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Rewriting Dante after Freud and the Shoah

Giorgio Pressburger's *Nel regno oscuro*

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ABSTRACT: Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt as restless and as passionately in love as the adulterous Paolo and Francesca in the 'bufera infernal' of *Inferno* V, but riding in a black cab to the (Italianized) rhythm of Goethe's ballad *Der Erlkönig*; Ezra Pound, Knut Hamsun, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline as the three heads of a new Cerberus whose mixed pastiche of English, Norwegian, and French is an incomprehensible noise conveying nothing but hatred of the Jews; Primo Levi as a fallen angel taking the place of Lucifer at the very bottom of Hell: these are some of the surprises awaiting the reader of Giorgio Pressburger's latest novel *Nel regno oscuro* ('In/to the dark realm'), which is a rich and creative rewriting of Dante's poem.

Like all previous prose works by the 1937-born Hungarian Jewish author who emigrated to Italy in 1956, it is written not in his native Hungarian but in Italian. It is the first part of a planned trilogy inspired by the *Divine Comedy*, integrating the Middle European style of Pressburger's previous works with the attempt to engage with the first part of Dante's poem (of which Pressburger's novel also seems to replicate the canonical apparatus of notes, in this case written by the author himself).

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Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt as restless and as passionately in love as the adulterous Paolo and Francesca in the 'bufera infernal' of *Inferno* V, but riding in a black cab to the (Italianized) rhythm of Goethe's ballad *Der Erlkönig*; Ezra Pound, Knut Hamsun, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline as the three heads of a new Cerberus whose mixed pastiche of English, Norwegian, and French is an incomprehensible noise conveying nothing but hatred of the Jews; Primo Levi as a fallen angel taking the place of Lucifer at the very bottom of Hell: these are some of the surprises awaiting the reader of Giorgio Pressburger's latest novel *Nel regno oscuro* ('In/to the dark realm'), which is a rich and creative rewriting of Dante's poem.¹

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The role of Virgil, Dante's guide in the *Inferno*, is taken by Sigmund Freud, and the journey of the melancholic protagonist begins as psychoanalytic therapy to enable him to come to terms with the loss of his father and his twin brother, but soon turns into a journey through the realm of the dead which, like the *Divine Comedy*, takes the shape of a series of encounters with the shades of historical figures. Thus Dante's descent to hell metamorphoses into a phantasmagoric voyage to the most intimate and obscure dimensions of the human psyche as well as a journey through the tragic events of history in the twentieth century – and the Shoah in particular.

The combination of the personal, the collective, and even the universal is one of the most interesting aspects Pressburger takes from Dante's poem. In the following analysis I am interested in exploring how both Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Pressburger's *Nel regno oscuro* place personal and collective suffering at the centre of their own narratives and stage writing as a political, ethical, and possibly 'salvific' way to deal with this dual suffering, even as they differ in their concepts of identity and selfhood on the one hand and in their models of history on the other.

Written in the early decades of the fourteenth century, the *Divine Comedy* can be situated at the crossroads of a typically 'medieval' concept of the self as exemplary and archetypal and a more modern sense of individuality and subjectivity. On the one hand, in the *Divine Comedy* Dante's journey has a universal and allegorical meaning which reflects the medieval understanding of one's true 'self' as an *imago Dei* whose likeness to Christ is considered to be shared by all human beings. On the other hand, as is already made clear in the first two lines of the poem – 'Nel mezzo del cammin di *nostra* vita, *mi* ritrovai in una selva oscura' (*Inf.* I, 1–2; my italics)³ – the dialectic between the collective '*nostra*' and the individual '*mi*' expresses well the sense that Dante-pilgrim's journey from the misery of hell to the glory of heaven holds both an allegorical value that is valid for all humankind and a specific value that refers to the historical and personal case of Dante Alighieri. Indeed, the *Divine Comedy* derives much of its force and persuasiveness from the introduction of Dante's personality. Dante is everywhere in the poem and his discourse, if universal, never relinquishes the concreteness and specificity of his own individual self, which remains central to the poem's narrative and representation of reality.⁴ Moreover, the specific and personal presence of Dante in the text is paralleled by that of the

other figures portrayed in the *Divine Comedy*, who are not mere allegorical personifications of vices and virtues, but – according to Erich Auerbach, for the first time in Western culture – also specific individuals with their own bodies, memories, and a protomodern sense of interiority based on desire and introspection.⁵ Often, as in the case of characters like Francesca da Rimini, Pier delle Vigne or Farinata degli Uberti, they also represent aspects of Dante's own life and personality.

The way in which the *Divine Comedy* mingles the personal, the collective, and the universal is particularly interesting in Dante's portrayal of his own times in bleak and negative terms that emphasize the suffering of humankind and link it to his own suffering. In the following analysis, I will focus on two episodes that stage history as an apocalyptic scenario against which Dante defines the mandate for writing which constitutes the core of his own identity in the *Divine Comedy*: the allegorical procession and Dante's reunion with Beatrice in the final cantos of *Purgatorio* and the encounter between Dante and Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* XV–XVII.

In the Garden of Eden located on top of the mountain of Purgatory, Dante witnesses a spectacular procession, which offers an allegorical representation of human history informed by the motif of the Apocalypse, entirely constructed out of images taken from the Book of Revelation. (Indeed Dante is rewriting the Apocalypse.⁶) The procession is divided into two parts, in the middle of which Dante's reunion with Beatrice takes place. The first part of the procession is centred on the arrival of a griffin pulling a chariot, symbolizing Christ and the Church respectively, and escorted by figures representing the books of the Old and New Testaments.

This is followed by Beatrice's appearance on the chariot pulled by the griffin and by the reunion between Dante and Beatrice. She is presented both as Dante's beloved from the time of his youth and as a Christ-figure, thereby combining a personal element from Dante's individual life as narrated in his previous works with an allegorical sense that what is staged is the possibility for everyone to recover his or her likeness with Christ. It is a very complex and important episode – according to Jorge Luis Borges, it constitutes the very core of the whole poem⁷ – and I would only like to recall that it combines Dante's private history, in this case his personal experience of love, with the collective scenario of salvation history, the one mirroring the other.⁸ It is here that Dante's first poetic and prophetic investiture takes place. It consists of

Beatrice's mandate that he narrate the allegorical sketch of salvation history that he is allowed to witness: 'Però, in pro del mondo che mal vive, l al carro tieni or li occhi, e quel che vedi, l ritornato di là, fa che tu scrivi' (*Par.* XXII, 103–05).

In the second part of the procession, which is also built on apocalyptic imagery, Dante is shown a dramatic allegory of human history moving from the first Roman persecutions to the Islamic schism and to the Church's contemporary corruption, which is symbolized by the monstrous shape taken by the chariot and is presented, in this passage as well as throughout the poem, as at once the ultimate sign of the decline of human history and its primary cause. In the final scene, which rewrites and reinterprets the 'meretrix magna' of Rev. 17. 1–5, a whore, representing the papal *curia*, stands on the monstrous chariot (representing the corrupted Church) and lasciviously embraces a giant (representing the French monarchy), while the giant brutally beats the woman and drags her and the chariot into the forest.⁹

This final image represents the Church's Babylonian captivity in Avignon, and the whole allegory expresses a very gloomy and negative sense that, after the redemption brought about by Christ, human history has reactivated the Fall in a process of constant and progressive decline, which has by now reached its lowest possible point and for which the main culprit is to be envisioned as the Church's greed and interest in temporal power. Yet, if Dante's political thought is marked by the sense that good is about to succumb and evil to prevail, it is at the same time also always characterized, as Bruno Nardi and others have shown, by the certainty that God will soon send a second messianic figure to redeem humankind.¹⁰ In particular, redemption will come from an imperial figure who will be able to have the Church resume Christ's model of poverty in the Gospel and who will kill the monster of the Apocalypse and restore the balance between Church and Empire.

In the case of the events described in the Garden of Eden, Beatrice indicates that an imperial figure sent by God, the enigmatic 'cinquecento diece e cinque l messo di Dio', will soon punish the whore and the giant and reinstate justice and order.¹¹ This message of hope and imminent salvation is very much part of Dante's political vision in the *Divine Comedy*, and Beatrice urges Dante not to forget to narrate it in his poem. 'Tu nota;' says Beatrice, 'e sì come da me son porte, l così queste parole segna a' vivi' (*Purg.* XXXIII, 52–53). There is a tension between the sense that the world has become so corrupted that it is on

the brink of collapse and trust in an imminent renewal. It is this space that Dante uses to place himself as a poet and prophet who is granted a divinely-inspired vision which he is to narrate in a poem in support of corrupted humankind ('in pro del mondo che mal vive'). Indeed, Peter Hawkins has called the whole *Comedy* an 'extended call narrative, a story about the making of a prophet'.¹²

The encounter between Dante and his ancestor Cacciaguida in the Heaven of Mars, which deals with contemporary history and Dante's own exile, expresses the same pattern of corruption and renewal that we have just observed with respect to Dante's portrayal of human history in the Garden of Eden.¹³ The history of Florence is presented as a process of progressive degeneration from an Edenic and perfect origin (the Florence of the good old days narrated in *Par.* XV) to an increasingly corrupt present, along the lines of the image, taken from the Book of Revelation and recurring throughout the poem, of Florence as the infernal Babylon.¹⁴ Dante's own exile from Florence thereby appears not only as one more symbol of the evil of history and the sign of an imminent Apocalypse, but also as a necessary experience serving higher purposes, inasmuch as Dante's position of isolation and unjust suffering is presented as that which gives him a privileged perspective and grants him the same polemical and authoritative – indeed political – voice as that of the Old Testament prophets.¹⁵

This episode begins by having Cacciaguida reveal the painful details of Dante's exile but culminates with Dante's ancestor conveying a message of imminent renewal (in this case linked to the figure of Cangrande della Scala, the Emperor's vicar in Italy) and presenting Dante's 'mission' to write his Christian epic as a compensation for the unjust exile he has to endure on Earth:

Figlio, queste son le chiose
di quel che ti fu detto; ecco le 'nsidie
che dietro a pochi giri son nascose.
Non vo' però ch'a' tuoi vicini invidie,
poscia che s'infutura la tua vita
via più là che 'l punir di lor perfidia. (*Par.* XVII, 94–99)¹⁶

Dante's own exile, isolation, and suffering are presented as the ultimate sign of degeneration in history but are also given a positive meaning coinciding with the composition of the sacred poem, which is presented – in the mode of the texts by Old Testament prophets – as having the

political value of a denunciation of contemporary corruption and a suggestion of a hope for renewal: no matter how strongly an apocalyptic sense of degeneration and corruption runs through the *Divine Comedy*'s view of human history, the 'sacred poem' is always backed up by an even stronger confidence that Divine Providence presides over human history and will intervene to correct its course in this world.¹⁷ Writing – Dante's own writing – thereby represents not only a political act of denunciation and condemnation, but also a message of collective hope for the imminent renewal of society. On a personal level, it even represents a compensation for the author's unjust suffering on earth.

The interplay between the personal and the collective, as well as its connection with the motifs of the Apocalypse and writing are also at the core of *Nel regno oscuro*, where Dante's text additionally undergoes significant metamorphoses. The first striking metamorphosis, announced by Freud's replacing Virgil as a guide through hell, is the organization of the novel's narrative around an explicitly psychoanalytic, Freudian concept of the self. As I mentioned above, the book opens with the narrator's malaise,¹⁸ which combines existential doubts with a melancholic desire to reunite with his dead father and twin brother:

La mia esistenza non mi soddisfa, no ... Non vedo scopo in questo essere al mondo. Io sognavo da bambino di agitare la spada sopra l'altare del tempio, di essere il nuovo Davide. Ora devo errare ancora e ancora in cerca di quella terra promessa che non trovo da nessuna parte. Ci sono ma perché, perché devo esserci, perché patire, godere un po' e poi patire? Che cosa mi aspetta oltre a questo? Che vita posso vivere ancora? Voglio parlare con mio fratello e mio padre. [...] Ero annichilito, inerte, impotente. [...] Privo di volontà, privo di stima per me stesso; colmo solo di disgusto. (14)

The encounter with Freud restages the encounter between Dante and Virgil in *Inferno* I, and the narrative begins with Freud's promise to the narrator to help him in his search for his dead relatives.

As the author himself ('Giorgio') indicates in the *Lettera a due amici* at the end of the novel, the narrative proceeds as the account of a series of psychoanalytic sessions informed by the narrator's unconscious:

Nelle mie intenzioni effettivamente si tratta del diario di una lunga serie di sedute di psicoanalisi, commentate talvolta da annotazioni a posteriori dall'analista stesso. Tutti i capitoli contengono la descrizione di visioni,

allucinazioni, transfert, identificazioni, conati d'ira, farneticazioni del protagonista. Effettivamente tutto fluisce dall'inconscio. (325)

Indeed, the text is presented as 'una specie di magazzino dell'inconscio' (326) – a sort of storehouse for the unconscious of its disturbed protagonist.

In the psychoanalytic context of the novel, for which Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* represents an important model, the narrative neither conveys the quintessentially Dantesque sense of a linear movement forward, which is typical of the pilgrim's unstoppable progression from hell to heaven, nor is it structured along the lines of Dante's ordered systematization, where everything has its own place and the reader is given the sense of a universe where *tout se tient*. Rather, the narrative of *Nel regno oscuro* proceeds according to the method of free association in a circular movement that always revolves around the transformation of the same images – in particular those of the mountain and the train – and conveys the way in which the unconscious works (or at least is manifested on the couch during therapy). This is clear in the second part of Chapter 4, where, after plunging into a river to escape Dr Josef Mengele (who takes the place of Minos as the one presiding over the damned's fate), the narrator sees a rose which, for him, carries associations ranging from a line in Emmerich Kálmán's operetta *Die Bajadere* ('Rosa di Jaipur dal profumo incantatorio!') to his wet nurse Rosa, to Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*, Cielo d'Alcamo's poem 'Rosa fresca aulentissima', Pier Paolo Pasolini's collection *Poesia in forma di rosa*, right up to the encounter and dialogue with Rosa Luxemburg, who tells of her youth, ideals, and violent death. And from Rosa Luxemburg, whose corpse was thrown into Berlin's Landwehrkanal, the associations continue to the shores of the Danube in Hungary and Serbia, where corpses of murdered Jews were thrown, to the river Congo and the massacre of the Tutsis in Rwanda, to Paul Celan, a poet beloved by Pressburger who killed himself in the Seine and who, in the novel, will explain the reasons for his suicide, culminating with the Wannsee in Berlin where the Celan admirer and scholar Péter Szondi killed himself.

Making explicit and programmatic use of psychoanalysis to structure its narrative, *Nel regno oscuro* is a very subjective novel, in which episodes and characters reflect the narrator's creative, personal, and often deranged interpretations and perspectives.¹⁹ The episode of Primo Levi can be considered a paradigmatic case: the narrator encounters

Levi, '[l]'angelo caduto', at the end of his journey at the place that in Dante's *Inferno* is assigned to Lucifer. It is a paradoxical and provocative episode, which begins with the narrator's celebration of Levi for surviving the extermination camp and finding the language to describe it:

Tu hai attraversato l'orrore più orribile che l'uomo possa sperimentare sulla terra, ne sei uscito vivo e hai parlato. Hai compiuto molto più che un miracolo, hai indicato a tutti la vera strada dell'umana libertà e della coscienza. Hai dato all'uomo lo splendore della parola, l'oscuro splendore del mondo dicibile nel male e nel bene. Ci hai ridato il mondo. [...] Tu, solo tu sei arrivato al vero, all'essenza di tutto, alla verità, alla mostruosa e radiosa verità. (237)

At the same time, the narrator also accuses Levi of committing suicide and insults him for it:

Allora un improvviso odio nacque in me. Balzai in piedi, stetti davanti a lui.

'Perché hai attraversato l'oscuro mondo, se non sai fare altro che ammazzarti? Piciu! Stronzo! Schifoso! Maiale! Non ti potrò mai perdonare questo! Lo so, la sofferenza del sopravvissuto è terribile, indicibile, incontenibile. Eppure non posso, non posso perdonarti. In nome di miliardi di disperati, ridotti allo stremo, al pensiero costante del suicidio, non ti perdono. Mi dispiace, perché io ti amo!' (239-240)

This attitude towards Primo Levi is striking and, as the text suggests, can be understood in the sense that it is the narrator's love and great admiration for Levi that generates anger and frustration at his suicide.

During a discussion on the novel, Pressburger also explained that the rage which he felt when Levi committed suicide (which Pressburger takes as proven) is rooted in his own personal history and in the several suicide attempts made by his mother during Nazi persecutions when he was a child. According to Pressburger, it was only after writing the novel that, with the interpretative help of a psychoanalyst, he was able to understand the connection between his reaction to Levi's death and the trauma he underwent as a child due to his mother's suicide attempts. Writing the encounter with Levi into the novel was to help him to overcome his childhood trauma.²⁰

Yet, while *Nel regno oscuro* is presented as a – rather morbid – quest on the part of the narrator for himself and is explicitly structured around his subjectivity, it also mediates, like Dante's poem, between

the personal and the collective, and if the starting point of *Nel regno oscuro* is the focus on the narrator's psyche and his personal take on reality, it is psychoanalysis itself that also allows it to open up to a wider historical and collective dimension. In the novel, psychoanalysis has a 'technical function' that allows it to stage 'degli incontri impossibili', impossible encounters with dead people without recourse to what Pressburger terms 'theology': many figures, especially those whose lives had something unresolved and unexplained about them, have marked the narrator so much that they have become part of his psyche, and he encounters them in his fantasy during the psychoanalytic therapy.²¹ In this way, the analysis of the narrator's psyche can take the shape of a series of encounters with people who died in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thereby acquiring the collective dimension which is also a significant component of *Nel regno oscuro*.

From its beginning, the novel is also presented as a testimony of the past century: 'Fa' che io riesca a compiere questo viaggio e raccontarlo in un'opera che vorrei fosse la memoria del secolo', says the narrator after accepting Freud's offer to guide him along the journey through the *regno oscuro* (20). Like Dante, Pressburger uses language to build a world, but this world is very different from Dante's. Justice is the pillar sustaining the whole of the *Divine Comedy*, which is founded on the principle that humans are always free agents responsible for their actions and that in the afterlife all will get what they deserve according to the way in which they have freely behaved during their lifetimes. Indeed, punishment in Dante's hell can be understood as the act of continuing to commit the sin that one has deliberately chosen on earth (while in purgatory it represents a productive opportunity for growth and change for those who have repented of their sinful behaviour but have not completed their process of purification).²²

In Pressburger's novel, by contrast, hell is on earth and consists of the condition of gratuitous and senseless suffering to which history has damned many innocent people in the twentieth century. In the words of the narrator after he is shown and forced to experience what took place in the gas chambers, 'L'inferno non è per peccatori, non è una fantasmagoria in cui ficcare amici e nemici, è per vittime innocenti l'inferno' (56). *Nel regno oscuro* not only rewrites the *Divine Comedy* and moves hell to earth, filling it with innocent people rather than with sinners, but also seems to reread Dante's poem, in the sense that whereas Dante insists that his journey was real and places emphasis on the truth, prophetic

quality, and collective usefulness of his poetic enterprise, Pressburger suggests that Dante's tale is a phantasmagoria written for personal reasons.²³ By doing so, he uses a typically Dantesque strategy to stress the unreliability of a literary model in order to suggest the superior truthfulness of his own text.²⁴

The Shoah is the true hell, presented as the centre of the twentieth century and the symbol of the unjust suffering that it has inflicted. For instance, the protagonist's journey into the *regno oscuro* begins at the iron gate of the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the final exit from the *regno oscuro*, which takes place after the encounter with Primo Levi, is only possible once the protagonist has passed through a mountain composed of the rotting corpses of the prisoners killed in the extermination camp.

Pressburger's hell is mainly populated by intellectuals, artists, and poets, but there are also politicians, 'common people', and relatives of the author, mostly Jews but also other victims of Nazism and Fascism: Rosa Luxemburg, Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, Anne Frank, Edith Stein, Federico Garcia Lorca, Marina Tsvetaeva, Aby Warburg, Antonio Gramsci, and many others, including the women and children exterminated in the camps of Ravensbrück and Theresienstadt. There is no justice or sense in the world described by Pressburger, as the figure of Freud acknowledges regarding the children who died in Theresienstadt:

'Non c'è il perché. È inutile domandarlo.' Disse il professor Freud. '[...] Di loro non è rimasta la più piccola traccia. Li hanno squartati, torturati vivi, stuprati, operati senza anestesia per fare esperimenti sul cervello umano. Poi li hanno bruciati e buttati sull'immondizia'. (84)

This passage can be read in dialogue with Dante's effort to maintain that, although humans cannot fully grasp it, divine justice presides even over the fate of dead infants and dictates the reasons why they are either condemned to hell or saved in Paradise (*Par.* XXXII, 52–66). Things are different in the world described by Pressburger's novel, where suffering is random and there is neither compensation for it nor any possibility of finding sense in it. As a child says regarding her death in Theresienstadt, 'Non farmi dire altro. Sono stata sfortunata. Sono una povera bambina sfortunata. Che ci vuoi fare? È così e basta' (84).

The Shoah symbolizes history's fundamental absence of justice, which in the novel encapsulates all the senseless and unjust suffering of the twentieth century. In his *After the End: Representations of Post-*

Apocalypse, James Berger shows that the Shoah has been regarded as apocalyptic by many thinkers, including Theodor Adorno, Arthur Cohen, Elie Wiesel, and Jean-François Lyotard, and argues that one can indeed speak of the Shoah in apocalyptic terms inasmuch as it is ‘an overwhelmingly catastrophic event that does occupy a central position, dividing history into a “before” and an “after”, and radically restructuring our understanding of all events on either side’.²⁵ It seems to me that the full negativity of the Shoah and its centrality in Pressburger’s novel give it the apocalyptic character indicated by Berger. Yet, given their different historical circumstances, the apocalyptic mode in *Nel regno oscuro* is very different from that in the *Divine Comedy*, where the imminent sense of the end is always accompanied by a positive expectation of renewal. In several instances, *Nel regno oscuro* also criticizes the degeneration of contemporary society, which it often attributes, in a Pasolinian mode, to the market economy and the monstrous development of capitalism, competition, and greed.²⁶ But in Pressburger’s novel there is never the hope that things will improve in the future; in particular, the pre-eminence and centrality attributed to the Shoah in the text make it as though the Apocalypse had already taken place and no renewal had followed. And whereas writing the sacred poem for Dante meant denouncing contemporary corruption and uttering a message of confidence in God and in future salvation, writing for Pressburger has a different meaning, which is mainly connected not with the future or the present, but with the past.

Written after the Shoah, Pressburger’s novel conveys the sense not of hope or expectation but of *coming after*, and, in this respect, I find it significant that Virgil, the poet of confidence in history who celebrated the progressive movement from the destruction of Troy to Augustus’s foundation of the Roman empire, has been replaced by Sigmund Freud, the theoretician of the impossibility of escape from one’s own past and of the necessity of looking back at it. Looking back certainly means addressing and expressing the unresolved issues and traumas of one’s own psyche, and the artistic process is presented as a possibility of salvation for the individual artist: ‘Il vero artista gioca tutta la vita su un singolo atto della sua arte. Solo questo lo guarisce dal male, dal male oscuro che per molti è la vita’ (148). But, as the figure of Freud tells the narrator, looking back also has a more communal and political value, which coincides with preserving the memory of the collective past: ‘[L]’arma prodigiosa per la vendetta sui torti della storia [...] ha un

nome e si chiama: memoria. Ed ha un altro nome: verità' (90).²⁷ And in an another episode, also overtly modelled upon Dante's poetic/prophetic investiture in the middle of *Paradiso*, Pressburger has the poet Osip Mandelstam not only reiterate the difference between the invented character of Dante's *Inferno* and the reality of hell on earth, but also indicate that the task of poetry and art is to represent its horror:

Ho letto Dante, ne ho parlato in pubblico. Sai, l'inferno c'è. Sì, c'è. Dante non lo sapeva. Per lui l'inferno era fantasia. Io invece sì, ho visto l'inferno. Ti prego, parlane del vero inferno che esiste oggi. Di qua, di là, nel mondo. Parlane. [...] L'orrore lo può testimoniare solo la poesia: la verità sta solamente in lei, è impossibile rappresentare l'orrore, Ma il poeta può farlo, e morire nella fatica di pronunciare le parole. Le parole della verità. Ti prego. Parla. Ti prega un moribondo. La favola dell'inferno cristiano è bella, edificante e potente, ma quando l'inferno scende sulla terra occorre un'altra immaginazione. Irreparabile è questa notte, da voi c'è luce ancora ma qui il sole è nero. (189–191)

In this way, *Nel regno oscuro*, which starts from a very personal and subjective position reflecting its post-Freudian character, becomes a testimony to the history and suffering of the Novecento. It lacks Dante's confidence in God's preservation of justice and instead focuses on survival and the process of working through trauma. Nonetheless, as for Dante, for Pressburger writing is also salvific and represents – in his case, along with psychoanalysis or even in its place – the possibility of confronting history, evil, and the tragedy of loss without falling into total despair or yielding to the temptation of suicide.

NOTES

- 1 Giorgio Pressburger, *Nel regno oscuro* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008).
- 2 As the *Inferno* is divided into 34 cantos, so is *Nel regno oscuro* divided in 34 chapters, which are also preceded – as in modern editions of the *Divine Comedy* – by cursory summaries of the events that are about to be described. Chapters carry titles that often recall the *Inferno*, as for instance in Chapter 3 ('L'entrata. La porta'), Chapter 4 ('Acheronte. Minosse'), Chapter 7 ('Francesca da Rimini. Un taxi nero') or Chapter 9 ('Cerbero e Ciacco'). The text of the novel is printed with some blank spaces that do not necessarily correspond to the syntax but are meant to convey a sense of rhythm similar to that of poetry. For practical reasons, my quotations in this article will not reproduce the graphics of the original.
- 3 Dante's *Comedy* is quoted from Dante Alighieri, '*La Commedia*' secondo l'*antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 2nd edn, 4 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994).

- 4 On Dante's insertion of an element of 'personality' within the medieval category of *auctoritas* which until then had been mainly impersonal and ahistorical, see now Albert R. Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- 5 On the individuality that begins to emerge with the *Divine Comedy*, see Auerbach's famous statement that 'Dante was the first to configure man, not as an abstract or anecdotal representative of an ethical type, but man in his living historical reality, the concrete individual in his unity and wholeness'. Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 175–76. See also Manuele Gragmolati, *Experiencing the After-life: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); 'Nostalgia in Heaven: Embraces, Affection and Identity in Dante's *Comedy*', in *Dante and the Human Body*, ed. by John Barnes and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 91–111, as well as the essays in the section 'Subjectivity' within the volume *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragmolati, and Jürgen Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010): Carlo Ginzburg, 'Dante's Blind Spot (*Inferno* XVI–XVII)' (pp. 150–63); Lino Pertile, 'Trasmutabile per tutte guise: Dante in the *Comedy*' (pp. 164–78); Gary Cestaro, 'Is Ulysses Queer? The Subject of greek love in *Inferno* XV and XXVI' (pp. 172–92); Francesca Southerden, 'Lost for Words: Recuperating Melancholy Subjectivity in Dante's Eden' (pp. 193–210); Manuele Gragmolati, '(In-)Corporeality, language, Performance in Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia*' (pp. 211–22); and Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragmolati, 'Dante after Wittgenstein: *Aspetto*, Language, and Subjectivity from *Convivio* to *Paradiso*' (pp. 223–47). On the concept of selfhood based on memory and introspection staged in the *Divine Comedy* and enhanced by the late-medieval practice of confession, see Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 88–112; and Manuele Gragmolati, '*Inferno* V', in *Lectura Dantis Bononiensis*, ed. by Emilio Pasquini (Bologna: Accademia delle Scienze, forthcoming).
- 6 On the motif of the Apocalypse in Dante's *Comedy* and, in particular, on the last cantos of *Purgatorio*, see Marjorie Reeves, 'Dante and the Prophetic View of History', in *The World of Dante: Essays on Dante and His Times* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 44–60; Ronald B. Herzman, 'Dante and the Apocalypse', in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 398–413; Peter Dronke, 'The Phantasmagoria in the Earthly Paradise', in *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 55–61; Lino Pertile, *La puttana e il gigante. Dal cantico dei Cantici al Paradiso Terrestre di Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1998).
- 7 Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Meeting in a Dream', in *Nine Dantesque Essays*, in *Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922–1986*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger; trans. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), pp.

- 298–301 (p. 300) ('It is my belief that he constructed the triple architecture of his poem to insert this encounter into it').
- 8 See Pertile, *La puttana e il gigante*, and Anna Maria Chiavacci's commentary in Dante, *Commedia*, ed. by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, 3 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), II, pp. 850 ('la storia privata dell'autore, non a caso posta al centro di quella universale dell'umanità, ne riflett[e] lo svolgimento') and 876 (Nel momento in cui il poema raggiunge il luogo del suo massimo significato ideale, si tocca [...] il punto più scoperto della vicenda biografica del suo autore').
 - 9 'Sicura, quasi rocca in alto monte, | seder sovrasso una puttana sciolta | m'apparve con le ciglia intorno pronte; | e come perché non li fosse tolta, | vidi di costa a lei dritto un gigante; | e basciavansi insieme alcuna volta. | Ma perché l'occhio cupido e vagante | a me rivolse, quel feroce drudo | la flagellò dal capo infin le piante; | poi, di sospetto pieno e d'ira crudo, | disciolse il mostro, e trassel per la selva, | tanto che sol di lei mi fece scudo | a la puttana e a la nova belva' (*Purg.* XXXII, 147–60).
 - 10 Bruno Nardi, 'Dante profeta', in *Dante e la cultura medievale*, 2nd edn (Bari: Laterza, 1949), pp. 336–416; see also Charles T. Davis, 'Dante's Vision of History', in *Dante's Italy and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984) pp. 23–41; Dronke, 'The Phantasmagoria in the Earthly Paradise'.
 - 11 'Sappi che 'l vaso che 'l serpente ruppe, | fu e non è; ma chi n'ha colpa, creda | che vendetta di Dio non teme suppe. | Non sarà tutto tempo senza reda | l'aguglia che lasciò le penne al carro, | per che divenne mostro e poscia preda; | ch'io veggio certamente, e però il narro, | a darne tempo già stelle propinque, | secure d'ogn' intoppo e d'ogne sbarro, | nel quale un cinquecento diece e cinque, | messo di Dio, acciderà la fuia | con quel gigante che con lei delinque' (*Purg.* XXXIII, 35–45).
 - 12 Peter S. Hawkins, 'Dante and the Bible', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 125–40 (p. 136).
 - 13 Note that in this case as well Dante's personal, individual history is encapsulated within the transcendental motifs of the resurrection of the body in the heaven of the Sun and divine justice in the Heaven of Jupiter.
 - 14 See Amilcare Iannucci, 'Firenze, città infernale', in *Dante da Firenze all'aldilà*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone (Florence: Cesati, 2001), pp. 217–32. On Dante's relationship to Florence, see also Joan M. Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the 'Divine Comedy'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Catherine Keen, *Dante and the City* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003); Claire Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City: The Poetry of Citizenship in Dante* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006); John M. Najemy, 'Dante and Florence', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp. 236–56.
 - 15 As Najemy writes, Dante in the Heaven of Mars 'also learns that his exile will serve higher purposes and that the meaning of his life and poetic vocation will thereafter consist in the revelation – to him and by him – of truths that become accessible precisely because of his separation from the city. [...] Leaving Florence behind in every sense thus becomes the necessary precondition for the vision of

- political and moral redemption entrusted to him for the benefit of humankind' ('Dante and Florence', p. 238). On the relationship between Dante's prophetic voice and that of prophets from the Old Testament, see Nardi, 'Dante profeta'; Nicolò Mineo, *Profetismo e apocalittica in Dante, Strutture e temi profetico-apocalittici in Dante: dalla 'Vita nuova' alla 'Divina commedia'* (Catania: Pubblicazioni della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, 1968); Rachel Jacoff, 'Dante, Geremia e la problematica profetica', in *Dante e la Bibbia* (Florence: Olschki, 1988), 113–23; Amilcare Iannucci, 'Dante: Poeta o Profeta', in *'Per correr miglior acque ...': Bilanci e prospettive degli studi danteschi alle soglie del nuovo millennio*, (Rome: Salerno, 2001), 1, pp. 93–114; Robert Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy in Dante's 'Commedia'* (Florence: Olschki, 2008).
- 16 Cacciaguada reiterates to Dante the mandate to narrate everything he is shown in the afterlife after Dante expresses the fear that, if he does so, many important people on Earth would turn into his enemies: 'Coscienza fusca l o de la propria o de l'altrui vergogna | pur sentirà la tua parola brusca. | ma nondimen, rimossa ogne menzogna, | tutta tua vision fa manifesta; | e lascia pur grattar dov'è la rogna. | Ché se la voce tua sarà molesta | nel primo gusto, vital nodrimento | lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta' (*Par. XVII*, 124–32).
- 17 This confidence in God's governance is also made clear by Dante's last prophetic and poetic investiture, which is uttered by Saint Peter in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars and expresses both a denunciation of contemporary corruption and the hope of an imminent regeneration: 'In vesta di pastor lupi rapaci | si veggion di qua sù per tutti i paschi: | o difesa di Dio, perché pur giaci? | Del sangue nostro Caorsini e Guaschi | s'apparecchian di bere: o buon principio | a che vil fine convien che tu caschi! | Ma l'alta provedenza, che con Scipio | difese a Roma la Gloria del mondo, | soccorrà tosto, sì com'io concipio; | e tu, figliuol, che per lo mortal pondo | ancor giù tornerai, apri la bocca, | e non asconder quel ch'io non ascondo' (*Par. XXVII*, 55–66).
- 18 I say the narrator – 'io narrante' is how it is referred to as in the text – but I always also mean the character and the empirical author, because Pressburger's novel seems to aim at collapsing that distinction. It also insists in several ways that in some instances it is impossible to distinguish between work of art and artist's life, between textuality and biography, as in the cases of Osip Mandelstam and Paul Celan ('La sua arte e la sua vita [Mandelstam's] sono tutt'uno, come in pochi altri casi (quello di Celan, per esempio). Sia benedetto il suo nome'; n. 705, p. 307) or in those of Ezra Pound, Knut Hamsun and Louis-Ferdinand Céline ('se è un essere schifoso a pronunciare parole, anche le più belle, quelle parole sono contagiate dallo schifo. Questa tesi afferma che l'autore e la sua opera, in certi casi, sono inscindibili'; n. 275, p. 270). See also Pressburger's reflections on the relationship between the life of an author and his or her works in Emma Bond, Manuele Gragnolati, and Laura Lepschy, 'Riscrivere Dante in un'altra lingua: Conversazione con Giorgio Pressburger su *Nel regno oscuro*', in *Dante's Plurilingualism*, pp. 250–66, especially p. 261. Recently Lino Pertile has proposed the interesting hypothesis that the distinction between Dante-poet and Dante-pilgrim

- is also less clear than is usually argued; see Lino Pertile, “‘Trasmutabile per tutte guise’: Dante in the *Comedy*”, in *Dante’s Plurilingualism*, pp. 164–78.
- 19 Emma Bond shows that a distorted perspective is also present in Pressburger’s *La legge degli spazi bianchi*; see Chapter 3 (‘Intimacy, illness and silence in Giorgio Pressburger’s “La legge degli spazi bianchi” and “Vera”’) of her DPhil dissertation ‘Disrupted Narratives: Illness, Silence and Identity in Svevo, Pressburger and Morandini’, which was discussed at Oxford in July 2009. The model for this narrative choice is represented by Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno*.
 - 20 Bond, Gragnolati and Lepschy, ‘Conversazione con Giorgio Pressburger’, pp. 261–62.
 - 21 See *ibid.*, 259. On the relationship between writing, psychoanalysis, and Jewish memory in twentieth-century Italian literature, see Sergio Parussa, *Writing as Freedom, Writing as Testimony: Four Italian Writers and Judaism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), pp. 1–5.
 - 22 See Manuele Gragnolati, ‘Gluttony and the Anthropology of Pain in Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*’, in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, ed. by Rachel Fulton and Bruce Holsinger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 238–50.
 - 23 On Dante’s paradoxical representation as both a work of art and an expression of truth, see Teodolinda Barolini, ‘Non False Errors and the True Dreams of the Evangelist’, in *The Undivine ‘Comedy’: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 143–65.
 - 24 As, for instance, Dante with respect to the *Aeneid* in *Inf.* XIII, 46–51; see Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the ‘Comedy’* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 211–12.
 - 25 James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 20–29 and 59–62 (p. 21).
 - 26 See, for example, Rosa Luxemburg’s bitter words (‘Quello che ho detto nell’“Accumulazione” oggi si è avverato quasi alla lettera. I portatori di civiltà convinti della superiorità dei loro costumi, della loro cultura, dispotici, ottusi, incoscienti, ipocriti, brutali, calpestando i popoli, annientano civiltà antiche, pretendono di cambiare milioni di vite, in nome dell’economia di mercato, dell’economia globale’; 33) or Aby Warburg’s curse (‘Tramonta, mondo, prima di scoppiare, prima di deflagrare, tramonta, mondo, getta via le immagini accumulate in migliaia di anni, getta via tutto, vivi come Lutero, come gli ebrei, senza immagini, vivi e poi crepa! Collassa, muori, perché chissà che cosa verrà di qui in poi! Scompari, mondo! Purulento, decomposto mondo che va avanti solo con il petrolio, ma questo liquame delle carogne antiche farà marcire l’uomo del presente!’; 170).
 - 27 See also another statement by Freud, which follows the episode where the narrator is shown Federico Garcia Lorca’s assassination: ‘Lei deve ridire tutto il male che ha visto e, senza timore di offendere qualcuno, deve cercare solo la verità perché adesso nessuno vuole farlo, cercano tutti il modo di meglio mentire, o d’adulare e divertire il pubblico. Ma lei dovrà, dovrà portare il peso di quegli eventi e renderne conto alla generazione a venire’ (128–29).

Manuele Gragnolati, 'Rewriting Dante after Freud and the Shoah: Giorgio Pressburger's *Nel regno oscuro*', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 235–50 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_14>

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