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LIKE A MEDIEVAL JOURNEYMAN WITH HIS POEM IN HIS HAND

Dante's Presence in Charles Wright's Poetry

ABSTRACT: Charles Wright is one of the contemporary American poets who have most profoundly absorbed Dante's *Commedia* into their work. This paper places Wright's interest in Dante in context, focusing on *Purgatorio* as the canticle he relates to most in his poetry, and as the book closest to his own poetics. Examples taken from various texts support this reading of Wright's relationship with the medieval Florentine poet.

KEYWORDS: Wright, Dante, American Poetry.

Among the multitude of ways in which Dante has continued to flourish in the poetry of the United States since the end of the Eighteenth century,¹ Charles Wright's response stands out among contemporary American readings, translations, imitations, interpretations, and appropriations of the *Divine Comedy* and the *Rime*. Wright has experienced the three main approaches to Dante that have marked the Florentine poet's reception in America over the last fifty years. In so doing, he falls within the long-standing tradition of using Dante as a canonical figure in which to mirror one's poetics and the cultural trends of an age. These three groups include the poet-translators,² the poets who

¹ The first translation from the *Comedy* to appear in the United States was a passage from *Inf.* 33, the famous episode of Count Ugolino, published in the *New York Magazine* in 1791 by William Dunlap, a writer, painter, and theatre impresario. The American translation of the three canticles was first accomplished by Henry W. Longfellow, who completed it in 1867.

² The translators include renowned figures such as: Robert Pinsky who has, in his words, 'Englished' *Inferno* in 1994, moving away from the original *terza rima* to get "speed and efficiency" and make readers feel "Dante's great rapidity and fluidity" – a method that has made his lively bilingual version a best-selling book (see Pinsky's comments on his translation in Pinsky 2007, 42-46); William Stanley Merwin, a Pulitzer-Prize winning poet and prominent scholar and translator of Medieval and Romance literature, who published his *Purgatorio* in 2000; Mary Jo Bang, who is the author of a freewheeling and questionable rendering of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, published respectively in 2012 and 2021. Bang brings the two books closer to here-and-now readers with anachronistic references to, for example, Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, Freud and Nietzsche, Donald Rumsfeld, and Steven Colbert, arbitrarily condemning historical figures to eternal punishment or purgatorial expiation. To mimic the original's plurilingualism, she inserts lines by authors of all ages, from Bob Dylan to Lord Byron, Lewis Carroll, and Emily Dickinson.

have adopted the architecture of the *Comedy* in their works,³ and the poets who have freely re-used Dante's imagery, language, and characters, often moving away from the original or alluding to it only vaguely.⁴

Wright could, with good reason, be included in each of these three categories as the author who has most and most consistently absorbed Dante's lesson in contemporary verse. Although he tried his hand at translation only in 1993, rendering in English *Inf.* 13 and 14,⁵ Wright has declared Dante's presence in his writing "a glittering sediment under everything I do," "dispersed and dissipated" among his lines since his apprentice years in

This group should also include a classic edition of *Inferno*, assembled in 1993 by poet and editor Daniel Halpern, introduced by James Merrill, and translated by twenty poets, all American except for Seamus Heaney: Mark Strand, Galway Kinnell, Cynthia Macdonald, Amy Clampitt, Jorie Graham, Charles Wright, Richard Howard, Stanley Plumly, C.K. Williams, Robert Pinsky, Susan Mitchell, Carolyn Forché, Richard Wilbur, W.S. Merwin, Alfred Corn, Sharon Olds, Deborah Digges, Robert Hass, and Halpern himself.

³ Standing out in this second group is the name of James Merrill, with his trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover*, an immense epic poem in three parts and a coda, composed between 1976 and 1982, which records the Ouija board sessions during séances that Merrill and his partner David Jackson conducted with a crowd of spirits from the other world. Among African American poets, Le Roy Jones/Amiri Baraka looks at Dante's narrative sequence and recasts, with only one significant variation, the *Inferno* scheme (borrowed from John Sinclair's 1961 translation) in his autobiographical novel *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965). The original structure provides him a guideline to his lyrical narration of Black people's infernal experience, which is much worse than that of the sinners in Dante's book. The structure of the *Comedy* reappears in another trilogy, Frederick Seidel's *The Cosmos Trilogy* of 2002, which collects three earlier books. In his sequence, Seidel inverts Dante's itinerary and humorously begins his postmodern epic without hope in the heavens, journeying over a paradisiacal New York on board modern vehicles and spacecrafts to gradually descend into the neo-inferno of a violent and degraded post-9/11 Manhattan. This itinerary is scanned by the 33 poems of the first two volumes and the 34 poems of the third part, where Dante and Virgil appear in the final 100th poem, thus echoing the original structure of Dante's cantos.

⁴ This is the largest group, and it includes an extraordinary range of rewritings of Dante's poetry for all tastes, from the Medieval Dante to Dante in popular culture. If the Nobel Prize winner Louise Glück titles her 1999 book *Vita Nova* to talk about a love that is gone, Pulitzer Prize winner Yusef Komunyakaa dedicates a poem of 100 lines, "Flesh", to an unusual Beatrice who, divested of her role as the poet's muse, reclaims her womanly identity. Her words provide an original self-portrait at the same time as they give the author's comment on poetical inspiration and the relationship with tradition.

Critics have asked why the *Comedy* is a text so often used and abused in the United States. David Gewanter writes that over the years it has remained an aesthetic ideal that "challenges any poet to create a total vision of the world," proving that the dead have more to say than when they lived" ("Dante 2006: The Contemporary", in *Rewriting Dante*, 25). Hawkins and Jacoff regard the *Comedy* as a paradigm for contemporary poets to represent the crisis of a declining empire, as well as a text close to the intensely religious nature of American culture. Moreover, the personal story of the author Dante tells of a man who was able to turn his political and personal misfortunes into art, offering grounds for reflecting on justice and exile ("Introduction" to *The Poets' Dante*, xiii-xxvi).

⁵ These translations are included in the *Inferno* edited by D. Halpern mentioned in Note no. 2.

the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ It was then that Dante, together with Ezra Pound and Eugenio Montale, helped to open the doors of poetry to Wright. Such an unusual jump-start into composing verse is a major component of Wright's very rich anecdotal memories.

As often recalled in his interviews,⁷ it was 1959 and he was serving in the US Army Intelligence Corps in Verona, with no specific skills and little inclination for military discipline. One day he found himself reading Pound's 1911 poem "Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula" standing in front of the place that had inspired it, at Sirmione on Lake Garda. There, on the spot, in front of a landscape more attractive than Paradise (to paraphrase the first line in Pound's lyric) he decided to pursue a life in poetry. This figure of a poet holding his poem while contemplating natural scenery was, we might say, Wright's first still image in a long series of self-portraits he was later to write on the thread of memory to follow the earthly journey of his autobiographical pilgrim-poet in search of a way towards some sort of revelation of the mystery that envelops each visible thing. Pound was indeed his "great highway into the Città Dante" (Wright 2001, 260), and that epiphanic moment set the ball rolling.⁸

Wright first studied Dante as a Fulbright student in Rome from 1963 to 1965,⁹ reading *Inferno* while he was fully immersed in another important project: the translation of Montale's *La bufera e altro*. This book was to be published only much later, in 1978, with Gustave Doré's illustration of "la bufera infernal" from *Inf. V* reproduced on the cover.¹⁰ The choice of this image is not accidental, because it was in the spring of 1978 that Wright read the complete *Comedy* in Italian in a systematic manner: one canto a day for three consecutive months, helping himself with the Singleton English edition and commentary and without writing one single line of his own (Wright 2001, 261).

⁶ Wright, "Dantino Mio" in Hawkins and Jacoff 2001, 261.

⁷ Details of this sudden conversion, when the landscape first entered his imagination, are related in several interviews collected in Wright's *Halflife* and *Quarter Notes*, and also inserted in poems.

⁸ Wright has often acknowledged his debt to Pound for having introduced him to Dante at the onset of his career. Besides the much-quoted essay "Dantino Mio" (Wright 2001, 261), see also "Improvisations on Pound" in *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 33 (Fall 1985): 63–70. rpt. in Wright 1988, 10–19) and "Improvisations: *The Poem as Journey*" in Wright 1995, 35–36. Discussions of Pound's influence on his early work are to be read in many interviews, including the well-known 1989 *Paris Review* interview with poet and critic J.D. McClatchy ("The Art of Poetry XLI, Charles Wright," Winter II, 185–221, rpt. in Wright 1995, 89–121).

⁹ In "Dantino Mio" (Wright 2001, 261), he credits his Fulbright literature professor, Maria Sampoli, for having introduced him to the study of Dante "I first studied Dante with Maria Sampoli [...]. I owe her both Dante and Montale, really two of the three great poetic influences of my life". The third was Pound.

¹⁰ Montale, *The Storm & Other Poems*, translated by Charles Wright, Oberlin: Field Translation Series 1, 1978. For a study of Wright's translations from Montale see Francini 1992, 44–71. As with Dante, Wright has extensively discussed Montale's influence on his work in various occasions. See, for example, his interview "With Antonella Francini" (Wright 1988, 117–122) and the prose "A Matter of Emotional Transference," his contribution to a Montale conference held in Florence, Italy, in 1996 (rpt. in *Montale tradotto dai poeti*, 25–29).

Moreover, the 1970s was the decade when Wright's poetics of the "metaphysics of the quotidian" (Wright 1995, 95) firmly took on its peculiar features, revolving around three things, as the poet has often pointed out: language, landscape, and the idea of God.¹¹ His characteristic journey structure was also already present in the poetry of those years, as was the death theme—Wright's extreme metaphor for the unknown, set against the metaphor of light towards which all his poetry, in a Dante-like manner, is aiming. His common topography, too, was well-defined as a network of places and zones that in his writing continuously spans between the Northeast of Italy and the Southeastern United States, where he was born and grew up. Through these idealized, dynamic landscapes and shifting panels, charged with metaphysical possibilities and elusive epiphanies, his autobiographical pilgrim wanders and meditates. These are Wright's "sacred places" (Wright 1995, 97), the Stations of the Cross of a poet who, moving from his Christian background, has achieved a personal version of agnosticism.

In brief, Dante entered the poetics of an author who had already found his mature voice and looked at the Medieval poet as a guide along his contemporary spiritual pilgrimage, one that, unlike Dante's journey, was doomed to remain incomplete and unfulfilled. My sin, he writes, "has been to keep on nosing around, unlike Dante, in the unknown without a map [...], and without an entry point or exit" (Wright 2001, 260). And he first entered Wright's poetics visually, on the cover of his translation of *La bufera*, which he had read and translated from a religious and Dantean perspective. Montale, he writes, "is a religious poet of a unique sort": like Dante, he shifts "belief over to the real of the image, the simple message over into complex metaphor. By this shift in emphasis, language becomes religious, and 'God' becomes a possibility" (Wright 1988, 43 and 41). But Wright's God is a God he does not believe in. As J. D. McClatchy pointed out, Wright has given himself a formidable task: "to write about what isn't there in order to fall silent before it" (McClatchy, 106).¹²

No surprise, then, if the *cantica* Wright favors is the second. "A mountain in my poetry," he has conceded, "is that of Dante's Purgatory."¹³ Indeed, the book he published soon after his total immersion in the *Commedia*, *The Southern Cross* (1981), refers to *Purgatorio* right from the title, which recalls the "quattro stelle" in *Canto* 1, 23 while clearly alluding to the writer's Southern origin. The epigraph that opens the volume

¹¹ See, for instance, Wright 1995, 123: "There are three things, basically, that I write about – language, landscape and the idea of God. The idea of God seems to be the one thing that has floated up, naturally." This is a declaration that also often occurs in his recent poetry as he retrospectively examines the outcome of his original poetical plan.

¹² Studies on Wright's mysticism include Henry Hart's "Wright's *Via Mistica*" (Giannelli 1999, 325-344), and Bonnie Costello's "Charles Wright's 'Via Negativa': Language, Landscape, and the Idea of God" (2001). Costello remarks that Wright "has created a mysticism for the modern mind", and that his pilgrim persona "pursues disappearances, not presences; beauty is derived not from nature's generous plenitude, not from things or motions, but from the shadows which haunt it and the lights which penetrate it."

¹³ Personal conversation with the poet.

comes from *Purg.* 21, 130-36, where Statius bows down in the attempt to embrace Virgil's feet "*trattando l'ombra come cosa calda.*" This episode allows Wright to further indicate his relationship to Dante. First, Statius' gesture coincides with his feelings towards the Medieval poet as well as the numerous masters to whom he genuflects and pays homage to in his poetry. Secondly, it offers a key to the reading of his entire work, which revolves around the presence-in-absence in the landscape of a transcendent reality which he stubbornly strives to reveal as a "*cosa calda.*" The first poem in *The Southern Cross* is a long "Homage to Paul Cézanne" in eight sections. In an oracular tone, Wright composes here a meditation on mortality. By imitating the technique of the French artist, who metonymically stands for all the great figures the American poet admires, he explores the relationship between nature and art, and between the living and the dead. In Section 3 he gives them a voice with words that echo Pia de' Tolomei's lines in *Purg.* 5:

The dead are constant in
 The white lips of the sea.
 Over and over, through clenched teeth, they tell
 Their story, the story each knows by heart:
Remember me, speak my name
When the moon tugs at my sleeve,
When the body of water is raised and becomes the body of light,
*Remember me, speak my name.*¹⁴

Thirdly, Dante's work is for Wright an immense reservoir of language, a dictionary from which he freely draws images and situations, adjusting them to his poetical discourse, "I go to Dante as I go to a dictionary," he has written, "to find out what something means". And since he has set for himself the arduous goal of grasping the unsayable, following the Florentine poet's example he has tried "to raise [himself] from [his] own ground, into [his] own blue" (Wright 2001, 263 and 260). These words are Wright's declaration of humility towards "the great poet of light" (Wright 1988, 22); at the same time, they trace his choice of a specific aesthetic path, shoring up his lines with the work of selected kindred spirits. "*Da me stesso non vegno,*" says Dante to Cavalcante in *Inf.* 10. Likewise, Wright needs guiding figures along his journey – from Dante to St. Augustine, the Christian mystics, the Medieval Chinese poets, composers of country music, and authors belonging to various cultural traditions. Besides the predictable names of Pound and Montale, his poetical genealogy includes Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane, Dino Campana, Kafka, Leopardi, Hopkins, Giorgio Morandi, Rothko, etc.¹⁵

¹⁴ All quotations from Wright's poetry come from *Oblivion Banjo* (Wright 2019).

¹⁵ In the interview "With Antonella Francini," which focuses on Montale, Wright also discusses, in general terms, his relationship with other Italian authors, including Dino Campana, whose *Orphic Songs* he translated and published in 1984 (Wright 1988, 122-125). Campana's prose poem "La Verna," with its many references to Dante (especially to *Purgatorio*) and the figure of the pilgrim poet as "novo peregrin d'amore," elicits an almost too obvious comparison. In the interview, Wright talks of the affinity he feels

Inserting quotations in his original verses is a characteristic feature of the mode of composing of Wright who, writes Helen Vendler, “turns to the abiding memory of his predecessors in contemplation,” to compose “an aesthetic pantheon,” and assert the function and survival of art” (Vendler 1988, 14). In his essay on Wright’s Dantism, Massimo Natale has pointed out that the *Commedia* is a book of formation for the American poet, “un breviario in versi che mette a disposizione un’intera e salda possibilità di interpretazione del mondo” (Natale 2020, 135). It is a manual to consult, we might add, to better bring into focus his poetics.

What are, then, the moments in the second *cantica* that Wright singles out? The key concept of *Purgatorio* as a place of passage, close to human experience, certainly coincides with Wright’s metaphysics. Yet, within this framework he often references *Purg. 10* and the meeting with the penitent prideful, coupling this sin with its opposite: humbleness. In “Mount Caribou at Night,” at the beginning of *The Southern Cross*, the mountain mentioned in the title (which is actually located in northwest Montana, Wright’s vacation retreat) looms up for the first time in Wright’s poetry as a metaphor for an imaginary afterlife which his voice seems to come from—“the other side of the river,” to use one of Wright’s many expressions for his fictitious afterworld.¹⁶ In this regard, Harold Bloom has remarked that Wright “has the unique art of bringing up from their graves the mighty dead among the poets and performing this resurrection without self-consciousness. It is as though he knows he already is among his spiritual ancestors” (Bloom 2011, 331). However, no mighty dead are brought up from the graves in “Mount Caribou at Night,” but instead early Montana homesteaders in the Yaak River area. According to legend, the settler Walter Smoot was buried in a sitting position, his head bent toward his knees. The image recalls the penitents on the Terrace of Pride bent under the weight of rocks at the end of *Purg. 10*, and alludes to the carvings depicting examples of humility Dante sees engraved in the slope (“l’imagini di tanti umilitadi”). Immortal, in the background, the majestic Mt. Caribou rises to the sky where the constellations of Cassiopeia, Andromeda, and the Whale are on the move—a sharp contrast with human mortality in the small cemetery where the poet stands:

Just north of the Yaak River, one man sits bolt upright,
 A little bonnet of dirt and bunch grass above his head:
 [...]
 I speak to the others here, lodged in their stone wedges, the blocks

with this “unique sort of pilgrim”: “Most of my own work has centered around pilgrimages of one sort or another, and I feel a kinship. There is little about his ‘lyrics’ per se that attracts me, and I find there is little to learn from him technically for me at this point. But his spirit has always moved me [.... It was his desperate reaching and yearning for what he felt but couldn’t ever write down or understand truly that has always drawn me to him.” On the same subject see, for example, “Charles Wright on Eugenio Montale and Dino Campana: An Interview with Mary Zeppa” (Wright 2008, 29-36).

¹⁶ *The Other Side of the River* is the title of another major book of Wright’s, published in 1984.

And slashes that vein the ground, and tell them that Walter Smoot,
 Starched and ease in his bony duds
 Under the tamaracks, still holds the nightfall between his knees.

Work stars, drop by inveterate drop, begin
 Cassiopeia's sails and electric paste
 Across the sky.

Wright's recurrent projection of his pilgrim-persona into an otherworldly future is frequently modelled on the *Commedia's* second book, often alluding to purging scenes. This happens in "Hawaii Dantesca," where the reference is to *Purg. 1*, to the purification rite with the reed of humility, and to *Purg. 2* for the image of the white wings of the "celestial nocchiero" ("I primi bianchi apparver ali"):

Soon it will be time for the long walk under the earth toward the sea.
 [...]

 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.

In a Hawaiian landscape, the poet prefigures the moment of passing when his entire earthly life will be assembled in one single image on the day of reckoning—not a Last Judgement, but possibly the judgment of posterity on his poetry. "I don't see myself as any kind of spiritual creature at all," he said in an interview, "what I am trying to do is writing a kind of quasi-spiritual autobiography" (Suarez, Verner 1999, 68). The adverb *quasi* is here perhaps the most relevant word since Wright's poetical project does not lead to paradisiacal transcendence; rather, it resounds like a prayer in praise of his idealized landscapes and constellations. The poet, in a pantheistic sense, imagines being transfigured or 'transubstantiated,' to use his religious term, into these landscapes after death, returning to his ideal country: the numinous world of nature. Wright's pilgrim is the priest of this world, one who urges language to constantly reformulate his chant, and so to move beyond meaning itself into musical tones. Like Orpheus, the mythical poet with whom he finally identifies, he asks his poetry to enact over and over the fatal moment of the backward look, to be able to sing his song of irreversible loss: "You have got to find Eurydice on your own / you have got / To find the small crack / between here and everywhere else all by yourself."¹⁷

In "Reply to Lapo Gianni", a 1975 free re-writing of the renowned sonnet attributed to Dante, "Guido, I' vorrei che tu e Lapo e io...", already at this early stage in his work, Wright introduces a major theme in his poetical fiction, affirming that the human

¹⁷ This quotation comes from the poem "No Direction Home," included in Wright's 2009 book *Sestets*. (Rpt. in Wright 2019, 691). For a discussion of the Orpheus figure in his later poetry, see Francini 2003.

experience is doomed to remain within its earthly confinements: “Lapo, we are all slow orphans under the cruel sleep of heaven...” (Wright 2019, 85). In a later poem of 2000, “Step-Children of Paradise,” he compares humans to “unconstellated stars, just next to / Great form and great structure, ungathered, uncalled upon” (Wright 2019, 455).

But there is also an extra-textual aspect to bring to light in Wright’s relationship with the *Commedia*. Being a poet who has always been interested in formal completeness and in the construction of internal patterns in his books and poems, Wright adopts Dante’s three *cantiche* as a model, or rather “a scaffolding” (Eaton, 130), to gather retrospectively ample selections from the volumes published in the last thirty years of the past century. However, his *trilogy of trilogies*, as he has called this grandiose project, appears eccentric, since each volume includes not only the poems from the three main books of each decade but also new compositions, thus constructing bridges between different phases of his writing.¹⁸ The third of this asymmetric trio, *Negative Blue* (2000), gathers the major volumes of the 1990s, *Chichamauga*, *Black Zodiac* and *Appalachia*. In an interview Wright says that this triptych, at least in the poet’s intentions, was to reflect the Dantean scheme:

Appalachia was not only the last book in the last trilogy, but it was also the last book of all three of the trilogies. I felt I should write a kind of Paradiso, or half-way house at least. The trouble was that everything the trilogies talked about refuted the idea, much less the actuality of a Paradiso. Besides, I wasn’t really capable [...] [*Black Zodiac* is] the purgatorial book of the last trilogy [...] *Chickamauga* is an odd little inferno, really never getting past the anteroom of limbo, hellish enough for some people. It’s a doorway, not a tunnel, to *Black Zodiac*, which suffers the purgatorial clear-out of all confessions-self-torture, self-mutation. Death-haunted, perhaps, but a way-station on the trail to a ghostlier X, a deadlier zone” (Caseley 2000, 22-25).

Aware of the purgatorial destination of his contemporary pilgrimage, it is in *Black Zodiac* that Wright abandons the Dantean structural model and begins to compose his alternative end of the journey, *The Appalachian Book of the Dead* series, six poems modelled after *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Set in his native Appalachia region, these poems are his secular version of ancient texts which are, respectively, guides to assist the dead person in the interim time between earthly life and the following rebirth, and in the journey towards the afterlife. The “ghostlier X” is indeed “a deadlier zone,” imaginatively unreachable for the non-believer Wright. In the third poem of the series, Dante’s vision of *Par. 18* is in fact deflated to an everyday beautiful night scene. The letter “emme” that Dante sees taking shape on Jupiter is here just the initial letter of the word *moon*, “a small-time paradiso...”:

¹⁸ The first trilogy, *Country Music: Selected Early Poems* (1982), also includes a few poems from his ‘apprentice’ book, *The Grave of the Right Hand* (1970); the new poems in the other trilogies are usually collected under the title “Coda,” and they have often been previously printed by Fine Press limited editions.

Full moon illuminated large initial for letter M,
 Appalachian Book of the Dead, 22 February 1997 –
La luna piove, the moon rains down its antibiotic light
 Over the sad, septic world,
 Hieroglyphs on the lawn, supplicant whispers for the other side,
I am pure, I am pure, I am pure ...

Going backward chronologically, the conceptual and structural centrality of *Purgatorio* is confirmed in the 1985 long poem “A Journal of the Year of the Ox”, a lyrical journal of Wright’s fiftieth birthday year (Wright 2019, 223-269). Structured like a pyramid, or a mountain, in the poem’s 33 sections the pilgrim ascends and descends, revisiting his “sacred” places. In the opening, the poet invokes compassion for his pilgrimage, which has no precise destination, and once again he introduces himself as an exile traveling toward his final dwelling beyond life, “the luminous, transubstantiated world” of the landscape,” as he names it in a later poem:¹⁹

Pity the poor pilgrim, the setter-forth,
 Under a sweep so sure,
 pity his going up and his going down.

On one side of the mountain, he is guided by Poe and Emily Dickinson, on the other by Dante and Petrarch. Dante appears to him in a nocturnal Italian setting in the Euganean Hills,²⁰ dressed according to the most popular iconography, and pronounces a sort of critique of the 20th-century poet’s way of proceeding in his search for a way out of his ‘dark forest’ of knowledge:

Brother, he says, pointing insistently,
 A sound of voices starting to turn in the wind and then disappear as though
 Orbiting us, *Brother, remember the way it was*
In my time: nothing has changed:
Penitents terrace the mountainside, the stars hang in their bright courses
And the darkness is still the dark:
 Concentrate, listen hard,
Look to the nature of all things,
 And vanished into the oncoming disappearing
 Circle of voices slipstreaming through the oiled evening.

A radio from a parked car brings the contemporary poet back to reality, while a motor scooter whines up the hill, towards Mt. Madonna: it is 1985, and Dante is on a moped. The lines that follow contain another re-writing of the passage in *Purg. 10*, where the

¹⁹ In the 2004 poem “Buffalo Yoga Coda I.”

²⁰ The journal informs us that it is July 9th and Wright is in Italy with his family, at Villa Ca’ Paruta, in the Euganean Hills.

souls of the Pride penitents slowly approach, bent to the ground under heavy stones. The noise of large trucks loaded with huge rocks cut from two quarries on the mountain slope resounds here like “a music of sure contrition”: it spreads all around, inducing a general repentance and making the listeners’ heads bend down humbly and their feet slow like Dante’s sinners:²¹

All morning the long-bellied, two-hitched drag trucks
Have ground down the mountainside
 Loaded with huge, cut stone
[...]
They make the breaks sing and the tires moan,
A music of sure contrition that troubles our ears
And shudders the farmhouse walls
[...]
We all sway to the same tune
 when the great stones pass by,
A weight that keeps us pressed to our chairs
And pushes our heads down, and slows our feet.

In the following lines, Purgatory is mentioned again to describe the monasteries, radar stations and vineyards on the terraced Euganean Hills. Towards the end of this year-long journal, in the month of October, we find another intense moment of contrition that also encompasses the natural world (“The season steps up / repeating its catechism inside the leaves. / The dogwoods spell out their beads, / Wind zithers a Kyrie eleison over the power lines...”), with one more reference to *Purg. 10*. Packing them into two lines, here Wright sums up the sins and expiations of a collective “we”—his own sins and those of his epoch—by borrowing the images Dante uses to illustrate the punishments: “rocks on our backs” for Pride; “eyes sewn shut” for Envy, in Canto 13; “escaping smoke” for Wrath in Canto 15; and “rising out of the flames” for Lust in Canto 25. The allusion to the angels erasing the P’s from Dante’s forehead closes this scene, which was elicited by the flaming red of the autumn foliage in Charlottesville, where Wright lives:²²

²¹ Wright’s comment on this passage: “The whole passage is something of a reversal of the terrace of Purgatory where the sin of Pride is being expiated. This was Dante’s own sin, of course, and the mountain being named Madonna led me to make a kind of reference point to that Purgatory passage: hence the weight that pushed our heads down and slows our feet, the music of contrition, etc.” (personal correspondence with the poet).

²² Wright’s reading to this passage in our correspondence: “Again, a reference to the Mount of Purgatory [...] We always hope we’re going up and down where the flames are concerned, of course all this occasioned by the flaming maple leaves, colour of same, in October here in Charlottesville [...]. Colour of flames everywhere in the seasonal change, everything referential to Purgatory in the unfolding of the seasons of the year.”

The days peel back, maples kick in their afterburners,
 We harry our sins
 and expiations around the purgatorial strip
 We are subject to, eyes sewn shut
 Rocks on our backs,
 escaping smoke or rising out of the flame,
 Hoping the angel’s sword
 Unsullied our ashed foreheads,
 Hoping the way up is not the way down,
 Autumn firestorm in the trees,
 autumn under our feet . . .

In the closing lines of the poem, the contemporary pilgrim questions Dante’s advice on how to get out of the “selva oscura.” Other matters count in his own time, and the strict discipline imposed on his self will not raise him to the light: “What is a life of concentration worth in this world? / How far can you go if you concentrate, how far down? // The afternoon shuts its doors/ The heart tightens its valves.”²³ The year, we finally read, is reduced to just a syllable: “I roll it around on my tongue, I warm its hedge . . .”. And, since this last entry dates December 25th, we might infer that Wright’s syllable stands for the word ‘God,’ the beginning of a new cycle and of new spiritual exercises for his metaphysical fiction.

In “Apologia Pro Vita Sua,” another long poem from *Black Zodiac*, Pia de’ Tolomei’s words reoccur, with variations:

“Verona mi fe’, disfecemi Verona”, the song goes.
 I’ve hummed it, I’ve bridged the break

To no avail.
 April. The year begins beyond words,
 Beyond myself and the image of myself, beyond
 Moon’s ice and summer’s thunder. All that.

This poem is Wright’s *ars poetica* in defense of the pilgrim-poet and of his Via Crucis, here called “Spring’s Via Dolorosa” with a clear allusion to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Verona in 1959 and his decision to write poetry marked a second birth for Wright, who was thus ‘made’ professionally; at the same time, he was ‘unmade,’ in a poetical sense, having chosen a writing project that could not be fulfilled. His *finis terrae* is doomed to remain the landscape, which offers no reply to his speculations.²⁴

²³ There is here an echo of Emily Dickinson’s poem 303.

²⁴ Pia’s words resound also in *Homage to Giorgio Morandi*, adapted to the painter’s biography, who was born and died in Bologna: “Bologna made you and Bologna undid you in the scheme of things” (Wright 2019, 546-47).

There are many other moments in Wright's poetry that refer to, or recall, other works of Dante besides the *Commedia* and *Purgatorio*, as we have seen. From *Rime*, for instance, he borrows the famous line of the sestina "*Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra*" to insert it in another long poem, "Lives of the Saints," for describing the 'darkness' of knowledge within one of his usual seasonal cycles:

Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra –
A little light and a great darkness,
Darkness wherein our friends are hid
and our love's gone wrong....

As Dante is "a dictionary" for Wright, his borrowings are often ready-made images useful to compose his lyrical tableaux. In the final section of "Yard Journal," a bumblebee is compared to the monster Geryon in *Inf. 17* as the poet imagines being transported on the insect's shoulders into his own version of the afterlife. In the last line of the poem, he echoes Dante's words to Brunetto Latini in *Inf. 15* – "Bico, my man, are you here?" – as he envisions faces of dead people "starting to swim up" and calls out the name of a friend who has passed away. Likewise, in "Laguna Dantesca," Wright borrows the image of the "piccioleta barca" in *Par. 2* and the episode of Piccarda Donati in *Par. 3* to formulate his wish to return to the natural world (Wright 2019, 110-11).²⁵ Also, throughout his poetry, the poet's persona often casts his own contemporary dismay, or search for a road map towards some kind of truth, within the framework of the *Comedy's* initial lines.²⁶

But it is in the six books written after 2000 that Dante's word appears more than ever a special dictionary available to Wright to fathom meanings that are beyond language. "Thinking about him and his poem has made me medieval-minded aesthetically," he writes in his Dante essay (Wright 2001, 264). This is how he portrays himself in "North American Bear," a 1999 poem dedicated to the constellation of the Big Dipper, thus updating his long series of self-portraits: "There is a final solitude I haven't arrived at yet, [...] / I simmer inside its outline [...] / Like some medieval journeyman enfrescoed with his poem in his hand."²⁷ One of his *adagia* reads: "I would like my poems to be like visionary frescoes on the walls of some-out-of-the-way monastery;" and another: "I write from the point of view of a monk in his cell. Sometimes I look at the stones, sometimes I look out of the windows" (Wright 1995, 81 and 80). As if already exited from life, Wright

²⁵ For a reading of this poem, see Natale 2020, 143-44.

²⁶ See, for example, "Apologia Pro Vita Sua" I: "Every important act is wordless—/ to slip from the right way, / To fail, still accomplishes something" (Wright 2019, 356).

²⁷ Wright may have had in mind Domenico di Michelino's 1465 famous painting in the Florence Cathedral showing Dante with the *Divine Comedy* in his hand, opened at the very beginning, and surrounded by illustrations of the three regions in the Christian afterlife.

What a sidereal jones we have!
 Immensity fills us
 Like moonrise across the night sky, the dark disappears,
 Worlds snuff, nothing acquits us,
 And still we stand outside and look up,
 look up at the heavens and think,

Such sidebars, such extra - celestial drowning pools
 To swallow us.

 Let's lie down together. Let's open our mouths.³¹

"[T]he point where all things meet" is a line from "A Journal of the Year of the Ox": the point where historical time ("ground lights") and the mystery of the divine ("constellations") intersect. "Form," for Wright, is what "orders and controls," "the imposition that sets you free" (Wright 1995, 165), "the secret of the universe" (Wright 1988, 154). Ultimately, it coincides with his poetics and whatever he has written in his *quasi*, and "quasi spiritual," autobiography. *Form* is, therefore, the contemporary secular translation of Dante's *amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*.

We find this line once more, buried in section 9 of *Littlefoot*: "There is no body like the body of light, / but who will attain it? / Not us in our body bags, / Dark over dark, not us, / though love move the stars and set them to one side." In its original appearance, it provides the title to a poem (here reproduced in its integrity) in Wright's most recent book, *Caribou* (2014), entirely dedicated to 'his' *Purgatorio* mountain in Montana:

I love walking into the setting sun
 where nothing is visible but light.
 And that not really visible, just a sweet blinding.
 Then coming back to the world
 Unharmmed, but altered slightly,
 as though it were not the same setup anymore.

And it's not. The camp robbers are here,
 Doughy and black in the dusk-dead trees.
 The great wheel has turned a notch
 and I didn't even hear its soft snick.
 The mallards parade on the small pond, the older ones, not
 the young'uns.

³¹ The final section of the poem may be regarded as a free re-writing of Leopardi's "The Infinite" as he imagines himself dissolving into an immensity and "drowning pools" beyond the visible. To this poet, Wright has dedicated the poem "To Giacomo Leopardi in the Sky," a sort of compilation made of lines taken from Leopardi's major lyrics and reworked into a new text. On Wright's relationship with Leopardi see: Francini 2003, 86-88 and Carrera 1999, 14-24.

Nothing's as far away as love is,
 not even the new stars,
 Though something is moving them
 We hope in our direction, albeit their skin's not on fire.

The child steps out of the dark woods, but it is not shining.
 Something dies off as my friend.
 If I could walk back to the light, I would,
 but it's buried by now, and gone.

The poem opens in a typical Wrightian manner with an immersion in the landscape, which is crepuscular to match the poet's age in 2014. The sunset light blinds him (“a sweet blinding”) as Dante’s vision is blinded (“percossa / da un fulgore”) in *Par.* 33 when the bright circles of the Trinity strike his eyes. When he has come back to reality, Wright’s persona finds himself and a landscape that has been changed by nightfall: “camp robbers” have arrived, trees are darker. The “rota ch’igualmente è mossa” in the second-to-last line of the *Comedy* comes to his mind (“the great wheel has turned a notch”) as an image for the passing of time, also recalled by the old mallards parading on the pond. In the last stanza, *love*—which for Wright, as said above, equals Form, the idea of God and the unknown—remains far away like the mystery of the metaphysical mechanism that governs the universe and human existence. The “dark woods” from which the child steps out in the closing lines paradoxically coincide with a pre-natal light denied to the living, which Wright the pilgrim and the man has tried to probe.

His technique of “translating” into words “a forgotten tongue,” as the title of the last poem of *Caribou* reads, always brings the American poet back to his ‘negative theology.’ As has been written, for Wright “God can only be approached through a *via negativa*” and “God can only be hinted at through negative statements, delineating what He is not” (Hart 2004, 329). “Whose night sky is this / With no one under it? / Whose darkness has closed our eyes?”: these are the lines that close both *Caribou* and *Oblivion Banjo*, the capacious 2019 volume that collects almost all his poetry, which Wright considered his final book. Titles, epigraphs, and internal divisions are here removed, and Wright’s Dante is more than ever “a glittering sediment,” dissolved into his language and structures, appearing, and disappearing in this long drama of the self continuously pushed back into its human limits. The art work on the cover—a work of the photographer Holly Wright, the poet’s wife—features a fingertip covered in dust or sand grains against the backdrop of an inky darkness. It is the appropriate visual and talismanic synthesis of his chant as he feels his final station approaching. It is also an illustration of his “metaphysics of the quotidian,” which makes every visible thing redolent of impenetrable mystery: those who try to fathom it can only gather drops of truth. “What’s up, grand architect of the universe?”³², the poet asks in a later poem, his eyes turned up to the night sky, toning

³² “Terrestrial Music” from the volume *Sestets* (Wright 2019, 686).

down gravity to humor. Here, as is often the case in Wright's poetry, his "nosing around" in the unknown "without a map," unlike Dante, is tinged with facetious, conversational remarks. In contrast to the *Comedy's* grand structure, he calls the fictitious place where his persona performs his journey between life and death, under "the shadow of Dante's great wings" "Dabblesville", albeit "serious Dabblesville," (Wright 2001, 260). In his later poetry, this masterful *dilettante* on metaphysics thus looks backward to his own monumental body of work, "hoping to catch the right train, hoping to find the right city" (Wright 2001, 263).

In the end, Wright's spiritual search and constant reminding us of the limits of human nature contrast strongly with our current forms of self-importance empowered by social media, materialistic values, and cult of the body, thus making his poetry today, decades after it was written, a sort of apostrophe to a prideful and blind age, which echoes Dante's words in *Purg. 10* to the "superbi cristian [...], de la vista de la mente infermi."

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