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Dante as a Gay Poet

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ABSTRACT: [...] Bidart's idiosyncratic appropriation of the young Dante, as opposed to the Dante-versus-Petrarch-based interpretation of Italian poets, is peculiar but by no means as exceptional in the American panorama as it might at first appear. Other gay American poets whom I considered for my anthology also treat Dante as a model: Robert Duncan, J. D. McClatchy, and James Merrill. They even wrote significant essays on Dante, now collected in a useful anthology edited by Peter Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff.

In this essay I will attempt to explore, however rapidly, the grounds on which Dante may have become so essential for such poets. To be sure, the Dantism of these gay American poets may be viewed as a particular moment of the well-established American interest in Dante which goes as far back as Emerson and Longfellow and had its peak in Pound and Eliot. But I argue that such gay Dantism — which no survey of Dante's twentieth-century influence has yet brought to the fore — is a kind of cultural allegiance stemming originally and specifically from the soil of gay discourses and gender preoccupations. Interestingly, Dante, not Petrarch, also serves as a model for some Italian homosexual poets: Michelangelo, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Giovanni Testori. What, then, is it in the work of a poet like Dante, who confined the sodomites in hell and mostly sang the praises of one woman, that is so compatible with, indeed inspiring for, gay views?

DANTE AS A GAY POET

Nicola Gardini

My own picture is more plastic:

the maestro, leaning stiffly out
from the roofless cage of exile,
has his eye on the hands of a particular
young man just off of the roadside, lifting
the salvageable pieces of fruit
from the ground ...¹

Some years ago I edited an anthology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century gay poets, Italian and foreign, for an Italian publisher.² I observed quite basic criteria for inclusion: high literary quality – or what I would consider high literary quality – and clearly expressed erotic content. Being gay or supposedly so was not a sufficient condition. All the poems I selected dealt patently with homosexual love, relationships, and sex. In the introductory section, I included the following poem by the living American poet Frank Bidart, ‘Love Incarnate’:

To all those driven berserk or humanized by love
this is offered, for I need help
deciphering my dream.
When we love our lord is LOVE.

When I recall that at the fourth hour
of the night, watched by shining stars,
LOVE at last became incarnate,
the memory is horror.

In his hands smiling LOVE held my burning
heart, and in his arms, the body whose greeting
pierces my soul, now wrapped in bloodred, sleeping.

He made him wake. He ordered him to eat
my heart. He ate my burning heart. He ate it
submissively, as if afraid as LOVE wept.³

Bidart himself indicates that the subtext of this poem is the opening sonnet of Dante's *Vita nuova*:

A ciascun' alma presa e gentil core
nel cui cospetto ven lo dir presente,
in ciò che mi rescrivan suo parvente,
salute in lor signor, cioè Amore.

Già eran quasi che atterzate l'ore
del tempo che onne stella n'è lucente,
quando m'apparve Amor subitamente,
cui essenza membrar mi dà orrore.

Allegro mi sembrava Amor tenendo
meo core in mano, e ne le braccia avea
madonna involta in un drappo dormendo.

Poi la svegliava, e d'esto core ardendo
lei paventosa umilmente pascea:
appresso gir lo ne vedea piangendo.⁴

When I first came across Bidart's gay adaptation of the first sonnet of the *Vita nuova*, I was mainly surprised by the fact that this very sonnet had not too long before been pointed out to me by Andrea Zanzotto, a characteristically heterosexual poet, as a quintessential representation of 'love as horror'. Zanzotto's negative interpretation of Dante's sonnet is by no means puzzling. Zanzotto's theory of love – as is well known – is not Dantesque but Petrarchan. Nor is the reception of the *Vita nuova* among contemporary Italian poets based on the love theme. As I have shown in a specific essay, the *Vita nuova* provides Italian twentieth-century poets more with a model of autobiographical writing than with an erotic paradigm. Giovanni Giudici is a telling example.⁵ What is essential is that the imitation of the *Vita nuova* expresses a clearly polemical anti-Petrarchan poetics – something which, of course, one would have no reason to look for in these American poets.

Bidart's idiosyncratic appropriation of the young Dante, as opposed to the Dante-versus-Petrarch-based interpretation of Italian poets, is peculiar but by no means as exceptional in the American panorama as it might at first appear. Other gay American poets whom I considered for my anthology also treat Dante as a model: Robert Duncan, J. D. McClatchy, and James Merrill. They even wrote significant essays on

Dante, now collected in a useful anthology edited by Peter Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff.⁶

In this essay I will attempt to explore, however rapidly, the grounds on which Dante may have become so essential for such poets. To be sure, the Dantism of these gay American poets may be viewed as a particular moment of the well-established American interest in Dante which goes as far back as Emerson and Longfellow and had its peak in Pound and Eliot.⁷ But I argue that such gay Dantism – which no survey of Dante’s twentieth-century influence has yet brought to the fore – is a kind of cultural allegiance stemming originally and specifically from the soil of gay discourses and gender preoccupations. Interestingly, Dante, not Petrarch, also serves as a model for some Italian homosexual poets: Michelangelo, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Giovanni Testori. What, then, is it in the work of a poet like Dante, who confined the sodomites in hell and mostly sang the praises of one woman, that is so compatible with, indeed inspiring for, gay views?

The title of Bidart’s poem helps to provide an answer to this question. The phrase ‘Love incarnate’ does not come from Dante. It is intimated in Dante’s sonnet, but it does not appear within it. Dante says: ‘m’apparve Amor’. Bidart renders the phrase as ‘Love became incarnate’ and, in so doing, not only expands on the original imagery but conjures up the memory of a no less important subtext: ‘Et Verbum caro factum est’ (John 1. 14), a famous passage referring to the incarnation of Jesus. The emphasis in Bidart is on ‘caro’, that is, on flesh. No flesh appears in Dante. Amor in Dante’s sonnet is a mere apparition, a vision. His physicality is rendered exclusively through the account of his actions – holding the poet’s heart, feeding it to the woman, and embracing the woman. Though engaged in the physical activity of eating the poet’s heart, the woman is also designated by the abstract and clichéd term ‘madonna’. Conversely, her masculine equivalent in Bidart’s imitation is no generic individual, but a specific ‘body’. Bidart also endows the soul with bodily consistency by making it the direct object of the highly somatic verb ‘to pierce’.

Indeed, the treatment of the soul as a concrete entity is authorized by Dante’s *Comedy* itself, where souls are hit and bitten like bodies. As W. H. Auden, another famous gay poet, wrote,

[t]he Vision of Eros is not, according to Dante, the first rung of a long ladder: there is only one step to take, from the personal creature who can love

and be loved to the personal Creator who is Love. And in this final vision [the vision of God at the end of the *Commedia*], Eros is transfigured but not annihilated. On earth we rank 'love' higher than either sexual desire or sexless friendship because it involves the whole of our being, not, like them, only a part of it. *Whatever else is asserted by the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, it asserts the sacred importance of the body.*⁸

It is the corporeality of his moral universe that makes Dante a crucial predecessor for American gay poets – as well as for some earlier poets with similar sexual orientations. Michelangelo's sonnets, while apparently springing to some extent from the contemporaneous Petrarchan manner, are hugely indebted to Dante's bodily imagination. A legend has it that Michelangelo even made illustrations of the *Commedia*, but they were unfortunately lost in a shipwreck. The body is the main preoccupation of Michelangelo both as an artist and a poet. Giovanni Testori, another of the poets I anthologized, wrote that Michelangelo's poetry is based on

cose del corpo [...] il corpo dell'uomo (lucente, maledetto, ubriacante, ma come velato sempre da una cupa mutezza; un corpo, ecco, che chiama e non risponde mai e poi mai a sufficienza) [...] Michelangelo non intende recedere un solo attimo dal suo forsennato, implacabile corpo a corpo col corpo; il più tragico e inesorabile che la storia della poesia conosca.⁹

The Christological metaphor in Bidart's 'Love incarnate' is anything but unique. It also appears in a poem by Robert Duncan, the gay patriarch of twentieth-century American poetry. His 'The Torso', an almost religious poem, celebrates every single limb of the beloved.¹⁰ Here the body is an actual bridge between the world and Paradise ('His Body leading I into Paradise'). In gay Dantism the plot line of Christ's corporeal story – birth, death, resurrection, and transubstantiation (the beloved's eating the heart of the lover being reminiscent of the sacrament of communion) – replaces the highly spiritual narrative of the Virgin Mary which is so relevant to straight Petrarchism.

An unpublished note of Duncan's tellingly underlines the centrality of all sorts of bodily elements and experiences in Christ's earthly existence, including the performance of the Eucharist:

To get into the matter of the incarnation, we must not only imagine the body of Christ, his birth cry of woe, his 'blood, sweat, and tears', actual excretions, his speech, his having his hearing before the rabbis, his death-

passion, but we must imagine his cuisine, his actual blood and body, wine and bread, the salt, and the civilities of the supper.

In Christian rite, the Last Supper is still posed as a spirit ritual and removed from the full incarnation of our guts and appetite. The savor and smell of the kitchen is still burnt offerings for a Spirit's pleasure.¹¹

Robert Duncan pointed out that Jesus is central in the poetry of Jack Spicer, in whose negative vision of homosexuality as a curse Jesus stands as a representative both of the persecuted lover and of the idealized beloved:

There is a special poignancy for the homosexual lover both in his being just in his love crucified by the scorn, the disgust, and the laws of the Judaeo-Christian society he belongs to and also in his finding his ultimate beloved in this Bridegroom. In the late 1950s when I was reading the theosophical works of Jacob Boehme, Spicer urged me, Don't neglect the most important, *The Way to Christ*. And in his late work, in the set of 'Four Poems for *Ramparts*' in *Book of Magazine Verse*, his allegiance is reaffirmed: 'And yet it's there. Accepting divinity as Jesus accepted humanness. | Grudgingly, without passion, but the most important point to see in the world'.¹²

Interestingly, Duncan relates Dante's visionary experience of Love, which partakes at once of the actual and the rhetorical, directly to Jesus's double nature. The reality of Love is fallacious, obviously, but it occurs within an autobiographical space which purports to be true. 'Every fallacy', Duncan says, 'is a verity of the poetic experience.' And it is ultimately justified by Christ's duality. 'In a Christian world [like Dante's] where Christ is not only Man and God, but Love and Logos, words are, like men themselves, fields of Life.'¹³ And, as such, they are real and must be believed, however incredible they may sound, as when poets speak of physical visitations of Love.

In a subsequent passage, which expands on the interpretation of Dante's Christian realism, Duncan applies the Christian paradigm to all poets: all true poets, for him, are Christs; they all undergo some sort of Passion in the creative process, poetic creation being a painful delivery of realities. Duncan's words insist on torturous corporeality:

in every true poet's voice, in the full charm of the law or myth that moves us, you will hear also a counterpart of the Son's sorrow and pain of utter undergoing, the Passion [...]: the cross of the poem to the extent that it brings us into the fullness of its form or reality, brings us into the full condition of our living bodies, our utter individuality, our utter humanity.¹⁴

Duncan, well before Bidart, speaks of Dante as the poet of incarnation, 'because it is essential in his religion that God was actually and historically incarnate'.¹⁵ (It is not by chance that he also translated Cavalcanti's 'Donna me prega' in his 'I Tell of Love', a poem declaring the carnal nature of love.)

For Duncan, this notion of incarnation is the root of Dante's allegorical writing, in which one cannot tell the literal and the moral apart:

This doctrine of the literal, the immediate and embodied sense, as the foundation of all others, is striking to the modern poet, for it very much is the meaning of the insistence of the Imagists upon the image in its direct presentation, from which all meaning may flow [...] and of their abhorrence of all abstractions if they be divorced from the primal reality of incarnation. Not only in Theology but in Poetry too, something goes awry if in our adoration of the Logos we lose sense of [...] the living body and passion of Man in the actual universe. Words can float away in a light of their own, taking the light *for* their own, as if the universe of actual things, that we rightly call Creation, were, as the gnostics believed, a material antagonistic to meanings. Dante's insistence upon the literal, the actual, the human experience is pervasive. For him, as for Plato, an *idea* is a thing seen.¹⁶

In the name of Dante, Duncan makes his gay poetics, based on the body, converge with his imagist background, turning the male body into a paradigm of modernism itself. For Duncan, William Carlos Williams's axiom 'no ideas but in things' also appears to be a modern equivalent of Dante's poetics of the literal.

Dante's opening sonnet is quoted by J. D. McClatchy, another of my gay poets, in his essay 'His Enamel'.¹⁷ McClatchy speaks of '[c]annibalism – the gruesome crux of the Christian belief'.¹⁸ A propos of cannibalism, he has just mentioned Ugolino and shortly afterwards he mentions Satan devouring the traitors. It is on Satan that McClatchy's gay Dantism is most firmly grounded. Not only does he think that Dante's journey is a descent into a digestive tract ending in an icy anus, but he recalls being fascinated by Satan's shagginess when he first read Dante's poem:

That may be in part because when I first read the poem I was searching, under the sheets at night with a flashlight, for any sign of my own sprouting. Dante and Virgil approach Satan's shaggy thigh and find enough room between his hide and the ice for them to climb down ... a hairway to Heaven!¹⁹

To my knowledge, no one before McClatchy had ever thought of finding in Dante's description of monstrous Satan a stimulus for his growing erotic self-awareness. McClatchy tells us that similarly Gustave Doré's beautiful representations of muscular bodies served him as a good equivalent for pornography.

The Doré illustrations also exerted a determining influence over Robin Blaser's childhood:

you have to think of a three- or four-year-old boy turning pages of a book that seems enormous, I mean unbelievably enormous [...] with the Satan frozen in the ice, and then if you go back to the memory of that – because as Dante approaches he first thinks it's a windmill that's there, and then he thinks of it as a cross that's there. And the whole reversed form of the *Inferno* is in that image. The stunning one, for example, of Ulysses, and ... the guide that lifts them down into the lowest pit of Hell, the giant, and the marvelous one here where they're all frozen in the ice and Virgil says to Dante, 'Watch your steps, you're going to kick people in the head.' [...] Ice right up to the eyebrows. Oh I love those images and they were, of course, coming through the pictures.²⁰

Blaser is the one who said, before delivering a lecture on Dante in 1974: 'Dante was my best fuck.'²¹ The Doré book is so ingrained in Blaser's poetic imagination that it occupies the opening section of his verse essay 'Dante Alighiere' [*sic*]. Needless to say, Lucifer is there in all his daunting grandiosity but he is far from representing an erotic icon as is the case for McClatchy.

McClatchy's gay reading of Dante has its climax in his concluding interpretation of *Inf.* XXXIV, 88–93: 'Io levai li occhi, e credetti vedere | Lucifero com'io l'avea lasciato; | e vidili le gambe in su tenere; | e s'io divenni allora travagliato, | la gente grossa il pensi, che non vede | qual è quel punto ch'io avea passato':

[W]hile commentators knowingly insist that 'quel punto' here is the earth's exact center, any reader with the body's topography in mind realizes that the poets are passing Satan's sphincter. That the path to paradise should begin here! It is at such moments when Dante's invention – his immediate, tactile handling of things – surpasses his scheme, and astounds us.²²

A sexual interpretation of 'quel punto' also occurs in James Merrill's essay 'Divine Poem'. For him, rather than the sphincter, it could be Satan's genitals (as suggested by some Freudian interpretations),

although he does observe that Satan, as an angel, should not, and very plausibly does not, have any.²³

Dante's corporeality is at the core of Robert Duncan's poetry and poetic imagination, as we have already seen. Like McClatchy's, Duncan's Dante is both a poetic monument and a sort of sexual patron. But Duncan's Dantism is much more vital and profound than any other American gay poet's. It branches out in various directions, touching on language, society, and sexuality, and ultimately represents a model for other poets, like the aforementioned Robin Blaser or Jack Spicer, with whom he formed the so-called Berkeley Renaissance.

Duncan's opus, both in verse and in prose, seethes with memories of Dante. One of his books of verse is an outright tribute to Dante, *Dante* (1974), including adaptations of passages from Dante's minor works, *De vulgari eloquentia*, *Monarchia* and *Convivio*. Duncan appears to have particularly cherished Dante's notion of the maternal tongue and the ideal of a universal community, an imperial totality – concepts he respectively links to his own search for a highly personal poetic language and to his protest against the disintegration of contemporary society, causing the marginalization of homosexuals. (Such topics also appear in Blaser's Dantism, too – especially in his 'Dante Alighiere'.)

Another telling instance of Duncan's Dantism is *Caesar's Gate*.²⁴ The book opens with a reference to the *Inferno*:

Hell. Dante says accurately that it is a forfeiting of the goods of the intellect. How far can there be a poetry of hell, out of hell? It is all that is not terror: the nostalgias, sophistications, self-debasement here, that are the voice of a soul-shriveling, the ironies of mediocrity. To this point I came, willingly demoralized, to pray for grief, or for sleep, or for the tides of blood, for the worm to turn.

Indeed, *Caesar's Gate* is meant to represent the infernal condition of a homosexual 'I' in the contemporary world – an estranging, demoralizing dimension which is greatly indebted to Lorca's hellish New York (as Duncan's introduction to the book openly states). One particular poem gives a fair idea both of the book's tone and of Duncan's understanding of Dante:

'Upon Another Shore of Hell'

O forbidden Dead, I too drift.
Coming near to your river, I hear you.
Dead voices that would take body
out of my blood, your love cannot heal
nor your touch comfort.

So am I – four months – like you –
loveless, driven by hatred as by rain
or by pain of cold, driven.

Is it true that the Christians,
rank on rank, stand
immortal in their love or
the love of a God? singing?

O holy Dead, it is the living
not the Divine
that I envy. Like you
I cry to be rejoined to the living.

In *Roots and Branches* (1963), Duncan included a beautiful gay imitation of 'Guido, i' vorrei', dedicated to his friends Robin Blaser and Jack Spicer:

Robin, it would be a great thing if you, me, and Jack Spicer
Were taken up in a sorcery with our mortal heads so turned
That life dimmed in the light of that fairy ship
The Golden Vanity or The Revolving Lure,

Whose sails ride before music as if it were our will,
Having no memory of ourselves but the poets we were
In certain verses that had such a semblance or charm
Our lusts and loves confused in one

Lord or Magician of Amor's likeness.
And that we might have ever at our call
Those youths we have celebrated to play Eros
And erased to lament in the passing of things.

And to weave themes ever of love.
And that each might be glad
To be so far abroad from what he was.²⁵

The poem refers to a happy early period when the three of them made up an apparently harmonious trinity. But Spicer was a gay poet of a very different kind, a pessimistic, destructive one – one who considered man a pawn in the hands of a cruel God and drank himself to death at forty years of age. As in the case of Dante and Guido, conflict between Duncan and Spicer was inevitable. Indeed, in the above-mentioned essay on Spicer's poetry, when alluding to this conflict, Duncan seems very much to have in mind the antithetical attitude towards love which turned Dante and Guido from friends into enemies:

I was [...] the first poet Spicer took to be of his order, and the obsession remains, more than a quarrel, more than a contention, a war against the figure I was for him – that's but the half of it. In the other half, I am also the one who betrayed again and again the figure I was for him. From the beginning my rhetorical mode must have been difficult for him, for he was puritan in his ethos of the poem and hostile to the 'poetic', the charm or luxury of the poem. Increasingly his work would take on an apotropaic magic against the seduction of words. 'Words, loves.'

It was the difference between ideas of God. Had we been atheists the difference would have remained between the ideas of God we refused. In the beginning the difference must have been one of temperament. It seems to me that we seek ideas of God because they are necessary to some picture of our own nature and world. Both of us were homosexual in orientation; but for me my homosexuality was a potentiality, a creative promise for love; for Spicer his homosexuality was a curse, a trick in the game of a God who predestined such love of man for man to damnation.²⁶

It is characteristic of Duncan to use Dante's work and life for the fashioning of his own poetic identity. Even more characteristic is his ability to fashion other poets' identities after Dante's. An outstanding example lies in his interpretation of Whitman. The author of the *Leaves of Grass* is made into an outright American equivalent of the Florentine poet. To be sure, differences are admitted, the main one residing in the structure of the two poets' creations – open and virtually never completed in the *Leaves of Grass*, closed and immutable in the *Commedia*. But, for Duncan, the similarities appear to be more numerous and more evident than the differences. It is obvious that such a parallel – an almost Plutarchian *synkrisis* – stems from the bare fact that Duncan considered the two poets 'central to [his] thought, a perennial source from which [his] own art as a poet drew'. While Duncan's attempt to establish parallels between Whitman's innovations and Dante's views on language and

politics has something far-fetched, contrived, and entirely unhistorical to it, his placing desire and falling in love at the core of both poets proves forceful and illuminating. Duncan firmly rejects the interpretation of Dante's sexual desire as a process of sublimation and considers it rather, just like Whitman's, a struggle between Eros and Thanatos. Once again we come to the rhetoric of the body, which is the gist of this essay and of what I assume to be the core of American gay Dantism, something that Blaser summed up in the formula 'materiality of language – materiality of form – materiality of men's and women's bodies envisioning' (in 'Dante Alighiere'):

Eros and Thanatos are primary, at work in the body of the poem even as they are at work in the body of the man, awakening in language apprehensions of what we call sexuality and spirituality. Parts of language, like parts of the physical body, will be inspired; syllables and words, like cells and organs, will be excited, awakened to the larger identity they belong to. Longing had been the seed, for Whitman as for Dante, of a creative desire, a new life, transforming the inner and outer reality of a poetic vision. As words belong to language and cells to animal bodies, poets come to belong to a poetry.²⁷

Another poem in Duncan's *Roots and Branches* harks back directly to Dante, to the very crucial, indeed archetypal passage of Brunetto – which, as far as I know, even such a Dante-fanatic as Robin Blaser completely fails to address:

Sonnet 1, Inferno XV

Now there is a Love of which Dante does not speak unkindly,
tho it grieves his heart to think upon men
who lust after men and run –
his beloved Master, Brunetto Latini, among them –
Where the roaring waters of hell's rivers
come, heard as if muted in the distance,
like the hum of bees in the hot sun.

Scorcht in whose rays and peeld, these would-be lovers
turn their faces, peering in the fire-fall,
to look to one another
as men searching for another
in the light of a new moon look.

Sharpening their vision, Dante says, like a man
seeking to thread a needle,
they try the eyes of other men
towards that eye of the needle
Love has appointed there
for a joining that is not easy.²⁸

In his most celebrated essay, 'The Homosexual in Society' (1944), Duncan – who was then only twenty-five years old – speaks of the lack of social trust which homosexual love must undergo in society and compares this lack of trust to hell. Another reference to Dante's Brunetto occurs there – specifically to the passage of the eyes, which Duncan mistakenly takes as a sign of homosexual voyeurism. Duncan views in Dante's encounter with his master an ideal demonstration of solidarity. To be sure, the sodomites go to hell but Duncan emphasises the fact that Dante thinks his master would not be there 'were [his] desire all fulfilled' ('Se fosse pieno tutto il mio dimando', l. 79). Let us read this beautiful page, which gives a clear sense of Duncan's engaged Dantism and genius:

Love is dishonored where sexual love between those of the same sex is despised; and where love is dishonored there is no public trust. It is my sense that the fulfilment of man's nature lies in the creation of that trust; and where the distrusting imagination sets up an image of 'self' against the desire for unity and mutual sympathy, the state called 'Hell' is created. [...] 'We are come to the place,' Virgil tells Dante as they enter Hell, 'where I told thee thou shouldst see the wretched people, who have lost the good of the intellect.' In Hell, the homosexuals go, as Dante rightly saw them, as they still go often in the streets of our cities, looking 'as in the evening men are wont to look at one another under a new moon', running beneath the hail of a sharp torment, having wounds, recent and old, where *the flames of experience have burned their bodies*. [Note the insistence on bodies and living experience]. It is just here, when he sees his beloved teacher, Brunetto Latini, among the sodomites, that Dante has an inspired intuition that goes beyond the law of his church and reaches toward a higher ethic: 'Were my desire all fulfilled,' he says to Brunetto, 'you had not yet been banished from human nature: for in my memory is fixed ... the dear and kind, paternal image of you, when in the world, hour by hour, you taught me how man makes himself eternal ...' 'Were my desire all fulfilled ...' springs from the natural heart in the confidence of its feelings that has often been more generous than conventions and institutions. I picture that fulfillment of desire as a human state of mutual volition and aid, a shared life.²⁹

Duncan's gay Dantism is all-encompassing. It deals with social, artistic, and sexual issues and is ingrained in an intricate net of cultural references. Such panoptic appropriation, alongside such syncretism – Dante and imagism, religion and sexuality, history and politics – is a supreme example both of Dante's far-reaching influence over modern poetry and of the original contribution of gay poetry to the development of imagination and to the understanding of tradition. As Duncan himself stated in his essay 'The Homosexual in Society', 'the imagination depends upon an increment of associations.'³⁰ Dante, of course, is a master of associations. As such, he rightly enters the canon of gay poets of all times, still providing suggestions for the improvement of human life.

Let me conclude with the concluding words of Duncan's essay:

this love [i.e. sexual love between those of the same sex] is one of the conditions of the fulfilment of the heart's desire and the restoration of man's free nature. Creative work for the common good is one of the conditions of that nature. And our hope lies still in the creative imagination wherever it unifies what had been thought divided, wherever it transforms the personal experience into a communal good, 'that Brunetto Latini had not been banished from human nature.'³¹

NOTES

- 1 Carl Phillips, 'One Sees Pictures of Dante', in *Cortège* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1995), p. 37 (lines 6–12). I thank Dennis Looney for making me acquainted with this interesting poem.
- 2 *Il senso del desiderio: Poesia gay dell'età moderna*, ed. by Nicola Gardini (Milan: Crocetti, 2001).
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 4 Here and below I am quoting from the *Rime giovanili e della 'Vita Nuova'*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini, notes by Manuele Gagnolati (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009).
- 5 Nicola Gardini, 'Considerazioni sullo stilnovismo novecentesco: Il modello della *Vita nova*', *Italianistica*, 29.3 (2000), pp. 445–50.
- 6 *The Poets' Dante: Twentieth Century Reflections*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).
- 7 See Angelina La Piana, *Dante's American Pilgrimage* (New Haven: Published for Wellesley College by Yale University Press, 1948); Ronald de Rooy, *Il poeta che parla ai poeti* (Florence: Cesati, 2003); Nick Havely, *Dante's Modern Afterlife* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).
- 8 W. H. Auden, 'The Vision of Eros', in *The Poets' Dante*, pp. 142–43 (my emphasis). For a thorough discussion of embodiment and corporeality in the

- Comedy*, see Manuele Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2005).
- 9 Giovanni Testori, 'Un uomo in una donna, anzi uno dio', in Michelangelo, *Rime*, ed. by Ettore Borelli (Milan: Rizzoli, 1975), pp. 5–12 (p. 6).
 - 10 Robert Duncan, 'The Torso', in *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 63–65.
 - 11 Quoted in Annalisa Goldoni, 'Robert Duncan e Dante alle origini della lingua', *Testo e Senso*, 3 (2000), available at <<http://www.testoesenso.it/magazine/index/3>> [accessed on 9 August 2010], p. 160.
 - 12 Robert Duncan, 'Preface: Jack Spicer's *One Night Stand and Other Poems*', in his *A Selected Prose*, ed. by Robert Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995), p. 172.
 - 13 Robert Duncan, 'The Truth of Life of Myth', in his *Fictive Certainties* (New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. 1–59 (p. 57).
 - 14 *Ibid.*
 - 15 'The Sweetness and Greatness of Dante's *Divine Comedy*', in *The Poets' Dante*, p. 189.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
 - 17 Included in *The Poets' Dante*, pp. 277–91.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, p. 281.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, p. 283.
 - 20 Robin Blaser, 'Excerpts from Astonishments', in *Even on Sunday: Essays, Readings, and Archival Material on the Poetry and Poetics of Robin Blaser*, ed. by Miriam Nichols (Orono, ME: University of Maine at Orono, 1982) (special issue of *Sagetrieb* 1.1 (Spring 1982)), pp. 281–82.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, p. 284.
 - 23 'Divine Poem', in *The Poets' Dante*, p. 234.
 - 24 Robert Duncan, *Caesar's Gate* (Berkeley: Sand Dollar, 1972).
 - 25 Here is Dante's sonnet: 'Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io | fossimo presi per incantamento | e messi in un vasel, ch'ad ogni vento | per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio; | sì che fortuna od altro tempo rio | non ci potesse dare impedimento, | anzi, vivendo sempre in un talento, | di stare insieme crescesse 'l disio. | E monna Vanna e monna Lagia poi | con quella ch'è sul numer de le trenta | con noi ponesse il buono incantatore: | e quivi ragionar sempre d'amore, | e ciascuna di lor fosse contenta, | sì come l' credo che saremmo noi'.
 - 26 Robert Duncan, 'Preface: Jack Spicer's *One Night Stand and Other Poems*', in his *A Selected Prose*, pp. 166–67.
 - 27 'Changing Perspectives in Reading Whitman', in *Fictive Certainties*, p. 163.
 - 28 Interestingly enough, Canto XV was also translated by Robert Lowell (in *Near the Ocean*) and by Seamus Heaney.
 - 29 Robert Duncan, 'The Homosexual in Society', in his *A Selected Prose*, p. 49.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

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