

RAFFAELLA ANTINUCCI

## “I AM THE MEANS AND NOT THE END”

*Dante and E.M. Forster*

**ABSTRACT:** The well-known epigraph to *Howards End* (1910), “only connect,” provides a fitting motto for the life and work of Edward Morgan Forster. With the epigrammatic intensity of a manifesto, the famous locution also encapsulates the compositional principle of Forster’s art, informed by intertextual references and quotations, ranging from Pope to Whitman, from Plato to Shakespeare, from Shelley to Dante. Less explicit than that of other models, the presence of the *Sommo Poeta* permeates Forster’s fictional as well as critical universe like a *basso continuo*, to use one of the musical metaphors so dear to the English writer: while Dante’s spirit can be caught in the literary interstices in which the narration aspires to become vision – in his early novels and most notably in Forster’s fictional representation of Dante in the supernatural tale “A Celestial Omnibus” (1911) – the Italian poet features as a privileged interlocutor in Forster’s criticism and journals. This essay intends to retrace the forms and development of this artistic dialogue starting from the lecture on Dante that Forster delivered in 1907 for the Working Men’s College, the result of a study of the Florentine poet and of *The Divine Comedy* over which, as the author wrote in 1958, he had “put in quite a lot of work.”

**KEYWORDS:** Dante, E.M. Forster, Victorian and Edwardian Dantism.

## Forster and Dante: an unwritten story

There seems to be a general consensus among literary critics that for both the Victorians and Modernists the reading of Dante was central in the process of interpreting the dramatic changes of contemporary morals, religion and society, as well as of reconciling the rampant secularism with a lost transcendent (McDougal 1985; Milbank 1998, Caselli 2021). In this respect, the names of Carlyle and Ruskin recur among the first and most ardent admirers of the Italian poet, the very originators of a composite discourse that shaped the notion of “a Victorian Dante” (Marroni 2009, 243). Yet, Edward Morgan Forster has been rarely included in the circle of the British authors who turned to the Florentine poet for inspiration, although his personal papers as well as critical and fictional works brim with Dantean references, which, with a few, and not very recent, exceptions (Macaulay 1938; Shusterman 1965), have remained almost completely unnoticed. A possible reason for such a neglect may be ascribed to the very elusive character of Dante’s spiritual and artistic legacy: while evidence suggests that Dante had a special significance to Forster, as Shusterman justly observes, “the extent of

the influence and the exact nature of the influence are hard to determine" (1965, 41). Moreover, in his essay on Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, titled "A Book that Influenced Me" (1944), the author himself openly rejected any "anxiety of influence" when he grouped together *The Divine Comedy* with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as his "three great books [...] three monuments" (1972, 219), only to conclude that "they have not influenced me in the very least, though I came across them all at an impressionable age, and over Dante I put in quite a lot of work" (219). Besides the ambiguous quality of any notion of literary "influence," the unreliability of a writer's statement, and his/her possible unawareness about the inspiring effect of previous readings, it is undeniable that the presence of the Florentine poet represents a constant feature of Forster's long career as a writer and critic from his early twenties, as testified by the autograph documents preserved at the King's College Archive at Cambridge, especially by his notes headed "Dante" (1901-03; GBR/0272/EMF 13/7, vol. 2/7), "Notes on Dante's *Inferno*" (1901-02; GBR/0272/EMF 15/5, vol. 2/7), and "On Dante's Works" (1903-30; GBR/0272/EMF 15/4, vol. 2/6), respectively.

In most of Forster's essays, variously collected and published both during his lifetime and posthumously, the figure of Dante recurs as a standard of greatness, notwithstanding his historical and cultural distance from the Edwardian episteme. As Scherer Herz maintains, Forster "frequently recurred to him [Dante] in his *Commonplace Book* and in his essays. Indeed, among the writers and writings of the past that he often invoked [...] only Shakespeare and the Bible appear more often and more variously" (1988, 136). In an article on Proust (1929), Forster's commentary on the French writer's pessimistic theory of human intercourse – whereby "the fonder we are of people the less we understand them" (1936, 97) – is developed around a contrast with Dante's opposite view that "the fonder we are of people the better we understand them" (97). Dante is evoked virtually any time Forster speculates on the value of human existence and on the ultimate meaning of literature and art in general, as is evident in "What I Believe" (1938)<sup>1</sup>. It is also noteworthy that Forster's inventory of his personal books given in the essay "In My Library" (1941) is organized around themes and literary genres – "Books about India and by Indians, modern poetry, ancient history, American novels, travel books, books on the state of the world, and on the world-state, books on individual liberty, art-albums" – with one single exception closing the list, "Dante and books about him" (1972, 297).

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<sup>1</sup> In a passage that is frequently quoted by critics – "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country" – Forster makes Dante the paragon of authentic loyalty, since he placed "Brutus and Cassius in the lowest circle of Hell because they had chosen to betray their friend Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome" (1972, 66). As Shusterman noted (1965, 42), Forster is partly misreading Dante; however, the quotation is indicative of the exemplary stature credited to Dante in both his artistic and civic life.

If Forster's engagement with Dante was steady, his personal papers and narrative output show that the meditation on the Italian poet's thought and work intensified in the decade 1905-1915, which also coincided with Forster's most creative period. The present essay aims to retrace the forms – both critical and narrative – and development of this artistic dialogue starting from the lecture on Dante that Forster delivered in 1907 for the Working Men's College. It subsequently investigates Dantesque elements in Forster's early novels and in his short fiction, notably in the supernatural story "A Celestial Omnibus" (1908), in order to identify the characteristics of Forster's Dantism and verify to what extent it resembles or deviates from the coeval reception of the Italian poet in Britain.

### Dante, our contemporary: Forster's lecture on Dante (1907)

In 1907 Forster was invited to give a lecture on Dante at The Working Men's College, an institution founded in London in 1854 thanks to the Christian Socialist and Cooperative movements, with the aim of providing artisans with an education in "human studies" as well as with occasions for social gatherings modelled on the university life. The paper was thus written to be delivered orally to an audience of men with limited formal education and was later published in *The Working Men's College Journal* (1908). Both the tone and diction of the essay therefore reflect the context and the addressees of the lecture.

The first aspect that strikes the reader of the twenty-first century is Forster's outstanding talent as an orator. In order to accomplish the difficult task of making Dante accessible to a public of quite uncultured men, the author combines two old rhetorical techniques – storytelling and the so-called "rule of three" – and decides to structure his speech around three questions, each addressing one of Dante's most famous works: *The New Life*, *The Empire (De Monarchia)*, and the *Divine Comedy* respectively. After a very Dantesque incipit – "As we journey through life" (Forster 1971, 146), Forster clarifies that these three queries are universal, regardless of time and place, "inseparable from our humanity" (146). From a linguistic point of view, the pervasive use of the collective and possessive pronouns *we*, *us*, and *our* makes the authorial voice inclusive and never condescending from the very outset, setting the tone for the whole speech. The three "great questions" as thus formulated:

How shall I behave to the people I know – to my relatives, friends, and acquaintances? [...] How shall I behave to the people whom I don't know [...] – to the government, to society as a whole, to humanity as a whole? [...] How shall I behave to the Unknowable [...] God, or Fate, or whatever you like to call the invisible power that lies behind the world? (146)

Before addressing the first issue, Forster supplies a concise account of the major events in Dante's life and some background information on the historical context of fourteenth-century Florence. He particularly stresses the relevance of the year 1300, which denoted a watershed both for Dante and the Western world, marking the beginning of the poet's exile from Florence as well as the crucial moment "when the medieval world was passing into the modern" (148). The opposition between medievalism on the one hand, and modernity on the other, would resurface time and again in Forster's critical articles and fiction in connection with Dante, "a poet with one foot in the Renaissance, the other in Medievalism" (Macaulay 1970, 73).

Being the subject of several Pre-Raphaelite paintings, *The New Life* is introduced with a reference to Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Henry Holiday, familiar names for the majority of Forster's audience. On account of its almost uneventful frame story and exotic theme of courtly love, Dante's first collection of verse is defined as "a queer little book [...] half a diary and half a novel" (Forster 1971, 149) whose reading could easily result in irritation, for very little is revealed about Beatrice apart from the fact that she is loved by Dante. This statement is echoed in one of the preparing notes Forster wrote for the lecture, when he maintains that the discussions in *The New Life* are "sometimes merely scholastic, sometimes eternally true, sometimes fantastic. Mixture of learning and self-analysis makes it difficult to read him in these matters" (GBR/0272/EMF 15/4, vol. 2/6). In this regard, Forster makes a telling comparison with Shakespeare's poetry, claiming that while the meaning of his *Sonnets* could be obscure, their protagonists, unlike Dante's, are fully developed. This brings him back to the first question, i.e., how to behave towards the people we know: if one considers that Beatrice personifies not only Dante's lifelong love, but also, due to the emotions that she inspires in the poet, his link to God and future guide through Paradise in the *Comedy*, the answer that Dante seems to give is that people are "means to something else [...] windows in this sordid world" (Forster 1971, 149) through which one can get a glimpse of heaven. Forster explains that this was a common way of reasoning in Dante's times, which also accounts for the seemingly illogical separation – at least in the eyes of modern readers – between feeling and marriage in the notion of courtly love. In this light, marriage would be regarded as a sacrilege, a debasement of an emotion that is experienced as solely spiritual and sublime.

At this point Forster highlights two implications of Dante's medieval view by means of two further questions. The first one concerns what today would be termed a gender issue: the writer asks whether this notion of love is "a true compliment to the woman herself" (151), thus exposing the passive and submissive role assigned to women in the poetry of *stilnovisti* like Dante – the inevitable counterpart of their idealization – and implicitly, albeit briefly – "I am not going to answer this question, but I want to suggest it to you" (151) – touching upon the most authentic nature of love relationships. The second query is more central in Forster's opinion of Dante the man and regards the way in which he behaved to people he did not much like or only knew slightly. Drawing from

some incidents in the life of the Italian poet, Forster shows that Dante behaved as a "cad" (153) towards people, including women, he did not admire or respect, hence the conclusion that "he soared higher than we can; but he could sink lower" (151). In one of his notes on *The Empire*, Forster's aversion is expressed in even stronger tones: "How ungenial Dante is! [...] impossible to love him, or to feel that he said a kind word to a chap in passing" (GBR/0272/EMF 15/4, vol. 2/6). Considering the value that Forster assigned to personal relationships in his life and literary works, it is not surprising that he detects in Dante's incapacity "to be fair to the commonplace" (1971, 153) the fatal flaw that tainted his otherwise noble character. It is a fault, however, embedded in Dante's medievalism: "We of today – and I count Shakespeare one of us – try, however unsuccessfully, to look *at* people, not through them" (153, emphasis in the text), Forster concludes.

This unfavourable judgement is immediately counterbalanced by the praise of Dante's absolute unselfishness in his attitude towards mankind in general, the very subject of the second of his "great books," *The Empire*. To Forster, Dante's public life is "inspiring" (154) insofar as it testifies to his boundless love for humanity – "he loved humanity as it was never loved again until the eighteenth century" (154). As a result, Dante's claim on immortality is based on both his genius and selfless idealism, which make his position "unique in the history of the world" (154). Forster's premise is that Dante's major drive as a writer was the improvement of humanity, the strive to contribute to the establishment of a happier and peaceful society, an ideal to which, as his biography shows, he was ready to sacrifice his own life. The exposition of Dante's political credo expressed in the Latin treatise is prefaced by a long digression on the medieval concept of the complete separation between body and soul, that is, the split coexistence within any human being of a mortal and corruptible element – body – and an immortal and incorruptible one – soul. Likewise, Dante believed in the autonomy between the temporal and spiritual spheres, of which only the latter fell under the Pope's authority. In other words, he contested the hierocratic conception of the Pontiff's absolute power – both religious and secular – elaborated by the Roman Church, and advocated, instead, the advent of a new Holy Roman Empire, which he saw personified in the figure of Henry of Luxembourg, Henry VII. Like the Pope, the Emperor too was an agent of God, whose mission of guiding humanity in material affairs Dante considered equally divine. As is known, the failure of Henry VII's Italian campaign, as well as his sudden death, sealed Dante's fate marking the beginning of his permanent exile from Florence, the city he had tried to defend from the temporal demands of Pope Boniface VIII.

Without delving deep into one of the most controversial debates of fourteenth-century Italy, Forster's speech calls attention to two aspects of Dante's political utopia that he sees just as vital in his days. When it comes to the main objective of the ideal Empire – that of granting earthly happiness to mankind – Dante insists it can only be

achieved through peace. On this point comparisons and references to Forster's contemporary world become more frequent, while Dante's modernity is thus extolled:

"There is nothing medieval or out of date in this. Dante's words are as true today as when he wrote them. He never speaks of the beauties of war, like Ruskin or Rudyard Kipling. He has fought in battles himself, he knows what they are like. Peace is the only educational atmosphere for humanity." (159)

Forster is distancing Dante, and himself, from both Kipling's jingoism and Ruskin's chivalric notion of a "noble" kind of war on which, as he maintained in "War" (1865), "great art" is founded and flourishes (Ruskin 1905, XVIII, 459-460). Whereas Dante emerges as a modern thinker, Ruskin turns out to be a truly medieval intellectual. Be it the Holy Roman Empire or The Hague Conference mentioned by Forster, Dante foresaw that only an international power can act as a political arbitrator and ensure peace. In its turn, and in marked contrast to Ruskin's creed that "there is no art among a shepherd people, if it remains at peace" (Ruskin 1905, XVIII, 460), a peaceful society is the precondition for "unity," understood as the ideal atmosphere for the fullest development of "the potentialities of the human race *as a whole*" (Forster 1971, 159, emphasis in the text). Forster's tellingly underscores Dante's belief that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; that humanity is greater than the individuals who go to make it" (159), a principle underpinning his own humanist view of life.

As a second corollary to Dante's civic utopia, Forster points out that this notion of unity entails neither monotony nor social equality but aims to a state of harmony in which all differences are reconciled. Forster's emphasis on this argument is revealing of both his preoccupation with such subjects in the 1900s, and, most importantly, of the impact that Dante's ideas, apart from his poetry, had on the development of his own theory of human connectedness. Although deemed "impossible," Dante's political utopia expounded in *The Empire* remains, in Forster's opinion, "as not only one of the most beautiful schemes of this kind, but also as one of the wisest" (162). Forster's approval is apparent, with the only difference that to Dante's medieval mind the earthly concord could solely be the manifestation of heavenly bliss. For his vision of terrestrial harmony, the Florentine poet had found his model in the eurhythmic orbits of the stars, which, as Forster reminds his audience, feature as the alpha and omega of his writings, the very final words of each of the three parts of *The Divine Comedy*.

The discussion of Dante's magnum opus occupies the last, and shortest, section of Forster's lecture. The lesser attention it is awarded, however, must not be read as a value judgement, for the novelist promptly acknowledges its prominence as the Florentine's "greatest book" (163) both because "it contains his best poetry" (163) and because it deals with the question Dante deemed most important, i.e., "our behaviour to the Unknowable" (163). The limited space devoted to *The Divine Comedy* should be rather ascribed to Forster's own interpretation of Dante's most enduring legacy, which lies in his intuition of a harmonious society based on peace and tolerance, the very core and

main objective of the lecture. In other words, Forster is clearly more interested in Dante's answers to the first two questions, both of which concern human behaviour towards fellow human beings, than to his religious response to the mystery of the unknown.

With the aid of a diagram, Forster sets out to illustrate Dante's imaginative journey and the structure of the three spiritual kingdoms of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. As to the first realm, he briefly mentions Virgil, the guide sent from Beatrice to escort Dante through the nine circles of Hell. In his personal notes, Forster criticizes the austere characterization of the Latin poet, who, although portrayed by Dante as "the ideal pedagogue," in his judgement typifies the very opposite of a model mentor. A notable aspect of Forster's succinct overview of the main incidents and unfortunate souls that dwell in *Inferno* is the special emphasis he places on the coeval popularity of Dante's first *cantica*, which prefigures his subsequent "deconstruction" of *Hell's* alleged superiority: "This is *the most famous* part of the poem, and the dramatic episodes of Paolo and Francesca, of Farinata degli Uberti, and of Conte Ugolino, are known to thousands who have never followed Dante through the *less exciting* realms of Purgatory and Heaven" (164-165, my emphasis). Forster is implicitly beginning to (re-)direct his audience's reception of the *Divine Comedy* towards less conventional positions.

Equally short is the part devoted to *Purgatory*, whose atmosphere is encapsulated in one word, "cleanliness" (165). Indeed, Forster's admiration for this section permeates his private memos, in which the beauty of Dante's imagery is extolled in theatrical terms: "They cleanse themselves in the Dawn. The staging magnificent. Cato has disappeared like a tiresome prologue, and the curtain rises upon the trembling seas and dewy meadows" (GBR/0272/EMF 15/4, vol. 2/6). Dante's "dramatic power" (Forster 1971, 166), however, seems to disappear as he travels through Purgatory and Heaven. The progressive focus on sensations, rather than on personalities, in Forster's view accounts for the disappointment that many readers may feel in approaching the realm of bliss. Still, Forster invites his audience to go beyond the prevailing response to *The Divine Comedy* and resist the primacy assigned to *Hell*: "But those who have followed the poet's spiritual yearnings *with due attention and with sympathy* will find here a sublime fulfilment, and perhaps think that the 'Heaven' contains *the most wonderful words ever written by the hand of man*" (166, my emphasis).

Foster's paper ends on the assertion of the "authoritative" quality of Dante's voice and vision in the *Comedy*: his gaze is godlike, for "his standpoint is not in this world. He views us from an immense height, as a man views a plain from a mountain" (167). This is the reason why any lecture on him can be "hard to follow," and his words can appear "a little remote," even "false" – "we feel that by his very elevation he is not qualified to judge" (167). Yet this impression, warns Forster, only derives from our different epistemic perspective, the same that makes Shakespeare not only "a sublime poet, but also a jolly good fellow" (168), and Dante a disagreeable, if not terrorizing company despite his poetry full of love and beauty. Therefore, the natural response of twentieth-century

readers is to suppose that "he knows no more about us than we know about the canals in Mars" (167). Still, Forster continues, "Here we are wrong. Dante knows a great deal about us. He was himself a soldier, politician, a scholar, and a lover, and he never forgets his experiences" (167).

In highlighting not so much Dante's artistry and poetical excellence, which is given for granted and perhaps might not be appealing to the public of the Working Men's College, but above all his passion for humanity and untiring efforts to imagine and set the foundations for a peaceful and tolerant society, indeed what Forster offers is a reading of Dante as our contemporary. In this regard, the 1907 lecture is more revealing of Forster's wide-ranging engagement with Dante's life and figure than of his literary appreciation. This aspect, together with the pre-eminence given to *Heaven*, represents the most distinguishing feature of Forster's response to the Italian poet, the one that primarily distances him from Victorian Dantism. Moreover, all the major points addressed in the speech would resurface in Forster's fiction of the period, which, starting from its titles, appears to be imbued with Dantesque overtones: "The Eternal Moment" (1905), *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), "The Other Kingdom" (1909).

### Dante and the myth of the South in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

As is clear from his lecture on Dante, Forster only partly assimilated the tradition of Dante bequeathed by the Victorians, who were fascinated and almost obsessed with the *Comedy* and its first canticle, whose iconic force proved to be a powerful metaphor for modern times in which the urban vortex, swallowing up both natural and human landscapes, often assumed hellish connotations. The conventional acknowledgment, not only English, of the greater poetic nature of *Hell* is evoked by Forster in the first of his novels, fittingly set in Italy, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. The fictional advocate of this idea is the Tuscan Gino, who, after having politely praised England's greatness, proudly reminds the English Philip Herrington that

'Italy too [...] is a great country. She has produced many famous men – for example Garibaldi and Dante. The latter wrote the 'Inferno', the 'Purgatorio', the 'Paradiso'. *The 'Inferno' is the most beautiful*. And with the complacent tone of one who has received a solid education, he quoted the opening lines [...]

'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura

Che la diritta via era smarrita' (Forster 2007, 24, my emphasis)

With subtle irony, the writer points to a primacy ratified in Italy under the hermeneutic influence of Francesco De Sanctis and Benedetto Croce: the "complacent

tone" of the young uneducated Italian has a comical effect on the reader, for only a few pages earlier the refined Philip had praised the cathartic and ennobling power of Italy<sup>2</sup> hailing the journey undertaken by his sister-in-law Lilia as the beginning of a "New Life"<sup>3</sup>. However, Forster's target does not seem to be so much the canonical study of Dante but rather his literary reception influenced by the authoritative judgement of the so-called Victorian "prophets," most notably Carlyle and Ruskin<sup>4</sup>.

In staging the encounter and clash between two antithetical cultures – the English and the Italian – between two different but complementary ways of understanding human life, and in search of a beneficial synthesis, Forster uses Dante to unearth the stereotypes underlying the English rampant *Italomania*, especially the "virtual" and unreal nature of the idealised and picturesque image attributed to Italy since the early times of the Grand Tour. Without renouncing to the mysterious and magical aura that surrounds Italian places, Forster sets the unfortunate events narrated in the novel in an imaginary town, Monteriano – an ancient village in the neighbourhood of Siena, probably based on the towns of Monticiano or Montepulciano – a place-name that also serves as the first, provisional title of the book. Its subsequent substitution with the famous line from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711) – "fools rush in where angels fear to tread" (l. 1625), which plays on the pun resulting from the assonance between the lexemes "Angels" and "Angles" – does not affect the centrality of Monteriano, heightened right from the outset by means of a *myse en abyme* that directly involves the Italian literary culture and its greatest representative. Leafing through the Baedeker on Central Italy, the bible of any English tourist, under the heading "Monteriano" the protagonists, and readers with them, learn of its ancient origins:

History: Monteriano, the Mons Rianus of Antiquity, whose Ghibelline tendencies are noted by Dante (Purg. XX), definitely emancipated itself from Poggibonsi in 1261. Hence the distich, "Poggibonzi, faui in là, che Monteriano si fa città!" till recently enscribed over the Siena gate. (Forster 2007, 12)

The reference to Dante, deliberately contrived by Forster, is used to denounce the cultural blindness of a travel guide that, instead of practical and detailed information,

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<sup>2</sup> "Italy really purifies and ennobles all who visit her. She is the school as well as the playground of the world. It is really to Lilia's credit that she wants to go there" (Forster 2007, 6).

<sup>3</sup> Dante's early work enjoyed great popularity in England during the nineteenth century, especially after Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation, "Dante's New Life", included in *The Early Italian Poets* (1861). On this subject, see Camilletti forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> As is well known, in the section "Hero as Poet" of his study *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) Carlyle had given the *Sommo Poeta* the primacy of world literature and deemed the *Comedy* "the sincerest of all Poems" (1968, 120, emphasis in the text), while in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) Ruskin famously defined Dante as "the central man of all the world, as representing in perfect balance the imaginative, moral, and intellectual faculties, all at their highest" (XI, 187). On this topic see, among others, Bidney 1976, Brand 1984-85, Marroni 1996, and Wallace 2003.

offers vague literary citations, thus reducing Dante's poetry to a mere hallmark for evocative excursions<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the allusion to the twentieth canto of *Purgatory* is meaningful if one considers the role that the sins committed by Ugo Capeto in the fifth cornice – avarice and the "aged she-wolf," greed – play in the plot of the novel. Even the earthquake that shakes the mountain of Purgatory, accompanied by the chorus of many souls intoning the *Gloria*, on whose obscure message Dante's twentieth canto closes, seems to foreshadow, in a semi-serious rewriting, the epiphany experienced by Philip and Caroline at the foot of an entirely etymological mountain, the Forsterian "Mons Rianus," and similarly favoured by music, namely Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. In both cases a release takes place: from temporal punishment for the souls of Purgatory, from the emotional prison of the "northern" upbringing for the English protagonists of the novel.

Composed in a still hesitant style, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* anticipates some of the *motifs* of Forster's writing, typically shaped around definite spatial coordinates that in this novel place South against North, Italy against England, and, in Dantean terms, Heaven against Hell. It is the tower of Monteriano that stands out as the objective correlative of the verticality inherent to the fictional worlds created by Forster:

"It reaches *up to heaven*," said Philip, "and *down to the other place*". The summit of the tower was radiant in the sun, while its base was in shadow and pasted over with advertisements. "Is it to be a symbol of the town?" (Forster 2007, 83, my emphasis)

Forster's microcosms are certainly imbued with symbols; still, as Virginia Woolf noted in an essay on her fellow Bloomsburian (1942), the metaphorical level does not undermine their realism: through "eternal moments" reality is transfigured but not erased. It is in this very technique, which Erich Auerbach termed "figural," that lies one of the most significant points of convergence with the *Comedy*, perhaps the most lasting artistic legacy of the *Sommo Poeta*.

It should come as no surprise, then, the prominence Forster attaches to places, which can also be inferred from a quick glance at the titles of his production: foreshadowing Cesare Pavese and his moon, in the introduction to *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1946) he maintained "in them also I believe" (Forster 1972, XIII). Whether it is Monteriano, the spires and gardens of Cambridge, the view of Florence from the bedroom of the Bertolini guesthouse, Howards End or the Indian mountains, places are turned into interior landscapes and shrouded in a mystical halo. What is brought back to life is the *genius loci* of classicism, which Forster's updating condenses into the poetics of the "sense of place"

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<sup>5</sup> In *A Room with a View* one of the English characters, Miss Levin, admiring the Ponte alle Grazie with Lucy, remarks: "particularly interesting, mentioned by Dante" (Forster 2000a, 16). As pointed out by E.K. Helsinger, Ruskin himself used the *Commedia* as a guide on his Italian visits, together with the indispensable Murray (1982, 143).

expounded by Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End*<sup>6</sup>. It follows that for the English writer the figure of Dante does not only evoke his homeland, but also coincides with it: in many respects Dante *is Italy*<sup>7</sup>, and in the myth of the South Forster seems to find the possibility of an alternative existence, of a "middle way" that combines passion with rationality, primitive instincts with ascetical tension, and, ultimately, nature with culture.

In this asymptotic effort, Forster does not fully recoil from Ruskinian Dantism, which adapted the literary, civil and political sublimity of the Florentine poet to the axiological needs of a country like England in rapid transformation, in search for new ethical and artistic anchorages. Nevertheless, unlike his predecessors, it is chiefly from the third *cantica* of the *Comedy* that Forster draws images and stylistic elements that portend a spiritual renewal. Dante's heavenly imagery is accordingly employed by Forster to create his own *commedia*. If in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* even a distracted reader would not miss the frequent use of the lexeme *heaven* and a whole "angelic" and "heavenly" isotopy<sup>8</sup> alluded to right from the very title, it is with *A Room with a View* that the references to the last realm take on a more structural pre-eminence.

### "The whole of everything at once": heavenly motifs in *A Room with a View*

Setting up another Italian-English comparison, Forster's third published novel follows the turning points in the spiritual growth of the young Lucy Honeychurch, torn between her commitment to the refined Cecil Vyse and the attraction to the extravagant George Emerson. Her inner journey takes the form of a progress that literally proceeds from darkness to light, from the abyss of hell – "They hurried home through a world of black and grey" (Forster 2000a, 175) – to the fullness of heavenly vision. The two realms are explicitly conjured up by Mr Emerson, George's father, in an early exchange with Lucy, to describe the interior restlessness of his son: "A baby is worth a dozen saints. And my baby's worth the whole of Paradise, and as far as I can see he lives in Hell" (24). In

<sup>6</sup> "She recaptured the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and, starting from *Howards End*, she attempted to realize England" (Forster 2000b, 174). In *A Passage to India* Adela observes that "in space things touch, in time things part" (Forster 1985, 199).

<sup>7</sup> In this aspect, as well as in the emphasis placed on Dante's "sincerity" both as a man and a poet, the influence of Carlyle is apparent: "Yet the noble Italy is actually one: Italy produced its Dante; Italy can speak! [...] The Nation that has a Dante is bound together as no dumb Russia can be" (Carlyle 1968, 150).

<sup>8</sup> "[...] after all, love-marriages are made in heaven' 'Yes, Miss Abbott, I know. But I am anxious to hear heaven's choice. You arouse my curiosity. Is my sister-in-law to marry an angel?'" (Forster 2007, 20); "This admirable change in Philip proceeds from nothing admirable, and may therefore provoke the gibes of the cynical. But angels and other practical people will accept it reverently, and write it down as good" (82).

contrast, Lucy's joy at discovering that Mr Emerson had not been told of "the Florence escapade" is conveyed in paradisiac terms: "Lucy's spirits should not have leapt up as if she had sighted the ramparts of heaven" (143).

Similarly to Dante's *Heaven*, in which light is *emblemata* of truth, a visual representation of a beatitude that has its foundation in the act of beholding God, the concept of "vision" constitutes one of the *leitmotifs* of Forster's story: from the view of Florence, referred to in the title, to the English landscape of the family mansion of Windy Corner, "a beacon in the roaring tides of darkness" (177), the protagonist advances on her gnoseological path that amounts to an "ascent," a progressive unveiling of the inner light – "the light within" as Forster puts it in *Howards End* (2000b, 24) – through the slow attainment of a fully Dantesque aerial gaze, the same Forster had described at the end of his Dante lecture. As noted by Mr Beebe, Lucy "had found wings, and meant to use them" (Forster 200b, 87). Not surprisingly, the figure of Dante emerges in the dialogue on the beauty of the English countryside that Lucy entertains in the garden of Windy Corner with Cecil and his rival George. The latter shares an important teaching from his father:

"My father [...] says that there is only one perfect view – the view of the sky straight over our heads, and that all these views on earth are but bungled copies of it". "I expect your father has been reading Dante," said Cecil. (147)

Besides emphasizing the Platonic pattern of Dante's *Comedy*, which recent scholarship has brought to light<sup>9</sup>, the passage also reinforces the role played by Mr Emerson, behind whose words the authorial voice is barely hidden.<sup>10</sup> Just like a novel Virgil, the old journalist guides Lucy through the mists of her own contrasting and impenetrable emotional drives, teaching the young woman that her love for George can be repressed but not eradicated, since "love is eternal" (189). Above all, he reminds the heroine of the true value of an authentic life:

"Your soul, dear Lucy! I hate the word now, because of all the cant with which superstition has wrapped it round. But we have souls. I cannot say how they came nor whither they go, but we have them, and I see you ruining yours. I cannot bear it. It is again the darkness creeping in; it is hell." (189)

[...] "Now it is all dark. Now Beauty and Passion seem never to have existed. I know. But remember the mountains over Florence and the view." (190-1)

<sup>9</sup> See Marguerite Mills Chiarenza, Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, Anna Longoni e John Woodhouse, among others.

<sup>10</sup> The very name of the character alludes to the American transcendental philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, the first translator of *The New Life* into English and one of the pioneers of American Danteism.

In line with the etymology of her name, Lucy's newly attained awareness is pictured as enlightenment, a synchronic perception of the existent occurring in an "eternal moment" – "It was as if he had made her see *the whole of everything at once*" (191, my emphasis) – or, in Dante's terms, a truly "paradisiac" view: "Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna, / legato con amore in un volume, / ciò che per l'universo si squaderna: / sustanze ed accidenti e lor costume / quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo / che ciò ch'io dico è un semplice lume" (*Par.*, XXXIII, ll. 85-90).<sup>11</sup>

This vision, which represents the greatest form of spiritual broadening, can only be revealed to human eyes via the rediscovery of Nature and the acceptance of corporeity, elements that Forster sees as being inherent to the myth of the South. Against the idealising "medievalism" of Carlyle and Ruskin<sup>12</sup>, who saw in the Middle Ages the highest expression of a harmonious relationship between God, man and the social body, Forster appears rather to endorse Walter Pater's hope for a New Renaissance, invoked, in Dantesque guise, in his insistent appeal to a "New Life". If this modern *renovatio mundi* draws vital energy from the culture of the South, it is not, however, confined to it. Hence the "medieval" characterisation of a man like Cecil Vyse, learned and cultivated, whose passion for Italy, which he tries to instil in Lucy by teaching her the Italian language, turns out to be a simulacrum of his interior death. Skilled in finding "connections" between works of art and aesthetic theories, Cecil proves unable to establish authentic relationships with his fellow human beings, and Lucy tellingly associates her mental image of the young man with an enclosed place, picturing him in a drawing room "with no view" (99). In particular, his greatest flaw lies in a medieval-like asceticism founded on the denial of the body, which, as Forster had elucidated in his lecture at the Working Men's College, Dante only endorsed to a certain extent. Although the Italian poet represents the central figure of the Middle Ages, his political view expounded in *The Empire* was based on the recognition of the equally-important functions of both temporal and spiritual dimensions that, as Forster had emphasized in his speech, derived from the separation of body and soul. Once again Mr Emerson, Forster's *alter ego*, clarifies the terms of the question for the reader's benefit: "I only wish poets would say this, too: love is of the body; *not the body, but of the body*" (189, my emphasis). Since love originates from the body, its sensible guise cannot be laid aside. Beatrice's words are echoed in this notion, for Forster seems to paraphrase a famous tercet from the fourth canto of *Heaven*, in which the woman, luminous and smiling with celestial joy, thus summarises the

<sup>11</sup> "I saw how it contains within its depths / all things bound in a single book by love / of which creation is the scattered leaves: / how substance, accident, and their relation / were fused in such a way that what I now / describe is but a glimmer of that Light" (Dante 1986, 392-393).

<sup>12</sup> The extent of Ruskin's authority is revealed with subtle irony in the scene at Santa Croce, when Lucy wanders in the church with neither Baedeker nor human guidance, in search of the treasures made famous by the Victorian prophet in his study "Mornings in Florence": "There was no one even to tell her which, of all the sepulchral slabs that paved the nave and transepts, was *the one that was really beautiful, the one that had been most praised by Mr. Ruskin*" (19, my emphasis).

Aristotelian theory that celebrated the ennoblement of the senses: "Così parlar conveni a vostro ingegno, / però che solo da sensato apprende / ciò che fa poscia l'intelletto degno" (*Par.*, IV, ll. 40-42).<sup>13</sup> The target of Forster's criticism, therefore, is not so much the Middle Ages, but the Victorian aestheticising "medievalism": Lucy's break with Cecil and her new relationship with George Emerson eloquently mark "The End of the Middle Ages," as reads the title of the last chapter of the novel.

### Fictionalizing Dante: "A Celestial Omnibus"

Another child of the Middle Ages is portrayed in Mr Bons, a character in the short story "A Celestial Omnibus," published in 1911 but written in 1907, the same year Forster was preparing the Dante lecture and completing *A Room with a View*. The tale stands out in the English literature inspired by Dante as the Florentine poet is given fictional status and turned into the "celestial driver" who takes the young protagonist of the story on his second omnibus journey towards a celestial realm. As well as being a witty response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's imagining of a train journey to the Celestial City in "The Celestial Railroad" (1843), Forster's narrative is a modern rewriting of John Bunyan's dream parable and, at the same time, a significant homage to Dante's poetry. Intrigued by the sign "To Heaven"<sup>14</sup> placed on the edge of an alleyway, the anonymous boy in the story is driven by a strange omnibus to a secular Elysium populated by famous artists and their immortal creatures. From Achilles to the Rhine maidens, from Tom Jones to the Dickensian Mrs Gamp, Forster's chariot retraces the routes of the Western literary canon, thus epitomising a befitting vehicle for the *Sommo Poeta*. While its structure is magnificent and elegant, on the omnibus's walls the city place-names have been substituted with Dante's powerful, albeit disquieting (and slightly altered) verses, *Lasciate ogni baldanza voi che entrate* (Forster 2001, 41).

In fact, as the story unfolds it turns out that the euphoric space of the celestial city, in the vein of Hawthorne's tale, is precluded to those who have not kept their spirit pure, for its delights are only disclosed to the innocent eyes, and ears, of the boy. Once again,

<sup>13</sup> "I speak as one must speak to minds like yours / which apprehend only from sense perception / what later it makes fit for intellection" (Dante 1986, 44).

<sup>14</sup> In Forster's first novel, *The Longest Journey* (1907), the young protagonist Rickie imagines to put a similar sign, "This way to Heaven", at the entrance of a Cambridge garden, which in the narration takes on the sacred function of a *hortus conclusus*: "A little this side of Madingley, to the left of the road, there is a secluded dell, paved with grass and planted with fir-trees. [...] Rickie had discovered it in his second term, [...] the dell became for him a kind of a church – a church where indeed you could do anything you liked, but where anything you did would be transfigured. Like the ancient Greeks, he could even laugh at his holy place and leave it no less holy. [...] If the dell was to bear any inscription, he would have liked it to be 'This way to Heaven', painted on a signpost by the high-road, and he did not realize till later years that the number of visitors would not thereby have sensibly increased" (Forster 1973, 23-4).

before becoming visible, the revelation is first "heard," accompanied by the fading-out notes of Wagner's *The Rhinegold*. In contrast, devoted to a form of futile erudition and false spiritualism, alluded to in the inverted onomastics that links "Bons" and "snob" and in his list of social roles – "churchwarden," "candidate for the County City Council" (30), and "President of the Literary Society" (41) – , Mr Septimus Bons is both deaf to Wagner's music and blind to the heavenly visions, then his otherworldly trip develops into a deadly and infernal journey. As reported in the fictional newspapers mentioned in Forster's coda to the short story – *Kingston Gazette*, *Surbiton Times*, and *Raynes Park Observer* – the body of Mr Bons is found "in a shockingly mutilated condition in the vicinity of the Bermondsey gas-works" (46). Only able to see London, the very epitome of modern man's materialism in Forster's fiction, the man becomes desperate and before falling from the omnibus appeals to the driver to be taken back to "his" world. Dante's response – his only words in the short story – brings the reader to the very heart of Forster's reflection, expressed along the same lines used in the lecture at the Working Men's College:

*"I am the means and not the end. I am the food and not the life. Stand by yourself as that boy has stood. I cannot save you. For poetry is a spirit; and they that would worship it must worship in spirit and in truth."* (45, my emphasis)

In his fictional rendition, Forster is shifting the terms of Dante's view, for, unlike Dante, in his short story it is not people, but literature and artistic sensibility that act as "windows" or "means to something else" (Forster 1971, 149). In other words, Dante's heaven gravitating around God is here replaced with a literary empyrean, similarly ordered and immortal although "man-centred". By making human creativity its radiating focal point, Forster reaffirms what he had argued in one of his first essays composed in the same period, "Pessimism in Literature" (1907), namely, "In life we seek what is gracious and noble, even if it's transitory; in books we seek what is permanent" (Forster 1971, 145). In this light, literature can represent a way – a "means" – to separate fleeting illusions from lasting truth, hence Forster, like a modern Dante, believes in the "guiding" role played by writers, i.e., in the social impact that their personal literary journeys can have on humanity at large.

At the same time, despite art represents a dream of order to oppose a muddled and complex reality, it is, as Dante warns in "The Celestial Omnibus," only a means and not life; it is not enough to unite "prose" with "passion," to build the "rainbow bridge" (Forster 2000b, 159; Forster 2001, 44) which is often conjured up as the very emblem of Forster's personal and literary vocation. Equally, and even more important is the relational universe, the ceaseless ravelling and unravelling of relations between things and people: as Forster put it in "What I Believe," "I believe in personal relationships. Starting from them, I get a little order into the contemporary chaos" (1972, 66). From the title of an early novella, "Co-ordination" (1912), up to the final pages of *A Passage to*

*India* (1924), the concept of "co-ordination" shapes Forster's fiction and brings it very closely to Dante's poetry: "This universe is supposed to rest on co-ordination, all creatures co-ordinating according to their powers" (Forster 2001, 152). Forster's words indeed articulate a paraphrase of two celebrated tercets from the first canto of *Heaven*: "Le cose tutte quante / hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma / che l'universo a Dio fa somigliante" (*Par.*, I, vv. 103-5),<sup>15</sup> "onde si muovon a diversi porti / per lo gran mar de l'essere, e ciascuna / con istinto a lei dato che la porti" (*Par.*, I, vv. 112-4).<sup>16</sup> Despite their differing social and political ideologies, and distant if not irreconcilable worldviews, Dante and Forster seem to share a common attitude towards the relational consequence of both art and human life that Rose Macaulay defines as "mystical," since "both believe in the eternal meanings of human choices, the eternal value of men's relationships with their fellows" (Macaulay 1938, 74).

### Only connect

In one of his early notes on *The Empire*, Forster had termed Dante "ungenial," an author he could not "like," and certainly to "a child of unbelief," as Forster described himself in an essay on Proust (Forster 1938, 98), Dante's ultimate optimism and inescapable medievalism must have appeared outdated and anachronistic. Yet, the influence the Italian poet exerted on his view of literature and human life cannot be underestimated. The terms of Forster's appreciation of Dante both as a poet and a public persona, formerly expressed in the lecture at the Working Men's College, are further clarified in a later essay, "Does Culture Matter?" (1940), in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

Dante wrote over the gates of Hell that they were made by the power, wisdom and love of God:

*Facemi la divina Potestate  
La somma Sapienza e il divino Amor*

and neither the Middle West nor the Soviets nor ourselves can be expected to agree with that. But there is no reason why we should not understand it, and *stretch our minds against his*, although they have a different shape. The past is often *uncongenial* as far as its statements are concerned, *but the trained imagination can surmount them and reach the essential*. Dante seems to me a test case. (Forster 1972, 103, my emphasis)

<sup>15</sup> "Among all things, however disparate, / there reigns an order, and this gives the form / that makes the universe resemble God" (Dante 1986, 4).

<sup>16</sup> "Therefore, they move, all to a different port, / across the vast ocean of being, and each / endowed with its own instinct as its guide" (Dante 1986, 4).

If the past, including its literary expressions, can often appear as an “uncongenial” country, it should be nevertheless understood as a means “to reach the essential,” and not the end. Once again Dante is evoked as “a test case,” a model to look up to by going beyond any epistemic *a priori*: his figure stands out as the very embodiment of the highest notion of culture and of what is “essential” and universally permanent in human life. Only through “the trained imagination,” which writers contribute to shape, can man separate the transient from the everlasting values of humanity, and link the present to the past. Ultimately, it is *Howards End*’s motto – “Only connect” – that provides Forster’s utmost Dantesque rewriting.

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