<sup>20</sup>

Here the range of reference takes in the whole *Comedy*, implying an organic connection among its three parts. Although Wright venerates *Paradiso*, he does allude to the other canticles, usually in terms of their characters. *A Short History of the Shadow* contains several allusions to *Purgatorio*, and Wright's most recent book, *Sestets*, invokes 'Guido, I his once best friend, and Guido's father, and Bertran de Born'.<sup>21</sup>

Wright's most significant poetic encounter with Dante comes in the sequence of journal poems that commemorate his fiftieth year, 'A Journal of the Year of the Ox'. Each entry in the sequence is dated; when counted up, there turn out to be, of course, thirty-three entries. This anniversary sequence revisits Wright's totemic landscapes: eastern Tennessee where he grew up, Italy where he discovered poetry and art, and Virginia where he lives in the shadow of the Blue Ridge. Each landscape is significantly connected to a river, and each has historical as well as private resonances.<sup>22</sup>

In the central poems of the sequence, all set in northern Italy, Wright experiences the possibility of a transcendence that he both craves and avoids. Suddenly his reveries are interrupted by the presence of a stranger:

Who is it here in the night garden,  
gown a transparent rose  
Down to his ankles, great sleeves  
Spreading the darkness around him wherever he steps,







In *Scar Tissue* (2006), the poem 'In Praise of Franz Kafka' foregrounds the Hunter Gracchus. And in *Littlefoot*, the journal poem I just cited is followed later by the twenty-second entry which is yet again devoted to the story of the Hunter Gracchus. The Hunter Gracchus appears in every book published since 2002, with the exception of the last book, *Sestets*. These repetitions give it the role of a leitmotif in Wright's late poetry.

The Hunter Gracchus is the subject of a very short, haunting, and inconclusive story by Kafka. The story was written in 1917, its genesis a visit by Kafka to Riva in 1913 which is mentioned in his diaries. Gracchus was a hunter of wolves in the Black Forest; one day, out hunting a chamois, he fell into a ravine and died. He was placed on a boat to be carried to the other world, but somehow an error of inattention on the part of the helmsman prevented his arrival. He is condemned to a state of living death, endlessly circling the waters of the earth. In Kafka's story he arrives in Riva on Lake Garda, one of Wright's totemic places, and meets with the mayor of Riva to whom he explains his plight. The mayor is named Salvatore, which suggests that some sort of salvation might come from their encounter. But the story ends inconclusively. Noting that 'graculus' in Latin means jackdaw, which is what 'kavka' means in Czech, Kafka scholars find the story a kind of allegory for Kafka's own state of irrevocable alienation. There is some question about why the Hunter is condemned to this living death. Walter Benjamin speaks of the Hunter as guilt-ridden, punished for refusing to acknowledge his guilt.<sup>34</sup> As so often in Kafka, the source of the guilt is ultimately inexplicable.

Eric Santner sees the Hunter as 'one of a series of famous invocations of undead wanderers one finds in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and culture' and cites Adorno's description of the Hunter as 'the humble descendant of Nimrod'.<sup>35</sup> Kafka's story is picked up and brilliantly rewritten in W. G. Sebald's first novel, *Vertigo*, whose third section is entitled 'Dr. K Takes the Waters in Riva'. Sebald identifies with Kafka much as Kafka could be said to identify with the Hunter. The narrator of *Vertigo* shares the Hunter's condition of alienation and living death, and he finds it as well in all the places he visits, especially his childhood home in Germany. Wright, despite having written about the Hunter in his poem 'In Praise of Franz Kafka', chooses to mention Sebald rather than Kafka in a footnote to his retelling in *Lit-*

*tlefoot*, perhaps thereby hoping to annex for himself Sebald's autobiographical and saturnine expansion of the story's implications.<sup>36</sup>

Wright's very American persona is, at first glance, far from Sebald's history-haunted, European – and particularly German – melancholia, but he is clearly drawn to it and finds something of himself in this tragic condition of death in life, living death. He has, in fact, written a series of poems called 'Opus Posthumous',<sup>37</sup> and seems at times to have entered prematurely what Robert Harrison calls 'the dominion of the dead'.<sup>38</sup> Wright says that he writes for the dead; sometimes he seems to write *as* the dead. It is this premature identification with the dead, even if sporadic, which makes Wright so different from both Dante and Merrill, for whom the afterlife is ultimately an affirmation of life. Both Dante and Merrill make us understand the usefulness of the fiction of the afterlife as a way of staging a dialogue with the dead – which is what much of poetry, perhaps much of life, is about. What all three poets share is a dream of paradise as a site that emboldens the imagination.

#### NOTES

- 1 These poets are discussed by Peter S. Hawkins and me in 'Still Here: Dante after Modernism', in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and Wayne Storey (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 451–64.
- 2 Another American poet who reflects deeply on *Paradiso* is Gjertrud Schnackenberg in the title poem of *A Gilded Lapse of Time* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992).
- 3 'The Book of Ephraim' was originally part of *Divine Comedies* (1976). It was the first part of a trilogy, followed by *Mirabell: Books of Number* (1978) and *Scripts for the Pageant* (1980). All three, plus a *Coda*, are now published in *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York: Atheneum, 1982). Maya's dream is on p. 45 of that volume. Charles Wright mistakenly attributes a similar insight to Pound rather than Merrill in *Littlefoot: A Poem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 78: 'Paradise, Pound said, was real to Dante because he saw it. | Nothing invented.'
- 4 *The Changing Light at Sandover*, p. 132.
- 5 Now in 'Divine Poem', in *The Poets' Dante*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 227–29.
- 6 For a brilliant reading of the trilogy see Stephen Yenser, *The Consuming Myth: The Work of James Merrill* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 217–318.
- 7 *The Poets' Dante*, p. 233.

- 8 Ibid., p. 332.
- 9 *The Changing Light at Sandover*, p. 132.
- 10 Ibid., p. 517.
- 11 Ibid., p. 505.
- 12 ‘Dantino Mio’, in *The Poets’ Dante*, p. 260.
- 13 *The Poets’ Dante*, p. 261.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 262–63.
- 15 In an interview with J. D. McClatchy, in Charles Wright, *Quarter Notes: Improvisations and Interviews* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 117.
- 16 Quoted in Eugenio Montale, *Collected Poems: 1920–1954*, ed. by Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 538.
- 17 *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Michael King (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 150.
- 18 Wright, ‘Laguna Dantesca’, in *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009), p. 31.
- 19 Wright, ‘Hawaii Dantesca’, in *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*, p. 37.
- 20 Wright, ‘The Southern Cross’, in *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*, pp. 42–55 (p. 45).
- 21 Wright, ‘With Alighieri on Basin Creek’, in *Sestets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), p. 38.
- 22 Wright learned later that the Long Island of the Holston River, his childhood landscape, had been the sacred meeting place of the Cherokee Nation and the site of its defeat and dispersal in 1776. He writes about this tragedy in ‘A Journal of the Year of the Ox’.
- 23 Charles Wright, ‘A Journal of the Year of the Ox’, in *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*, pp. 150–90 (pp. 168–69).
- 24 Interview with Sherod Santos in Charles Wright, *Half-life: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977–87* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), p. 111.
- 25 The sidereal Wright and his relationship to Leopardi, Stevens, and Dante are beautifully explored by Piero Boitani in *Letteratura europea e Medioevo volgare* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), pp. 416–21.
- 26 Now in *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*. pp. 108–12.
- 27 Charles Wright, *Negative Blue: Selected Later Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), pp. 90–92 (p. 92).
- 28 Ibid., p. 182.
- 29 Ibid., p. 201.
- 30 Wright, Interview with Matthew Cooperman in *Quarter Notes*, p. 164.
- 31 *Littlefoot*, p. 77.
- 32 Ibid., p. 18.
- 33 Charles Wright, *Buffalo Yoga* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), pp. 28–30, (p. 29).
- 34 Benjamin discusses the Hunter Gracchus in his essay on Kafka in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt and trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 132. The question of the Hunter’s possible guilt is also discussed by Joyce

- Carol Oates in 'Kafka's Paradise', *Hudson Review* 26.4 (Winter 1973–74), pp. 623–46 (p. 628).
- 35 Eric Santner, *The Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 115. Santner shows the way that the Kafka story informs the whole of *Vertigo*.
- 36 W. S. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. by Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999).
- 37 Now in *Negative Blue*, pp. 159, 174, 190.
- 38 Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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