

# Introduction

## Nostalgia for the Empire, or Dante's Metapolitics

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### Touching Dante

Lately, every time I teach a Dante class, I must remember to warn my undergraduate students: *Beware of the Middle Ages*, the Middle Ages are *weird*, expect to be shocked! I also tell them that we are still surrounded by a mockery of Middle Ages–like mindset. Religious fundamentalism, charismatic cults, magical thinking, and nostalgia for theocracy shape our world as much as science and social sciences do, and those opposite tendencies are often at war with each other. People who speak in tongues and believe in the inerrancy of a seventeenth-century English translation of a book assembled thousands of years ago in a language they know nothing about sit side by side with those whose firm belief is that there is no other destiny than genetics, the universe is an accident, and our existence is the product of random selection and the survival of the fittest. We may study the Middle Ages; we may think that we understand the basics of the Middle Ages, we may even love the Middle Ages (they are great for mystery and intrigue), but unless we are medieval scholars, we do not *get* them. Yet anyone who knows intimately the history of Western culture can tell that modernity, *our* modernity, did not start with the Enlightenment and not even with Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. It gave its first cry centuries before, perhaps when Johannes Scotus Eriugena completed his *De divisione naturae* (867), even

though the work was banned after the author's death and would not be printed until 1681. It might indeed be argued that *De divisione naturae* marked the threshold between the culmination of antiquity and the slow beginning of a new era. If we agree with this teleological overview of Western history, then the Middle Ages have always been step after step on their way to modernity, and there would be no modern science if Scotus and Aquinas had not validated human reason as necessary to understand the unfolding of God's creation. Yet we also want to think that we are luckily removed from the dark side of the Middle Ages. We want to believe that what we have in common with the Greeks and the Romans outshines everything we may owe to some obscure ninth-century monk or to some incomprehensible thirteenth-century poet. Because we believe that the philosophy, psychology, and science of the West are grounded in Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine, we may have the impression that the Middle Ages are little more than an obstacle between us and the heights of classical antiquity. But that would be a mistake. The Middle Ages were a time of immense debate that laid the foundation for who we are now. The Middle Ages applied all the rationality that was available at the time to areas of human experience that modernity has left to the irrational mind and relegated to folly or superstition. The medieval men (and women too) strove to rationalize religion, mysticism, and the relation between God's plan and human politics to an extent hitherto unknown. They were obsessed with order, rules, and hierarchies from which nothing would escape, because to them everything had to *make sense*. Modern rationalism would later triumph, but it would do so by negation, having jettisoned the medieval dream that every aspect of human and superhuman experience should eventually fall into place. Modern rationalism was built on the Cartesian premise that there is a realm outside the rational mind that must be left untouched and unrationalized, or better locked away. Dreams, madness, and arcane correspondences between the human body and the body of the universe were not to become part of the modern project: they would be best left to the poets. But those were areas that the Middle Ages did not wish to abandon by the wayside. There is no "unconscious" in the Middle Ages (or rather, there is no conscious confinement of the unconscious mind), there is no psychology in the modern sense of the world (which, to a certain extent, is also the Greek sense of the word), because nothing, in the Middle Ages, lies outside God's gaze. This, among other things, is what makes it so difficult to understand those

times. If nothing stands outside the mind (God's mind and man's mind) and the will (God's will and man's God-given free will), there are no excuses for what you do (not even for your *folly*)—which is precisely Dante's premise. Modernity works by exclusion; here is science, and there is what has no place in science. The Middle Ages works by inclusion. That such inclusiveness may look suspiciously "totalitarian" to us just goes to show that the totalitarianism of modernity has succeeded in its own way, making it "natural" for us to think that a very large realm of human experience does not have a proper place and is meant only to wreak havoc and increase entropy. Modernity has created an *image* of the world, and an image is always framed. The Middle Ages had a *vision* of the world (of God and the world, that is), and a vision does not have a frame (Dante's cosmology is impossible to visualize with the tools of Renaissance perspective).

Twenty years ago, my undergraduate students (who are not usually literature majors) would raise no objections to Dante. He was who he was—a man of his time, a literary authority—and that was it. But things have changed. I heard the first crack in the wall when a student began to laugh while I was explaining the geography of the *Divine Comedy*: here is Hell shaped like a funnel, here is the soil that, having recoiled in horror at the fall of Lucifer, turned into the mountain of Purgatory. . . . "But that's ridiculous," he said. Other objections were raised afterward, mostly of the kind one would expect in a gender studies class, and I had to learn how to play along. In fact, because my students seem increasingly baffled by the information I give them (believe it or not, one of their major concerns is that Beatrice is not Dante's *wife*, and the sympathy they are supposed to feel for a Platonic yet adulterous love makes them—both men and women—feel uncomfortable), I have decided that there is no point in downplaying the weirdness of the Middle Ages. When we meet Saint Bernard of Clairvaux as Dante's last guide, I show them the engraving of the Holy Mary squirting her breast milk into Bernard's eyes to heal him from what was (likely) conjunctivitis or glaucoma. I am not saying that the snake-handling preachers who were common in the United States not long ago are the modern equivalent of Saint Bernard believing he was receiving the Holy Mary's milk in his eyes. The difficult conclusion is that, compared to a snake handler or a contemporary prosperity preacher, Saint Bernard was a champion of rationality, and the same could be said of Hildegard of Bingen and her visions of God, which she dutifully transcribed. In those years, you could believe that you were physically

in touch with the Holy Mary and at the same time be a very practical person, as influential in the history of Europe as any pope or king.<sup>1</sup> As I said before, the Renaissance and then modernity have found their spiritual ancestors in classical antiquity. Freud's rereading of Oedipus has made Sophocles our contemporary, and the satires of Juvenal may not look altogether different from, say, Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*. Why, then, couldn't Thomas Aquinas be modernized, too?

Unfortunately, science is not on board. Geneticist and atheist *extraordinaire* Richard Dawkins, who mocks Aquinas' five demonstrations of the existence of God as an example of obscurantism and poor logic, seems to ignore that it took the almost unlimited power that Aquinas bestowed on human reason to pave the way for modern science.<sup>2</sup> Yet it's a fact: Aquinas, Siger of Brabant, Saint Dominic, Saint Bonaventure, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Clare, Saint Angela of Foligno, and any other name from the sixth century to the thirteenth will never be as proximate to us as the Greeks and the Romans are. But if that is the case, if the Middle Ages have created their own world, inaccessible to us unless we dedicate a lifetime of study to it, then the only way to teach students how to approach the subject is precisely to respect that world's radical distance.

What about Dante, then, who knew very well the difference between the old and the new, the old poetry and the new poetry of the "modern usage" ("uso moderno," *Purg.* XXVI, 113)?<sup>3</sup> Has the great modernization of Dante that flourished in the Anglo-Saxon world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries come to its final chapter? After Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and all the modernist poets who wrote long and complex poems in their wake, with Dante always on their mind, what will Dante's fate be now? Is it still true what I heard poet and translator Allen Mandelbaum say toward the end of the 1980s, that Dante is the poet of the future? What I know is that he is definitely not a "poet of the past." Dante is a poet who creates his own age. In this book, which collects all the articles and essays that Massimo Cacciari has written on Dante's politics of mysticism and the mysticisms of his politics, the author is very careful never to push Dante in an uncharted direction.<sup>4</sup> Cacciari does not force Dante into any philosophical straitjacket. He walks with Dante, takes notes, asks questions, raises issues, and tries to understand the *Divine Comedy* and other works as much as possible in Dante's terms not as a critic but from the point of view of a faithful, assiduous, perceptive, at times embedded, sometimes perplexed, and sometimes worshipping reader. If Dante belongs to the future, that is one

more reason why he cannot be our contemporary. In fact, when was he? His political hopes failed in his time and were never resumed. His idea of a Christian Empire was dead on arrival. His theologization of courtly love found no followers. For centuries, and despite cores of sympathetic readers and commentators, whom he never lacked, his work was often put aside as obscure and unreadable. In the general taste, he played second (or third, or fourth . . .) fiddle to Petrarch until the nineteenth century. But he always was, and still is, a massive comet that shoots through our skies at unpredictable intervals. It never comes too close, but we feel the pull of its gravity. The best way to approach Dante is to respect the distance he keeps from us—just as he kept his distance from his own contemporaries. You can either get mad at Dante because he objectifies women by angelicizing them (such is the current wisdom of some among my female graduate students who deeply dislike the *Vita nuova*<sup>5</sup>) or point out that he is one of the first great Western poets to have given a voice to women who suffered abuse (Francesca, Pia, Piccarda . . .). As I said, I play along if I must, but both approaches seem quite useless to me. Both miss the point that we will never *get* Dante. He will be with us if we want him to, but we cannot touch him the way Saint Bernard was touched by the Holy Mary's milk; we cannot make him fit our standards. Dante is not one of us. He is the most powerful reminder that there will always be something eluding our assumption that we can "police" the past the way we "police" the present.<sup>6</sup>

### The Mystery of Saint Francis

This book opens with a long chapter on Saint Francis of Assisi, a figure even more mysterious than Dante, to the point that not even Dante—such is Cacciari's argument—could figure him out. It is the most complex chapter, and Cacciari's major contribution to the understanding of Francis' uniqueness. For Francis was as incomprehensible in his own time as he is in ours. Cacciari's comparison of Dante's celebration of Francis in *Paradiso* X–XIII with Giotto's narrative of Francis' life in the Assisi frescoes and elsewhere is meant to show that both the poet and the painter failed to grasp Francis' *difference*. While they were able to highlight his historical role, his life, impact, and legend, they missed the import of his most radical message, namely, his ontology, theology, and politics of *poverty*.

What kind of narrative is Francis' life? It is a "divine comedy" in its own right, yet a comedy of suffering, the comedy of a man who imitates Christ but cannot conclude his imitation with a glorious resurrection. He is Francis *patibilis* just as Christ was *Christus patibilis*, but Francis' life can be told only in *stories*, in the plural. One all-encompassing story, one *Commedia*, was not made out of his life. Dante's philosophy fails before Francis, and even Dante's theology is not equal to the task. Francis is, as it were, another Beatrice, yet a silent Beatrice, or a silent Virgil, even more powerful because of their silence. Dante's *Paradiso* struggles under the sign of Francis, who leads the way without being the end of it. Giotto's treatment of Francis fares no better. And if both Giotto and Dante "betray" Francis (they cannot *represent* the radicalness of his *poverty*), then Francis is even more Christlike in his being betrayed.

This suggestion of betrayal may come as a surprise. After all, and to paraphrase Cacciari, Dante creates a majestic Franciscan *symphony* in *Paradiso* X–XIII, a forest of references that works as the Dantean Empire is supposed to work, being One without annihilating every singular nation or character. Because it is Thomas Aquinas who pronounces Francis' praise, we understand that Francis is indeed *primus inter pares*. But it is not pure eschatological Franciscanism that Dante has in mind; In *Paradiso* X–XIII Dante aims to reconcile theological knowledge and prophetic spirit, the power of syllogism and the harmony of eschatology. Siger, Joachim, Bonaventure, and Thomas, the great "themes" of Dante's symphony, are the four figures of Dante's *pax catholica*, which must happen *under the sign of Francis* because no one else has that power. And yet this is *Dante's* prophecy, not Francis'. It is the reformation of the Church as a precondition for renovation. Dante is a reformist (otherwise he would be a heretic who wants revolutionary renovation as condition for reformation), but a *radical* reformist, and to that extent he definitely wants to give due credit to Francis' poverty, except that Francis' difference is greater than Dante can accept.

Dante emphasizes poverty, the negotiations with the papacy, and the preaching. Giotto, for instance in the Louvre *predella*, paints the dream of Innocent III, the confirmation of the Order, and the preaching to the birds. In other words, Giotto's Francis is already being *normalized*. Providence speaks to the Pope in his dream, but not *through* Francis, and Francis is portrayed as humble and dejected before the Pope. It is true, however, that Giotto accepts Francis as a real legend while Dante essentially wants Francis to serve his idea of a Christian Empire. While

Giotto is keen on Francis' understanding of nature, Dante's Francis does not look as if he ever wrote the *Canticle of the Sun* and is not shown praising the Lord *together* with the creatures.

Dante's Francis is also above the divisions in his Order; it is not Bonaventure's Francis as it is in Giotto, because it is *Dante's* Bonaventure, not the Bonaventure of the *Legenda maior*, the most authoritative biography of Francis. However, Cacciari asks, is Giotto's cycle in Assisi that dependent on Bonaventure? In reality, it is dependent on the sacrifice that Francis and Clare had to make when they accepted a Rule for their orders. That was the great compromise that Giotto glossed over: if the life of the Brothers is a "form of life" (the life of Christ), it has to go through a constant "formation," which will never be perfect if it must follow a Rule. However, what concerns Dante is neither the Rule nor Francis as a maker of miracles. The *popular* Francis has no role in the *Commedia*. Conversely, poverty has little bearing on the Assisi frescoes (Giotto's Francis is obedient and meek, but there is no specific emphasis on his poverty), while Dante's Francis is explicitly poor. Cacciari, however, makes the point that Francis was *joyful* in his poverty, and not even Dante was able to picture the complexity of Francis' link between poverty and joy.<sup>7</sup> To Dante, poverty is fundamentally a theological problem that must be theologically resolved. Therefore, the question remains: why is Francis pursuing joy in poverty and poverty in joy? Which comes down to the ultimate question: who is Francis?

Francis' poverty is not a means to an end, nor is it just the virtue of renunciation. It does not result from hatred of money and possessions or a polemic against wealth. Francis' point is strictly Evangelical; the Kingdom belongs to the poor, but not on account of something that the poor do not have. The poor in spirit *lack nothing*, the poor are *perfect*, and nothing can be added to their perfection. "Poverty," Cacciari says, "is the will to conquer the Kingdom. Poor is the violence of he who wants the Kingdom. Only the poor are truly *powerful*." In other words, Francis' poverty is a political act. Centuries later, even Nietzsche was impressed by Francis' love, but he misunderstood it greatly when he rubricated it under "pity." Nietzsche overlooked that Francis' "great love" (a love full of power) was just the other side of what Nietzsche would call "great politics": a politics that *decides*, *converts*, "tames the proud" (including, we might add, the pride of the poor).

In its *destruens* part, poverty is *kenosis*, "self-emptying" of the self and the soul. Man's poverty is an *analogon* of divine *kenosis*, and thus

the only real relationship man can have with God. On the Cross, God emptied himself of all divinity. Analogously, man must empty himself of his divine spark. Man must be *abandoned*, as much as Christ was abandoned on the Cross. But this self-abandonment is done out of love, it is a movement toward the Other, which becomes a necessity when we have nothing left in ourselves. We have only what we love, but we do not possess it.<sup>8</sup>

Cacciari has always striven to emphasize the *pars construens* of every subject matter he has tackled. The problem is that the *pars construens* requires even more violence than the *pars destruens*. In this case, contrary to what Nietzsche thought, it implies severing all ties, even the ties of pity, which is what Francis did when he rejected his father and his family. But that violence is also joy. If the *pars construens* is the poverty of self-emptying, then poverty must be *glad* to be absolutely poor, and the poor (the Brothers, the Minors) must be glad as well.<sup>9</sup> According to Cacciari, this is where Giotto and Dante missed the target. The joy of poverty and suffering is not visible in the Assisi frescoes. And while Dante understands poverty, he erases its merriment. Francis, together with Peter and Benedict in the Mystic Rose, is Christ reborn, but Christ as king, not Christ as poor. It must be clear that there is nothing “masochistic” in Francis’ choice of poverty and suffering (as I said, there are no unconscious motivations in the Middle Ages). If that were the case, Giotto and Dante would be justified in eschewing the topic entirely. What is lacking in Giotto and Dante is Francis the joyful “jester,” the “fool” (*pazzus*), and the “mother” who gives up everything for her son. We can be spouses, brothers, children, and mothers of Christ—as Francis says—and a mother follows no Rule, she already knows what needs to be done. Dante emphasizes Francis’ theologico-political triumph; Giotto tells the story of a reconciliation between the Order and the Church, one that, in historical reality, was quite problematic. What is lacking in both, but especially in Dante, is Francis the *mystic*.

α. Perhaps there was no role for Francis’ brand of mysticism in Dante’s idea of Empire. We have only what we love without possessing it, but there is also what we *use* without possessing it, such as the food we eat and the water we drink. The *Canticle of the Sun* tells us to love sister water, but it does not say how drinking water that is not “ours” puts us in relation with the law. According to Peter John Olivi, the



“poor use” (*usus pauper*) of what the Brother needs to keep himself alive does not fall within the jurisdiction of the law. Such *abdication iuris*, renunciation of the law, *de facto* puts the Brother outside the law—a position that was unacceptable to the Church. In his study on the juridical implications of Franciscan poverty, Agamben has asked, “But what is a life outside the law, if it is defined as that form of life which makes use of things without ever appropriating them? And what is use if one ceases to define it solely negatively with respect to ownership?”<sup>10</sup> It seems that neither the Church, nor the Order, and not even modern jurisprudence, has ever given a convincing answer to that question. Maybe it was that threshold of uncertainty between law and life that prevented Dante from fully embracing Franciscan mysticism. Life outside the law, no matter how sanctified, does not make you a citizen, neither on Earth nor in the Heavenly Jerusalem, which for Dante is essentially a Heavenly Rome. It does not make you a Roman, and you must be Roman if you want to live in Dante’s Heaven, “the Rome in which Christ is / Roman.” (“quella Roma onde Cristo è romano,” *Purg.* XXXII, 102)

### A Sin against Aristotle

For Cacciari, there is no doubt that Dante’s Ulysses is a sinner and somehow deserves the place in Hell that the poet assigns to him. To determine which sin he committed, however, requires an endless analysis. Ulysses’ thirst for knowledge is *lustfulness*, as the patristic literature knew well, but is this the only interpretation at our disposal? If that were the case, Ulysses would be merely a deceiver. But there is *virtue* in Ulysses’ journey as there is *virtue* in Dante’s journey. They are both all-questioning minds, they both think alike. Besides, why should pagan Ulysses care for the Fathers of the Church? Ulysses’ journey is not intentionally blasphemous. How can his speech be fraudulent?

Was Ulysses too proud? Perhaps he was, but then he would not belong to the circle of fraudulent counselors. And his speech is melancholic, too, it is the confession of an old man. With his speech on knowledge, Ulysses deceives his sailors only indirectly, as a consequence, because, first and foremost, he deceives himself. His sin is a matter of

failed *rationalism*. He is in *error*, and an error of the intellect always carries ethical and political consequences. Cacciari suggests looking at *Convivio* III, 15—Dante’s theory of desire—for an answer (“And so human desire is proportioned in this life to the knowledge which we can have here, and does not go past that point except by an error which is outside the intention of nature.”<sup>11</sup>) Natural desire is commensurate to the desirer—every being strives according to its own finality, *entelechia*. Knowledge develops in stages, from one goal to the next. When the goal pertaining to a specific desire is reached, *that* desire is completely satisfied, and *therefore* it can renew itself. Desire lacks nothing except its own satisfaction, which—contrary to what every *esprit fort* of modernity would admit—may indeed be achieved. If the journey of knowledge goes from satisfaction to satisfaction, then Ulysses’ infinite longing is guilty of a radical errancy from the Aristotelian reading in the *Convivio*. Ulysses did not misinterpret the fathers of the Church, he misunderstood the *Convivio*, which means that he misunderstood Aristotle. Sure, Ulysses is the *letter* of Aristotelianism and scientific endeavor, but he is not the *spirit*. To that extent, he was a fraudulent counselor to himself, which may be the ultimate *hybris* indeed.

Infinite longing is not Aristotelian science. *Radical* Aristotelianism, however, is another matter. Radical Aristotelianism, which Dante encountered and by which, to a certain extent, he was seduced, was the Faustian pact of the Middle Ages, the belief that human intellect would have no limits whatsoever and could penetrate the archetypes, the eternal ideas inside God’s mind—or even the eternal ideas *outside* of God’s mind, as autonomous entities.<sup>12</sup> In Cacciari’s *addendum* to his Ulysses chapter, Farinata’s atheism, and perhaps Guido Cavalcanti’s, is the foreboding of Ulysses’ philosophical error. Did Guido, the *absent* Guido, whose fate in the afterlife is tragically unknown, subordinate revelation to intellect? Or did he reject revelation altogether? The shadow of Cavalcanti looms very large everywhere in the *Comedy*, and it may cover Ulysses as well. For both Guido and Ulysses, because of their *hybris*, betray Aristotle.

Obviously, Ulysses is not an Averroist. He does not syllogize; rather, he is a magician who conjures up an “unpeopled world” before his eyes and the eyes of his comrades. But science without a moral impulse toward the Good is worthless in Dante’s world, and the science of the Good is Politics. In Dante, there is no will-to-know that can be abstracted from the political dimension. There is no scientific “autonomy” in Dante’s universe. Yet Ulysses moves autonomously, without being part

of a bigger plan. His will-to-know is not directed toward an increase in human happiness. It is not even “utilitarian”; it is utterly unpolitical.<sup>13</sup> He separates theory from practice as if man were not a political animal. He is a king; he is supposed to take care of himself and his associates, of his wife, of his son and father, *as a king*; to make *polis*, to rule, to do good (what Aeneas did, what Emperor Harry VII, hopefully, will do), or at least acknowledge the primacy of moral philosophy over knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

Because Ulysses is to a certain extent a *figure* of Guido (and, conversely, Guido is a figure of Ulysses), in the *Addendum* Cacciari briefly addresses the *vexatissima quaestio* of *Inferno* X, using Enrico Malato and Antonino Pagliaro as guides. Who is the person whom “perhaps . . . your Guido did disdain” (“forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno,” *Inf.* X, 64)? According to Malato, the *cui* refers to Virgil. In Pagliaro’s interpretation, the *cui* refers to Beatrice. It goes without saying that Guido would not like to be “guided” by anyone. But here the issue is not Virgil as guide but rather the nature of love, or love-passion. For Dante, we can control love-passion insofar as we have free will, whereas for Guido, we cannot. Cacciari suggests that perhaps the ambiguity of the *cui* is intentional. In that particular circumstance, Dante did not want to choose between Virgil and Beatrice, for the entire premise of the *Comedy* is that the former’s teaching merges into the other’s. But if there is ambiguity in Dante, it must have a purpose. One of Cacciari’s favorite *tropoi* is that the origin is the most important part (*potissima pars*, in his favorite expression) of every single thing. If the beginning of love (as Francesca can attest) is entirely accidental, then how can love be controlled by free will and determination? It does not make much difference here that, to Guido, love is an “accident” (“un accidente,” *Donna me prega*, 2) and, to Dante, an “accident in substance” (“uno accidente in sustanzia,” *Vita nuova* XXV, 1).<sup>14</sup> The point has great theoretical, physiological, and ethical relevance, but it is not for Virgil to decide. On the matter of love, Virgil must remain silent and pass the baton to Beatrice, and this Guido could not accept. But Dante’s ambiguity (he must keep them both, Virgil and Beatrice, without being too explicit about it) may very well be the last gesture of friendship he makes to his friend.

β. In a way, Ulysses is the modern scholar who asks about the nature of entities but not about the essence of Being. He is the embodiment of the scientist who, in Heidegger’s parlance,

“does not think.” Otherwise said, the Hollywood version of Ulysses’ speech is the well-known line from *Deliverance* (dir. John Boorman, 1972): “Why do you want to mess around with that river?” “*Because it’s there.*” But there is more: Ulysses *overhears* himself when he speaks, like a Shakespeare character who is seduced by his own words. And he falls prey to cognitive dissonance. He “knows” that what he says is deceitful, yet he believes it. It is not just his sin; this is his *tragedy* (he may be the only character in the *Comedy* who is tragic in the classical sense). Or better, his tragedy is that he has no goal. “Ulysses conceives the path of knowledge as a desiring that is never fulfilled,” Cacciari says. He is not moved by *eros*; he is moved by *pothos*, by an indescribable, vague nostalgia for something that shines in the distance and can never be reached. The paradox is that Dante, by sentencing Ulysses’ desire to damnation, makes us long for the same desire. Dante gives shape to *modern* desire—infinite desire, that is—the desire that will take hold of Faust and Manfred, the infinite desire theorized by Leopardi, Baudelaire, Wagner, Freud, and ultimately Lacan and Deleuze. The first infinite desire that we encounter in the *Divine Comedy* is Francesca’s, “that, as you see, it has not left me yet” (“che, come vedi, ancora non m’abbandona,” *Inf.* V, 105). But Francesca’s desire has an object, Paolo. An object both present and eternally out of reach, but still an ideal goal. Ulysses’ infinite desire, on the contrary, is bad infinity, mere accumulation of steps toward something that he cannot define. The Greeks would have punished him as well as the Fathers of the Church, yet we *modern* readers root for Ulysses because we are the spiritual heirs of Milton’s Satan and of Tristan and Isolde.<sup>15</sup> Ulysses wants to know everything except what the Delphian oracle would command him to know, namely, himself. When Coleridge, in *Self-Knowledge*, asks, “Say, canst thou make thyself?—Learn first that trade” and ends with “Ignore thyself, and strive to know thy God!,” he is updating Dante’s Ulyssian spirit (to the extent that Ulysses’ God is his desire, that is). Yes, there is no doubt that Dante would never acknowledge such an “irrational” God, but is Dante really that different from his Ulysses? Dante sets up his self-absolution by building the walls of God around himself, but you cannot invent Ulysses,

that Ulysses, if he is not inside you. The *Divine Comedy* is the narrative of how Dante knew himself, yet even if we did not believe a single word he says, his poetic power would still be intact. And yet, because Ulysses not only misses Aristotelianism, but situates himself completely *outside* of it, he bursts out from the pages of the Middle Ages with irrepressible force. He does not belong in the *Divine Comedy*, and that is his scandal. His virtue and his sins are incomprehensible within the same boundaries that Dante erected around his poem and his journey. Ulysses was born from the lines of the poem to be the anti-poem, and the anti-Dante for whom Dante the poet feels the strongest *desire*. There is no question that Dante must defend himself from Ulysses, who may destroy the careful architecture of the poem just by wandering around, leaving behind everything and everyone he meets instead of carefully building up his ladder to salvation. *Ulysses does not want to be saved; he wouldn't even know what that means.* The only way Dante can prevent Ulysses from taking over the poem is to make the sea close upon him.

### The Politics of Heaven

The *Divine Comedy* is truth, fiction, allegory, prophecy, and many other things. In the first of his three-part introduction to *Paradiso* (chapters 3, 4, and 5), Cacciari suggests adding *Erlebnis* to the list, a fully lived-through *experience*, not “biographical” but definitely “autobiographical.” The experience of pilgrimage, that is. A pilgrimage toward a conversion-transformation that does not leave the world behind, and especially not the status of “citizen,” which must be maintained on Earth as well as in Heaven. Being in Paradise means to be a citizen of Paradise, endowed with heavenly rights and duties. Dante’s Paradise is *polis*, it is *civitas*, which means that there is politics in Paradise, because Paradise has a future, tied to the politics of Earth. Not even Beatrice, whose smile infinitely surpasses earthly beauty, can forget the events unfolding on Earth.

The conclusion of the pilgrimage of all souls, of which Dante’s is the *exemplum*, will come at the end of time when man *touches God*, when the light of the blessed, as Solomon says, becomes stronger in the “glorified and sanctified” flesh (“gloriosa e santa,” *Par.* XIV, 43) and man, in Cacciari’s expression, is finally *capax Dei* (capable of God). Stronger

than allegory, stronger than analogy, this is Dante's lived-through experience—the process of the sensible perception becoming *aesthesis Theia*, divine perception—of which every soul is a *sign* (“as a sign for you,” “per far segno,” *Par.* IV, 37–39)—a sign of the perfect joy to come. (The term “sign” has strong resonance in Cacciari's works; it can be understood as pure *index*, without symbolical and allegorical superstructures, and therefore much more direct and effectual.)

Signs of the future can be perceived on earth as well; they can be *seen*, because Paradise is the exalted mirror of the theo-drama unfolding on Earth, “the little threshing floor / that so incites our savagery” (“l'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci,” *Par.* XXII, 150). In fact, Paradise is the only place where human history can be properly understood, and whence one returns and *speaks plainly*. But how to reconcile the realm of Light, where the prophecy is spotless, and the grim reality of earthly politics? The urge to relate the vision becomes a problem of language. The vision is not incomplete; speech is. How to articulate, therefore, the *topos* of ineffability? If there is mysticism in Dante, it does not reach the point where poetry is abandoned or loses efficacy. On the contrary, the urge to make the ineffable effable is the essence of poetry. The more Dante says he cannot say, the more precise his lines are. There is no “discourse” of the final vision, but it is possible to put it into poetry. Ineffability is the impossibility of rational demonstration, *not* a failure of language. This is also where the *Divine Comedy* meets *De vulgari eloquentia*, whose importance is, to Cacciari, comparable to any other work by Dante (chapter 6). Perhaps Dante's only prophecy that was truly fulfilled is that common speech is the speech of the future.

While Heaven waits for the world to mend its ways, for the sensible to become divine, and for the final union of bodies and souls, Aristotle's political gaze joins the Neoplatonic emanation of light from the Light, and the connection between the two gives the pilgrim the strength to reflect what he sees. Imagination may fail Dante, or so he says, but his vision of the Light does not. Because God's light is physical, and it is in fact the same thing as God, Cacciari draws a “stellar” comparison between Dante and Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), a contemporary of Dante for whom poetry would have been a mere distraction but who shared with Dante the belief in the divine Light as uncreated, immaterial, sensible, and not separable from God.

However, whether Light is God or God's garment (“The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment,” Psalm 104), Love is His

substance, and Love is *excessus*, Love cannot rest; it wants to create, to expand, to conquer. God appreciates the meek but is won over by those who carry the “violence of love” in them. Cacciari’s philosophy has always been, by and large, a theory of the possible. There is no other category that he has investigated so deeply in his theoretical works, and with reverberations in his political philosophy. It is on the basis of his meditations on potentiality and the possible that he advances his final argument. Might the negative eschatology of *Inferno* ever give way to the *possibility* that God *might be* won over by the determination of His creatures who are violently in love with Him, to the point that He decides to put an end to the eternal damnation of the sinners? Wouldn’t it be *possible* that Dante has considered such *possibility* and has left us some clues, allowing us at least the chance to formulate the thought? “In sum, that in God may live a hope for our salvation so powerful, so violent, that He himself might wish to be vanquished by it.”<sup>16</sup>

γ. That God’s light was physical, sensible, and therefore a *body*, was not a problem for the mystics, nor was it for Dante, but it was a nightmare for the theologians, because the book of Genesis does not say that God is light, it says that God *created* light, and by stating that God is light you say that God is at the same time creator and the creature. Beginning with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (whose angelology Dante follows in *Par.* XXVIII and XXIX), various authors postulated a dark light, co-substantial with God and invisible to God’s creatures until it is revealed in the end time—or, in some passages by Palamas, a dark cloud that surrounds God and makes it unknowable to man. The question has ramifications that are too complex to be addressed here.<sup>17</sup> However, imagination and memory fail to report the final vision because they need a *distensio temporis*, but the enjoyment of the vision does not suffer because of that. In fact, we might say using contemporary jargon, enjoyment is possible precisely because it happens outside of time and speech, in an instant that is not related to either past or future—otherwise it would be caught in the rational language and it would be unsayable. The enjoyment of the final vision is the speechless *symbolon* that puts an end to the semiotic chain.

### Toward a European Empire?

Is Dante a serious political prophet? And does he speak *to us* in that fashion? Of course, Cacciari does not see any “autonomy of the political” in Dante, but a relative, pragmatic autonomy may not be foreign to Dante’s political thinking. The two Suns (Papacy and Empire) must illuminate, not just tolerate, each other. In fact, they *must* wish the other to be autonomous. Like Christ, who is man and God, they are one city in two persons. The universal mission of the Church needs the Empire (this was true for the early Christians as well, who did not want the dissolution of the Empire that persecuted them—a point that Cacciari stresses in *Europe and Empire*), and the Empire finds its efficient and final cause in the universalism of the Church. To maintain their relation, the two Suns must fear and hold back each other, be each other’s *katechon*, the “withholding power” of Thessalonians 2:6–7.<sup>18</sup> Peace is possible only if the two powers are never fully at peace, never in the same bed. They must “reform” themselves autonomously, but they are connected in their autonomy. If one dies, the other dies too. That is why the Christians need dual citizenship—in the Eternal Rome and the Heavenly City. The Holy Roman Empire cannot subsist if Christ himself is not Roman (*Purg.* XXXII, 102–103). Christ’s gospel is a message of salvation in Heaven and, at the same time, the announcement of an Empire that must be as lasting as the Earth will be.

From this point of view, it seems that modernity has nothing to learn from Dante’s political thought. In Dante, there is no State (the Empire is the negation of the State) and no *political realism* to speak of. Is Dante, then, hopelessly unpolitical? Is this the *drama* of the *Monarchia*? According to Cacciari, we might say that Dante sees in the Empire the actualization of the Aristotelian Possible Intellect that belongs to everyone and no one in particular and ignores artificial boundaries. However (and to counterbalance every suspicion of explicit heterodoxy), Dante knows that in the end every actualization of power must be contradicted by eschatology, which ignores the human limitation of the Empire.

There is no emphasis in Dante on the *officium*, on the bureaucratic hierarchy of who does what within the structures of the Church and Empire. The elimination of enmity is what matters to him, and not just between the two Suns but between the two Cities as well. In this respect, Dante does not follow Augustine, who was the harshest critic of the Roman Empire. In Dante, the Roman Empire is the eternal



model that always fails yet cannot be replaced. The *civitas Dei* does not and must not annihilate the *civitas hominis*. To Cacciari, this is where Dante is, perhaps, “modern.” Because the Empire is neither a state nor a principate, it exists only for the Common Good (there is no other reason for the Empire to subsist), which is in fact a “modern” notion. When the fiction of the Common Good vanishes, the Empire crumbles.

Dante’s politics is obviously not based on a social contract, nor is it a defense mechanism set up against human wickedness. Aristotle taught him that we are political animals, and politics is in our nature as much as it is in the divine will. Contrary to the well-known opinion by Passerin d’Entrèves, to whom *Monarchia* was an aberration and the *Divine Comedy* a return to the right path, Cacciari’s thesis is that not only does the *Commedia* not contradict the *Monarchia*, it goes further in the same direction.<sup>19</sup> Following a different chronology from Passerin d’Entrèves’, Cacciari tends to believe that the *Monarchia* was completed approximately when Dante was approaching the final cantos of the *Purgatorio*. Being crowned by Virgil (*Purg.* XXVII, 142) is Dante’s ultimate achievement on Earth as both a poet and a philosopher. But it is just an *earthly* beatitude. To begin the *real* journey toward transhumanizing, repentance and violent conversion are necessary. Such a scenario is totally absent from the *Monarchia*, and it is in fact the next step after the *Monarchia*. Sin has broken the political order of the universe, not just the moral and theological one. To live in the perfect city, it is necessary that the citizens convert, disposing of greed, envy, and other sins, yet the city is *impotent* to convert. The *Monarchia* is not oblivious to that, but in the final cantos of the *Purgatorio* the issue is no longer politics or the Unpolitical. What is necessary (we might say) is a metapolitics of the Empire, an “event” (such as the conversion) that transcends the politics of the Empire, because the Empire is *not just a political institution*.<sup>20</sup> In a way, therefore, Beatrice is the real conclusion to the *Monarchia*. She is the perfect citizen of the metapolitical Empire and, in the Earthly Paradise, the perfect figure of the Empress who stands for the all-powerful Emperor (symbolized by the Griffin).

Nostalgia for the Empire is key to Dante’s metapolitics, but it is a nostalgia for a *future* Empire. We must look at both sides of the issue. On the one hand, the *Commedia* does not correct the *Monarchia*’s assumption that the crucifixion of Christ was “just.” It had to be, or else Jesus’ sacrifice would fall under the rubric of mere human injustice. What makes Jesus’ death divine is the tragic paradox at play (tragic,

we might say, in a Greek sense that Dante did not know, like Socrates who was sentenced to death by the Athenian democracy and not by a tyrant). Jesus is the tragic victim of the *highest justice*—which implies that the justice of the Empire collaborates with divine justice and fails where it is supposed to fail, at the gates of metapolitics. If Jesus were not God, his death would be justice done without a remainder, but here the remainder is what counts. The Empire that Dante has in mind, however, and this is Cacciari's strong belief, is *not* like the Roman Empire. It is a federation of nations, not a superstate. And a federation of languages too, of vernaculars that must communicate with each other. Just like individuals must convert, nations must convert as well, and overcome their selfishness. Such Empire is much less hegemonical than the State and Dante, a reactionary if compared to Marsilius of Padua (the modern theorist of the State), is looking forward to a European Empire in which every nation maintains its individuality and the Empire is the guardian of their differences.

On the other hand, Cacciari's very generous, even "liberal" interpretation of the *Monarchia* does not go so far as to justify Dante's claim that the Romans had jurisdiction over all mankind and the divine right to subjugate the whole world (*Mon.* II, xi, 5, 7). In fact, Cacciari tends to agree with Dominican Friar Guido Vernani of Rimini—the fierce, "papalist" author of *De reprobatio Monarchie* (1329)—that in his Roman fury, Dante may have gone too far.<sup>21</sup>

### German Dante

The final two chapters (8 and 9) deal with Dante's reception in Germany and Schelling's interpretation of Dante. From Goethe to Nietzsche, and from Simmel to Benjamin, Dante is a monumental figure that the German writers and thinkers have always approached with caution. It is paradoxical that the champions of German obscurity (the charge against German literature raised by generations of Italian literati) find Dante too obscure. Only Stefan George—who might have been a reactionary on many accounts but dreamed of a Europe that would include the Mediterranean world together with the German and French heritage—seemed willing to accept fully Dante's challenge, and produced a partial translation of the *Commedia* that stands as a pinnacle of twentieth century German poetry.

Ahead of George, Schelling was the only one who understood Dante as a prophet and, specifically, a prophet of *myth*. Beginning with *On Dante in Relation to Philosophy* (1803), Schelling outlines his vision of Dante as a teller of myths that are facts, because they are critical to the life of an entire people (Friedrich Schlegel, too, stresses Dante's narrative power and claims that the *Comedy* is a real "novel"). Dante is the model of the poet-teacher whose task is to create new, *rational* myths, where art and religion are combined. Dante's mythopoetic imagination is not bound by Fichtean duty or Hegelian allegory. It does not have to transcend itself. According to Schelling, it is a "symbol" the way Goethe intended it in his *Maxim* no. 752, a "live and immediate revelation of the unfathomable."<sup>22</sup>

But Schelling is unthinkable without Spinoza, and Dante and Spinoza would never get along. Cacciari, however, argues that because Spinoza's *amor dei intellectualis* must reside within Substance, or else it would only be accidental (and certainly not, we may add, an "accidente in sustanzia"), maybe to Schelling the freedom of Dante's transhumanizing—of "surpassing" oneself—is rooted in Substance itself, and therefore in Substance's own freedom. In Spinoza, reason and love have no place within the necessity and eternity of Substance. In Dante, however, things are different; Dante gives us the nonaccidentality of the singular, the eternity of the individual, and, with it, a model for the relationship between art, religion, philosophy, and the science of nature. If Substance is a concrete totality, then poetry, and Dante's poetry in particular, is the discipline that pierces through it, seeing the infinite in the finite, the discipline of nature in act, the conflict between gravity and light, and the harmony between their "spirits."<sup>23</sup> In a way, it is precisely along these lines that we still read Dante even when we cannot but disagree with him, and it will be along these lines that we will keep on reading him.