

DANTESQUE “MAGNANIMITY”¹

A reading of *Inferno* I-IV

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To my students in Ravenna

From the famous opening words of his poem, poised between fear and hope (fear – *paura* - of the three wild beasts and the hope that is instilled in the pilgrim by Virgil's rescue), but divided between the I that is dismayed by Dante the person, faced with the otherworldly journey that awaits him («Ma io, perché venirvi? o chi 'l concede? / Io non Enea, io non Paulo sono; / me degno a ciò né io né altri 'l crede», *Inf.* II 31-33) and the solemn investiture to do it, which comes to him through the compassionate intervention of the «tre donne benedette» (Maria, Lucia, Beatrice) Dante the author skillfully dramatizes his original condition of cowardice and then, his final liberation from all fears about the possibility and legitimacy of undertaking this venture.

In assuming the role of the central character in the *Commedia*, the medieval writer, in short, didactically stages the story of his difficult, but ultimate transformation of his initial timidity into magnanimity, from *micropsichia* to *megalopsichia*, to use two Aristotelian terms, found contiguously, in fact, in *Inf.* II 44-45, one referring to Virgil («rispuose del *magnanimo* quell'ombra»), the other to Dante («l'anima tua è da *viltade* offesa»)². If indeed, in this case, the poet rightly defined pusillanimity in opposition to magnanimity, like that which «molte fiata l'omo ingombra / sì che d'onrata impresa lo rivolva, / come falso veder bestia quand'ombra» (*Inf.* II 46 -48); in other cases, in *Convivio* I XI, he had already pronounced himself on the «viltà d'animo» and the contrasting virtue, represented by its absence, as follows:

Sempre lo magnanimo si magnifica in suo cuore, e così lo pusillanimo, per contrario, sempre si tiene meno che non è. E perché magnificare e parvificare sempre hanno rispetto ad alcuna cosa per comparazione a la quale si fa lo magnanimo grande e lo pusillanimo piccolo, avviene che 'l magnanimo sempre fa minori li altri che non sono, e lo pusillanimo sempre maggiori. E però che con quella misura che l'uomo misura se medesimo, misura le sue cose, che sono quasi parte di se medesimo, avviene che al magnanimo le sue cose sempre paiono migliori che non sono, e l'altrui men buone:

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lo pusillanimo sempre le sue cose crede valere poco, e l'altrui assai; onde molti per questa viltade dispregiano lo proprio volgare, e l'altrui pregiato.

The definition of pusillanimity necessarily implied (both in the prose of the *Convivio* and in the verses of the *Commedia*), that of magnanimity, a virtue which is «moderatrice e acquistatrice de' grandi onori e fama» as the poet, always following along Aristotle's lines, again denotes in *Convivio* IV XVII. It is only a magnanimous person like Virgil (for whom Dante immediately acknowledges his great esteem, «de li altri poeti onore e lume» and his «maestro» and his «autore», *Inf.* I 82, 85), who could save the pilgrim from the «viltà» that takes hold of him, when setting off on his journey to the world beyond, which is the condition before the *Commedia*; even though the example of Virgil's Aeneid itself was such that it spurred the modern poet on to the arduous task of composing this «poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra» (*Par.* XXV 1-2). This is just the same as saying that recognition of his own poetic virtue, the discovery of his own magnanimity, or rather of his own vocation as an artist, fatally passes through fear and despondency before definitively bringing about a sense of self-awareness and certainty of his own capabilities. Hence the insistence with which Dante emphasizes his conquest of «ardire e franchezza» (*Inf.* II 123), thanks to Virgil spurring him on; hence the famous and delicate comparison (held dear by Manzoni) between the «fioretti dal notturno gelo / chinati e chiusi» and the soul of the pilgrim, at first prostrated, as well as between those that grow straight and «aperti in loro stelo», as «il sol li 'mbianca» and the «buono ardire» that then returns to hearten the poet (*Inf.* II 127-32).

Neither should the role played by Beatrice in Dante's progressive liberation from fear be forgotten (it is no coincidence that words such as «tema» and «paura» are interwoven throughout the account Virgil gives the poet of the appeal made by Beatrice herself):

Da questa tema a ciò che tu ti solve,
dirotti perch'io venni e quel ch'io 'ntesi
nel primo punto che di te mi dolse.

[...]

“O anima cortese mantovana,
di cui la fama ancor nel mondo dura,
e durerà quanto 'l mondo lontana,
l'amico mio, e non de la ventura,
ne la diserta piaggia è impedito
sì nel cammin, che volt'è per paura;
e temo che non sia già sì smarrito,
ch'io mi sia tardi al soccorso levata,
per quel ch'ì' ho di lui nel cielo udito”.
(*Inf.* II 49-51, 58-66)

Stirred by pity, similar to that of Virgil's, it is this «soccorso» that Dante emphasized in the final reproach to his «duca», «signore» and «maestro», aimed at securing a definitive victory over his earlier «viltà»:

«Oh pietosa colei che mi soccorse!
 e te cortese ch'ubidisti tosto
 a le vere parole che ti porse!
 Tu m'hai con disiderio il cor disposto
 sì al venir con le parole tue,
 ch'i' son tornato nel primo proposto.
 Or va, ch'un sol volere è d'ambidue:
 tu duca, tu signore e tu maestro».
 (*Inf.* II 133-40)

But the theme of pusillanimity, far from limiting itself to Dante the person's experience (thus alluding to that of Dante the author), objectifies itself in the representation of the damned of the Anti-hell; almost as if the poet, to further exorcise his personal insidious temptation, intended to reflect and cause to reflect, on the moral misery and plight of «coloro / che visser *sanza* 'nfamia e *sanza* lodo» (*Inf.* III 35-36), and thus on those who were unable to choose (similarly to the «cattivo coro / de li angeli che *non* furon ribelli / né fur fedeli a Dio, ma per sé fuoro», *ibid.*, 37-39) between good and evil.

Even here Virgil's stimulus fails him (it should be remembered, he is the symbol of human reason as well as the image of magnanimity), in other words it urges him on to rationally dismiss all pusillanimity, that is to say, he fears he is inadequate to personally undertake that difficult hellish journey and at the same time be its poetic spokesman («Qui si convien lasciare ogne sospetto; / ogne *viltà* convien che qui sia morta», *Inf.* III 14-15). But liberating Dante, both the author and the person, from any further cowardice, he is eloquently rescued in a far more persuasive way than by a mere verbal admonition («Questi *non* hanno speranza di morte, / e la lor cieca vita è tanto bassa, / che 'nvidiosi son d'ogne altra sorte. // Fama di loro il mondo esser *non* lassa; / misericordia e giustizia li sdegna: / non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa», *Inf.* III 46-51), the direct experience and vision of the harsh punishment allotted to the pusillanimous, compelled, through their obvious retaliation with their moral apathy in life to pursue, at least in death «ignudi e stimolati molto / da mosconi e da vespe» (*Inf.* III 65-66), an infernal sign. Nor was there any stylistic feature, better than denial, that could characterize the common condition of ethical and civil neutrality and the guilty release, precisely of those who never dared take sides:

«Caccianli i ciel per *non* esser men belli,
 né lo profondo inferno li riceve,
 ch'alcuna gloria i rei avrebber d'elli».
 (*Inf.* III 40-42)

Hence the grey anonymity to which they are condemned, in death as in life, those «cattivi» (almost cowardly prisoners of their own laziness) «a Dio spiacenti e a' nemici sui» (*Inf.* III 62-63) so well-represented by the enigmatic figure of «colui / che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto» (*Inf.* III 59-60), who, in as far as unequivocally identified by Dante along with a small number of other souls, in that «lunga tratta / di gente» (*Inf.* III 55-56) toiling behind a banner («Poscia ch'io v'ebbi alcun riconosciuto, / vidi e conobbi l'ombra di colui...», *ibid.*, 58-59), remains, however, an undecipherable «ombra» – whether it alludes to Pope Celestine V or some other great defeatist from a Bible story,

more than from a chronicle – whose identity however, the poet did not deem appropriate or necessary to reveal to his readers.

What is certain is that interest in the plight of «questi sciagurati, che mai *non fur vivi*» (*Inf.* III 64) was soon to be replaced by interest in that of the souls of the damned who thronged the banks of the Acheron; and no further mention is made of them throughout the rest of *Canto* III. In the following *Canto*, if the shadow of the same cowardice seems for one moment to touch someone as magnanimous as Virgil, (cfr. *Inf.* IV 13-21), it is soon dispelled from Dante's mind and rightly interpreted as the Latin poet's *compassion* rather than *fear* for «l'angoscia de le genti / che son qua giù» (*ibid.*, 19-20), whether such anguish refers generically either to the torments of the damned, or perhaps, rather to the moral suffering of the guests of Limbo (which is shared by Virgil, and that the vernacular poet especially holds so close to his heart he defines it as follows):

Quivi, secondo che per ascoltare,
non avea pianto mai che di sospiri
che l'aura eterna facevan tremare;
ciò avvenia di duol senza martiri,
ch'avean le turbe, ch'eran molte e grandi,
d'infanti e di femmine e di viri.
(*Inf.* IV 25-30)

Hence, Virgil himself is part of this crowd of adverse infidels (who «non peccaro» and «non ebber battesimo» or «non adorar debitamente a Dio», cfr. *Inf.* IV 34-38) who, not without grief, declare their shared exclusion from salvation and sentence to live eternally with a desperate longing for God («Per tai difetti, non per altro rio, / semo perduti, e sol di tanto offesi / che senza speme vivemo in disio», *ibid.*, 40-42). Faced with this unhappy condition, torn between desire and despair of salvation, Dante's turmoil is no less, and is not so much directed at the fate of that «selva [...] di spiriti spessi» (*Inf.* IV 66) he had crossed with relative indifference, as to the fate of greatness:

Gran duol mi prese al cor quando lo 'ntesi
però che gente di molto valore
conobbi che 'n quel limbo eran sospesi.
(*Inf.* IV 43-45)

As this *terzina*, which holds the key to the *canto*, well attests, more than for the fate of a crowd of unbaptized innocents, Dante grieves for the fate of the *people of great worth*, in other words the «spiriti magni», that he is preparing to meet in the «nobile castello». No comment today regarding Dante limits itself to giving a general value of «anime grandi» to the expression «spiriti magni» (*ibid.*, 119), which instead, calls for the specific value of «magnanimi», understood in the Aristotelian sense of *megalopsycoi*, namely of spirits that rightly counted themselves deserving of great honor, as they were indeed worthy of it, without becoming pusillanimous or excessively presumptuous, the latter a trait of those who aspire to great honors without deserving them.

«Videtur autem magnanimus esse, qui magnis seipsum dignificat dignus existens», had in fact warned Aristotle (that Dante had read in light of the commentary of St. Thomas and had learned about through the VI book of Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*, a vernacular translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by the Greek philosopher). Benvenuto

da Imola moreover, had written in his renowned *Comentum*, along the same lines as Aristotle, the famous *terzina* «Colà diritto, sovra 'l verde smalto, / mi fuor mostrati li *spiriti magni*, / che del vedere in me stesso m'essalto» (*Inf.* IV 118-120): «in prato virenti ostensi fuerunt [...] *virii magnanimi* de quorum visione in se ipso Auctor gloriatur [...] unde dicit li *spiriti magni*, id est *animae magnanimorum*».

The vision of the «foco / ch'emisperio di tenebre vincia» (*Inf.* IV 68-69), namely an area of light that triumphs over a hemisphere of darkness, that is to say, surrounded by darkness (humanistic interpretation vs mystical interpretation), introduces the second part of canto IV, the one in which Dante meets heroes of action (such as Hector, Aeneas, Caesar, etc.) alongside heroes of thought (such as Aristotle – which in fact goes back to the very concept of magnanimity – Socrates and Plato), ancient Greek and Latin peoples next to modern Arabs (such as Saladin, Avicenna and Averroes). What unites these spirits, all equally deprived of Christian salvation, – as my teacher Fiorenzo Forti saw in his seminal essay on *Limbo* and *megalopsicoi* of the Nicomachea – is their common moral nature: they are in fact all *megalopsicoi* and believed they were worthy of honor and fame, of an honourable name on earth, being indeed worthy of them.

The theme of honor therefore, fittingly dominates this second part of the canto, while in the background there remains the issue of eternal destiny (which the first canto persistently emphasizes) reserved for greatness: everything in fact tends to highlight the treatment reserved for the magnanimous, compared to that for the other inhabitants of limbo (the first group in the light, the other in darkness). This, as if to underline the special respect (*l'onranza*) there is, even in the Underworld, for the *orrevol gente*, for their *onrata nominanza*, that is, for the honourable fame acquired in life, which thus distinguishes them even in death. It is evident in these verses, (*Inf.* IV 72-100), that the key word *onore* persistently echoes throughout, with all its derivatives: it may be said that the very light (*foco* or *lumera*) surrounding the *nobile castello* – symbol and privileged place of magnanimity – is a metaphor or related objective of that *onore*, which like the light spreads evenly over all and that the poets of that *bella scola* (Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan) lavish at times on Virgil («Onorate l'altissimo poeta; / l'ombra sua torna, ch'era dipartita»), and at other times on Dante, person and poet, admitted to this select group, as «sesto tra cotanto senno».

«Però che ciascun meco si convene / nel nome che sonò la voce sola, / fannomi *onore*, e di ciò fanno bene», comments Virgil himself on the events, with his own magnanimous confidence. He not only knows he deserves the honor paid tribute to him, but also proclaims that those magnanimous people, poets like himself, by honouring him, honor poetry itself. Thus, the honor done to his master-teacher, Virgil (and to the poetry), is therefore also extended to Dante, who is the worthy pupil:

Da ch'ebber ragionato insieme alquanto
volsersi a me con salutevol cenno,
e 'l mio maestro sorrise di tanto;
e più d'onore ancora assai mi fenno,
ch'è' sì mi fecer de la loro schiera,
sì ch'io fui sesto tra cotanto senno.
(*Inf.* IV 97-102)

Like Virgil, Dante now has all the certainties of the magnanimous, and there is no longer any trace of the earlier cowardice in him, so much so that he shows no surprise

at the *onore* done him as a poet by the *auctores* he knows best: such investiture does indeed sound as if it were self-legitimation, as if it were the solemn recognition, that comes to him from the greatest poets of antiquity, of his value as an artist, his boldness as a poet, who is attempting to carry out a great feat, with the purpose of becoming intimate with the other magnanimous members of the group. The one time pusillanimous character of long ago has now finally been dispelled and become magnanimous, and being so, not only has the elevated feeling and discretion of the magnanimous («Cosi andammo infino a la lumera, / parlando cose che 'l tacere è bello, / sì com'era 'l parlar colà dov'era», *Inf.* IV 103-105), but also a solemn and reserved behaviour. The «*sembianza*», «né trista né lieta», of those wise men and their «salutevol cenno» to Dante, anticipate the very iconography of magnanimity (characterised by imperturbability), which emerges in a successive well-known *terzina* (*ibid.*, IV 112-114):

Genti v'eran con occhi tardi e gravi,
di grande autorità ne' lor sembianti:
parlavan rado, con voci soavi.

It is precisely such external «*sembianti*», that Dante has outlined, which find an antecedent in the description of the magnanimous, that the poet may have read, for example, in Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*:

L'uomo ch'è magnanimo, si è il maggior uomo ed il più onorato che sia. E' non si move per piccola cosa, e non china la magnanimità sua a veruna sozza cosa [...]. E se alcun uomo è magnanimo, non si rallegra troppo per grandi onori che gli siano fatti. E sappiate, che tanto onore non gli può esser fatto, che risponda alla sua bonarietà, ed alla sua grandezza. Anche il magnanimo non si rallegra troppo per cose prospere che gli avvengano, e non si conturba mai per cose adverse. [...] E tiene bene a mente l'ingiurie; ma disprezzale, e non cura. E non si loda, e non loda altrui, e non dice villania di niuno uomo. E cura più delle grandi cose che delle vili, sì come uomo che basta a sé medesimo. E nel suo movimento è tardo e grave. E nella parola è fermo. E questa è la diffinizione del magnanimo.

(Tesoro volgarizzato, 73-77)

In a gloriously ever-increasing repetition of *vidi*, as in the «*vidi* quattro grand'ombre a noi venire», of verse 83 to the progressively iterated *vidi* before the shadows of the other *spiriti magni* (verse 121 and successive verses: «l' *vidi* Elettra con molti compagni», «*Vidi* Cammilla e la Pantasilea», «da l'altra parte *vidi* 'l re Latino», «*Vidi* quel Bruto che cacciò Tarquino», «e solo, in parte, *vidi* 'l Saladino», «*vidi* 'l maestro di color che sanno», «quivi *vid'* io Socrate e Platone», «e *vidi* il buon accoglitore del quale», «e *vidi* Orfeo»), Dante the person ultimately declines his very own apotheosis of the magnanimous and poet who has been given the good fortune to see (*vedere*), in the company of those «*savi*», the shadows of the heroes inhabiting the «nobile castello», and for whom it is now natural to take pride in, evident in the words «sesto fra cotanto senno» and magnanimous among the magnanimous, the honor that divine justice itself bestows on earthly greatness.

Notes

¹ For subject matter and sources see FIORENZO FORTI, *Magnanimitade. Studi su un tema dantesco*, Roma, Carocci, 2006, with preface by Emilio Pasquini (I ed. Bologna, Pàtron, 1977).

² This and the following are my italics.

Biographical notes

Alfredo Cottignoli former professor of Italian literature, he is currently “Professor Alma Mater” at the University of Bologna and professor of Italian Literature on the three-year degree course of Cultural Heritage. A student of Raffaele Spongano, Fiorenzo Forti and Emilio Pasquini, he taught Italian literature and Dante Philology in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, and Philosophy, and Conservation of Cultural Heritage. Philologist and historian of criticism, his research interests range from medieval to modern literature (Dante, and fourteenth-century commentators, his authors are Muratori, Foscolo, Manzoni, Carducci and Tenca). On the subject of Dante’s work, he has held several *lecturae Dantis* in cities with links to Dante (Florence, Bologna, Ravenna), conceiving and organizing in 2006, with fellow anthropologist Giorgio Grupponi (with whom he later published, in 2012, a volume on *Fabio Frassetto e l’enigma del volto di Dante. Un antropologo fra arte e scienza*), an international conference on *Dante e la fabbrica della «Commedia»*. He is a Councillor for the *Opera di Dante* in Ravenna (for which he edited, in 2011, the cycle of Classense Lectures dedicated to Dante in the Italian Risorgimento) and co-director of “Studies and problems of textual criticism,” as well as, since 2012, for the Ravenna “Dante Bulletin. For the seventh centenary”, designed for Dante’s Centenary in 2021.