



# Writing Back to Dante

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2021 marked the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri, and writing *The Still and Fleeting Fire*, our response to his *Purgatorio* in the year of the pandemic, seemed almost pre-ordained. Dante's slow slog up the tiers in Purgatory, with the occasional angelic visitation and the promise of release at the end, dovetailed neatly with the experience of lockdown and the daily news of trauma and suffering, the global reach of the experience, and the spikes of hope – a vaccine, another vaccine, the gradual decline of serious cases. Being limited to the neighbourhoods of our own homes, and that only once a day, felt like a confinement, a slow circling, but also opened up the space for reflection and observation. The most basic elements of life acquired a new focus and, our mode of attention being thus shifted, we discovered for ourselves the truth of Dante's observation that 'vassene'l tempo e l'uom non se n'avvede (the time passes away and we perceive it not)' (Dante 1982: IV.9).

'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura (Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood),' begins Dante at the opening line of the *Inferno* (Dante 1980:1.1). It might seem perverse to quote the *Inferno* in an article about a poetical response to the *Purgatorio*, but life did become a walk, literally, as we circumambulated our immediate surroundings daily. And the pandemic did have hints of Hell about it, too – distortions, pain, the slippery unreliability of communications, fake news, and a disintegrating planetary landscape in the background. Dante's elision of 'I' and 'we' in the lines has a resonance for the 'I' and the 'we' of the pandemic experience, in which each of us had a personal role in a universal project. Charles Singleton, in his Commentary on the *Purgatorio*, judges that 'Liberty, freedom, is thus declared to be the goal of the purgatorial journey, liberation from the slavery of sin, both original and actual' (Dante

1982: Note to I.71). For 'sin' substitute 'disease', and this is vividly what we experienced in 2020-21, forcibly reminded of the potentiality of our bodies for disease, in thrall to the dictates of an invisible but hopefully surmountable virus.

On 25 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued a public statement:

At a time of uncertainty about the way a virus originates and behaves, it is even more critical that countries, organizations and the international community act as one. We need to move as one region, as one world in scaling up our ability to prepare and respond together. [...] However, we do not know at this point how the outbreak will evolve. While we cannot predict the virus' behavior, we can decide how good we are in stopping it. Today we are offered a window of opportunity; today we must grab it to make the region and the world safer. This is what all our people expect (Kluge 2020).

That sense of 'uncertainty', of an unpredictably mutating virus, of an unexplained unified project of prevention, continued throughout 2020 and beyond. Like many other writers we were already, before starting on Dante, responding to this sense of world crisis, of community effort, of global mourning, and of destabilised plans and outcomes. We were ordinary mortals in the grip of a mysterious higher power in the form of WHO and government directives, which sometimes had all the gnomic mystery of an oracle. Dante's searching exploration of the finer nuances of the human spirit is often multiply interpretable and very immediate, as his Souls tussle with their inclinations and submit to gruelling experiences in their common goal of passing through Purgatory. The *Purgatorio* is full of questions, asked by Dante the pilgrim and by other characters. In Canto 16, for example, Dante, 'bursting from a doubt within', asks one Marco of Lombardy to 'tell' him if he is 'on the right way', to 'point out [...] the cause' of earthly iniquity (Dante 1982: XVI.54,44, 61). Dante is at this point in a murky cloud so dense he cannot see and needs to be physically led by Virgil, his guide. The navigation of doubts and insufficient knowledge that many experienced during the pandemic melded promisingly with the doubts of the purgatorial trek, as charts and ministerial communications demanded painstaking interpretation.

Although not its primarily envisaged purpose, our project acquired in its undertaking the dimension of writing for wellbeing, and we discovered the truth of the assertion that 'the process of articulating painful truths can be restorative, healing, even life-saving' (Bolton, Field and Thompson 2006: 9). The project was in part a making sense of – or at least making manageable – the collective bewilderment and trauma of the pandemic. And there was a certain comfort in shaping the doubts and sense of doom into at least an artistic whole, a neat sequence of twenty-one prose poetry blocks, however much the finished product remains what Eco calls an 'open work'

(Eco 1989).

The element of crisis had its own urgency and collective reach, from which emanated a sense of global community and collective effort, echoing Dante's focus on flocks and choruses in the *Purgatorio*. Rebecca Solnit has commented on this aspect of crisis, discovering that participants in a crisis – in this case the attacks of 9/11 – exhibited a 'newfound sense of urgency, purpose, solidarity and danger they had encountered [...] and] relished who they briefly became' (Solnit 2009: 5). In today's world, she maintains, this is a rare experience: 'Mobile and individualistic societies shed some of these [traditional] old ties and vacillate about taking on others [...] Thus does everyday life become a social disaster. Sometimes disaster intensifies this; sometimes it provides a remarkable reprieve from it,' so that, Solnit writes, '[w]hen I ask people about the disasters they have lived through, I find on many faces that retrospective basking ... and a strange pleasure overall.' (Solnit 2009: 3, 6).

This sense of working together to achieve something in response to a crisis was mirrored in the collaborative approach we took to our work. This, in turn, in some ways represented a microcosm of the collective but also individual experience of the global population in the pandemic. Indeed, it is not stretching the point to note that these processes could be seen in terms of the concentric circles which provide one of the key structural motifs of *The Divine Comedy*. These elements of collaboration and interconnectedness were also at the heart of our intertextual, interpretative process of responding to Dante; of our reading – which was also a writing – of *The Divine Comedy*. Individually and in conversations over Zoom and Teams, we engaged with the same materials and explored possible formulations, and then wrote in the same framework of prose poems, before reading each other's work and noting the ways in which new resonances arose from the juxtaposition of our two voices, in ways that achieved a unified whole, just as our responses enriched and renewed Dante for us.

Intertextuality, as Graham Allen argues, 'foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life' (Allen 2000: 5), and the act of writing intertextually in response to Dante, we found, led us to dwell on the contingencies of life in 2020 and 2021. Michael Worton and Judith Still go further, suggesting that intertextuality 'explains that we make sense of our lived experience and hence construct our "lives" in relation to texts, whether these are Proust or television soap operas' (Worton and Still 1991: 19). *The Divine Comedy* is itself a highly suggestive work, full of obscure symbols and the apprehension of mysteries, with those 'unwritten part(s) of the text' – the 'missing links' – that Wolfgang Iser maintains form such a crucial element in reader response to what he calls a 'literary' text (Iser 1972: 287, 289); our amalgamated responses in *The Still and Fleeting Fire* spoke to those lacunae but in the act of collaborative composition we found that we generated a new 'unwritten' element of our own.

This intertextual element of shifting, writerly, unstable construction has something to do with how for us

reading Dante was also writing Dante. Wolfgang Iser posits a 'gestalt' (Iser 1972: 288-89, 299) that includes the reader's response at different times as part of the text no less than the words on the page:

The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. [...] With all literary texts, then, we may say that the reading process is selective, and the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations. This is borne out by the fact that a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first. The reasons for this may lie in the reader's own change of circumstances, still, a text must be such as to allow this variation. On a second reading familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at time enriched.' (p.281, 285).

Not to be too Bakhtinian about it, the gestalt of Dante's *Purgatorio* is different now from what it was even in 2019, pre-pandemic, and certainly in Dante's own time. We would have been unlikely to make connections with viruses or a concerted international health effort in 2019. Likewise, most of us will need footnotes to understand the obscure references that would have been obvious to a reader of Dante's time (the gestalt of the *Purgatorio* in medieval Florence): few of us are experts on falconry, for example, or papal bulls, contemporary Florentine princes and politicians, quotations from hymns, biblical stories, theological modulations, the Spheres model of the universe, Classical myth, or medieval theories about the ventricles of the heart. But if it is a sufficiently open text, with the sort of lacunae Iser was so interested in, those gaps can absorb and reflect new meanings, generate a fresh gestalt. As Worton and Still argue, 'the literary work is viewed not as a container of meaning but as a space in which a potentially vast number of relations coalesce' (Worton and Still 1991: 12), or in other words, it displays 'the fundamental interconnectedness of all things,' as Douglas Adams might have put it (Adams 1987: 121).

Yet the interlocking uncertainties we chased across the pages of our collaborative work were rooted in precise, concrete detail. Dante is very concrete. For all the finely tuned reflections on philosophy and psychology, he is fundamentally allegorical in his thinking, and part of the reason for the endurance of his text is its grounding in physical detail (things we can apprehend with any of the five senses – ironically so for a work steeped in an examination of the soul and enveloped by a supranatural world). Even the locations are very precise in *The Divine Comedy* – the entry to Hell is in a dark wood, populated by fierce animals, within a dark ravine, and Hell itself is situated within the Earth. As the work progresses, Dante is guided through the Earth, exits in the Southern Hemisphere, climbs the tiered mountain of Purgatory,

at the top of which he finds the Garden of Eden, and then travels through the Spheres of the planets, finally reaching Heaven, which is the outermost Sphere.

Because of this concreteness that is so characteristic of the poem, we could explore and appropriate the work's striking images – eyes sewn shut, letters stamped on foreheads, weighty sacks, gryphons, snakes, the River Styx, angels, guides, birds pecking up grain, lions, wolves, dogs, sheep, the hem of a garment, the cry of a voice. It was easy to see the significances for our own lockdown time – 'tiers' were not the only eloquent image that connected to our world: a world of genetic engineering, Zoom screens, shopping queues, theatres, taxis, checkpoints, double decker buses, toilet rolls, suitcases, French coffee, funhouse mirrors, umbrellas, banknotes, phones, GPS, sweet wrappers, cafes, magazine ads, specimen jars, viruses, relativity and physics, post-truth social media, the lockdown pursuits of sewing and baking, and foraging on the daily walk. Hospital wards doubled easily as visions of Hell, in which masked reporters confronted the pilgrim viewer with exhausted, underequipped healthcare professionals and their charges struggling for breath. The angry and the avaricious flooded the media, with Twitter persecutions chiming with the loss of reputation and the tortures of Hell that interest Dante. Shapeshifting recast itself as gaming, while we hid our true faces behind masks. We could interpolate folklore in a way not drawn directly from Dante but in tune with his methods of allusion: he alludes to Greek myth, but our particular gestalt of the *Purgatorio* also includes folk tales and fairy stories. Dante's movement between the 'I' and the 'we' of his journey – his personal spiritual journey is simultaneously that of all humankind – assumed a new significance in the days when each of us had individual experiences and responsibilities in managing the 'we' of the global response and experience. The purgatorial sense of being trapped and delimited, where small details become the focus, where the climb is slow and heavy, resonated with the pandemic's own peculiar brand of containment and effort.

The form of the prose poem too – particularly its tendency to draw attention to the fragmentary while simultaneously gesturing towards a notional, perhaps unknowable, "whole" – was peculiarly suited to responding to this new reading of the *Purgatorio* in 2020 and 2021. As Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington note, 'The prose poem's language needs to employ metaphorical, metonymic, analogical, and ambiguous figures in order to open conduits between its utterance and what it does not, or cannot, explicitly say' (Atherton and Hetherington 2022). We found the prose poem to be an ideal mode for exploring trains of thought, interwoven images, a suggestion of narrative that could deny resolution. As Dante's Virgil informs the poet towards the end of the *Purgatorio*, 'e se' venuto in parte / dov'io per me più oltre non discerno (you [...] are come to a part where I of myself discern no farther onward)' (Dante 1982: XXVII.127-9): the expert guide – whether literary or, indeed, medical or political – must eventually reach a point at which they must acknowledge they can lead no further. In *The Still and Fleeting Fire*, we sought

to engage imaginatively with the unlimited mutability of the core text, the *Purgatorio*, as an example of any 'literary' text in Iser's definition of the term, i.e. a text that contains lacunae (Iser 1972: 289), along with each other's writing and the seemingly endlessly recursive cultural texts relating to the pandemic. In so doing, our own pilgrimage led us a long way from Catholic Florence of the early fourteenth century – 'where once was prayer, now there's intertextuality' (Alyal and Hardwick 2021: 22) – yet in the play of fragment and whole, narrative and unknowing, we hope we have contributed to what Nick Havely calls Dante's 'vigorous afterlife' (Munden and O'Mahony 2021: 2), inviting the poet to join us in a

conversation which hints towards a hoped-for resolution of which no one can as yet be certain. As Prof Chris Whitty remarked on BBC Breakfast (11 January 2021), 'At a certain point, hopefully, we'll get back to a life that is basically exactly the same as it was before. However, we're quite a long way away from that at the moment.' To which Dante nods his laurel-crowned head: 'qui può esser tormento, ma non morte (here may be torment, but not death' (*Purgatorio* XXVII. 21).

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