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The Rhetoric of Compassion: from Francesca to Ugolino

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DANTE

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SU DANTE ALIGHIERI

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The relationship between Francesca and Ugolino has been a widespread topic in the exegesis of *Inferno* since at least Francesco De Sanctis. As is known, De Sanctis painted them as respectively the heroine of love and the hero of hate, stressing the concurrences in Dante's poetical representation of their tragedies caused by antithetic but equally overwhelming passions lasting even after death.¹ From this point of view, Dante would be deeply involved by their drama – both with Francesca's drama of love and Ugolino's drama of paternity – and would go as far as a sort of participation in or identification with the suffering of the sinners, making them in his verses two pathetic and pitiable figures of human greatness even if wicked, as romantic criticism has generally argued.

This implies a reflection on the meaning and nature of compassion, which has great emphasis especially in *Inferno* V, given first of all the several occurrences of the word *pietà* (ll. 72, 93, 140) and other terms related to the same semantic field (e.g. l. 87 «affettuoso grido», l. 117 «tristo e pio»)². Moreover, that the pilgrim has been strongly touched by Francesca's speech is demonstrated by his final fainting and fall as a dead body («sì che di pietade / io venni men così com'io morisse. / E caddi come corpo morto cade», 140-42). In *Inferno* XXXIII, however, things are changed and have evolved: there is again a strong emotional reaction after Ugolino's tale, but it arises in the invective against Pisa, that actually belongs more to the poet than to the pilgrim,³ while at the end of the canto compassion turns into courtesy («e cortesia fu lui esser villano», 150) and the act of courtesy by Dante is not wiping the frozen tears that close the eyes of a damned, frate Alberigo dei Manfredi, in order not to alleviate the pain and to respect the divine punishment. We are dealing, therefore, with an antiphrastic courtesy that refers to an attitude of religious *pietas*. It is worth noting that we find a similar reaction to the acts and the words of a damned soul resulting in an invective against his homeland in the episode of Vanni Fucci (*Inferno* XXV), a man that surely does not earn any compassion, whose acts and words are undoubtedly hateful and blasphemous. And regarding compassion, we have already learned from the encounter with Geri del Bello and Vergil's subsequent pressing remarks (*Inferno* XXIX 1-36) that being sympathetic («pio») towards a sinner goes against *pietas*,⁴ namely against God's will and Dante's duty and role in his otherworldly mission.

¹ De Sanctis 1955, 685-86 and 701-2.

² According to many modern interpreters, *pietà* in *Inferno* V does not mean 'compassion' or 'empathy': it would rather be a subjective disposition induced by the consideration of the terrible consequences of sin; see e.g. Natalino Sapegno commentary to *Inferno* V 72: «non è da intendere nel senso di compassione, simpatia (come nelle interpretazioni che di questo canto famoso diedero già, nel quadro di una sensibilità prettamente romantica, il Foscolo e il De Sanctis, seguiti da molti fra i commentatori moderni); bensì nel senso di turbamento, che nasce dalla considerazione delle terribili conseguenze del peccato. E s'intende che, trattandosi qui di una colpa che ha la sua prima origine in un sentimento naturalissimo, ed esaltato per giunta da una lunga tradizione poetica (che risale ad Ovidio e si distende per infiniti rami nella letteratura medievale, fino allo "stil nuovo"), e trovandosi tra questi peccatori molti personaggi celebrati dalla poesia e aureolati dalla leggenda, il turbamento implica anche una sfumatura di sofferenza e di segreta tormentosa inquietudine, che non importa comunque mai da parte di Dante un atteggiamento di adesione e di compartecipazione e non attenua in nessun modo la recisa condanna morale» (Sapegno 1957, 61; further remarks thereupon in Russo 1966 and Malato 1989, 85-89; for a concise survey on the theme of compassion in Dante, see Cranston 1968). It is notable that Boccaccio's explanation was substantially equivalent: «In queste parole intende l'autore d'ammaestrare che noi non dobbiamo con la meditazione semplicemente visitar le pene de' dannati; ma, visitandole e conoscendole, e conoscendo noi di quelle medesime per le nostre colpe esser degni, non di loro, che dalla divina giustizia son puniti, ma di noi medesimi dobbiamo aver pietà e temere di non dovere in quella dannazione pervenire» (*Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante* V, 1 138-39). Especially among German scholars it has grown a debate on the contrast between Right and Dante's mercy towards the damned souls, starting from Hugo Friedrich's book *Die Rechtsmetaphysik der Göttlichen Komödie* (Friedrich 1942), where he maintained that the pilgrim's trip through Hell, as an itinerary to a full insight into God's justice, were² also a way to learn mercilessness through the demonstration of the ineffectiveness of sympathy with the sinners, like in Francesca's case; see also more recently Schumacher 2016.

³ Moreover, Dante actually seems not to share Ugolino's pain, as the Count's insisted appeal suggests: «Ben se' crudel, se tu già non ti duoli / pensando ciò che 'l mio cor s'annunziava; / e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?» (XXXIII 40-42).

⁴ Comparable paradoxes are in *Inferno* XX 27: «Qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta», and *Paradiso* IV 105: «per non perder pietà si fé spietato».

Before going further, we have then to make a consideration due to the essential and now well-established distinction between Dante *agens* (the character) and Dante *auctor* (the writer): the effects of both Francesca's and Ugolino's speeches concern principally Dante as the character, that is evident, as we have just pointed, in the episode of Francesca. The stance of the author is not necessarily aligned and needs an additional investigation starting from the structure and strategy of representation and from the background of the ideological and theological implications.

In fact, the main material link between Francesca's and Count Ugolino's episodes is both structural and rhetorical and leads us into a net of many-sided intertextual reflections. The words – an actual *captatio benevolentiae* rich in *pathos* – with which Francesca begins the story of her deadly falling in love with Paolo are almost the same as Ugolino's beginning:

E quella a me: – Nessun maggior dolore
che ricordarsi del tempo felice
ne la miseria; e ciò sa 'l tuo dottore.
Ma s'a conoscer la prima radice
del nostro amor tu hai cotanto affetto,
dirò come colui che piange e dice.
(*Inferno* V 121-126)

Poi cominciò: – Tu vuo' ch'io rinovelli
disperato dolor che 'l cor mi preme
già pur pensando, pria ch'io ne favelli.
Ma se le mie parole esser dien seme
che frutti infamia al traditor ch'i' rodo,
parlare e lagrimar vedrai insieme.
(*Inferno* XXXIII 4-9)

Moreover, behind these words there is an eminent classical citation. I mean that both of them refer to the same source and quote the *exordium* of Aeneas' tale to Dido of the destruction of Troy:

Infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem,
Troianas ut opes et lamentabile regnum
eruerint Danaï; quaeque ipse miserrima vidi,
et quorum pars magna fui. Quis talia fando
Myrmidonum Dolopumve aut duri miles Ulixi
temperet a lacrimis? [...]
Sed si tantus amor casus cognoscere nostros
et breviter Troiae supremum audire laborem,
quamquam animus meminisse horret, luctuque refugit,
incipiam.
(*Aeneid* II 3-13)

As we see, on the background of the two sinners' tales stands out one of the most touching, highly pathetic and tragic passage of the Vergilian masterpiece. So, De Sanctis could be right, and Dante might have borrowed the quotation from Vergil according to the building of a depiction of

human tragedies shaped – paraphrasing Foscolo's words about *Inferno* V⁵ – as if compassion were the unique muse. Or, as for instance Robert Hollander points,⁶ it could be that by the doubled Vergilian reprise Dante leaves a kind of exegetic signal that prompts us to a symmetrical reading of Francesca's and Ugolino's discourses as a self-exculpating and self-serving version of their stories, which aims at sympathy but does not deserve it. I would rather change the perspective, put the author and the protagonist backstage for a while and consider the matter from this point of view: that Francesca and Ugolino are employing the same rhetorical pattern. Therefore, we are allowed to suspect that the eloquence of certain sinners takes advantage of a sort of *topica* of the exordia elaborated on a basis of Vergilian components, which has a specific and highly incisive application in pathetic tone in order to gain compassion. Taken in this way, the symmetry between the two discourses not only is of help to deconstruct the reliability of the accounts and then to deromanticize Francesca and Ugolino: it also implies that under discussion is the use of eloquence and the exploitation of literary *topoi* as tools of the technique of persuasion – that art exposed to distortions and to a lack of ethical control where the right can be wrong and the wrong right.

There is another significant textual connection between the two speeches, that – unlike the Vergilian quotation at the exordium – the commentaries usually overlook: to my knowledge, the first to spend some remarks about it was Giovanni Pascoli in his *Minerva oscura* and after him it has been hinted at by no more than a couple of critics.⁷ I refer to *Inferno* V 100-102 and XXXIII 19-21:

Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,
prese costui de la bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.

però quel che non puoi avere inteso,
cioè come la morte mia fu cruda,
udirai, e saprai s'e' m'ha offeso.

First of all, the correspondence is useful to interpret the disputed passage of *Inferno* V. Since the affinity, «e 'l modo ancor m'offende» should necessarily refer to «che mi fu tolta», namely the way of the death, not to the overcoming influence of Amore highlighted two lines above, as Antonino Pagliaro has suggested. What is still damaging and hurting Francesca («m'offende») is the brutal and ignominious – ignominious for the *in flagrante* adultery in which she and Paolo have been caught and dishonoured for all eternity – assassination at the hand of her husband Gianciotto, in the same way as Ugolino has been offended by Archbishop Ruggeri's betrayal and by the subsequent inhuman execution in the Torre della Muda. Feeling hurt and insulted involves, by the medieval ethos, the desire of revenge to restore dignity and honour. Ugolino gives vent to his beastly anger crunching Ruggeri's skull, but Francesca does not show less hate and rage when she substitutes her curse for God's judgment and predicts her husband's future damnation much lower down, in Caina: «Caina attende chi a vita ci spense» (107). The presence of Dante is a chance that they cannot miss to rehabilitate their dignity in the world of the living. So they resort to all the resources of their eloquence to gain sympathy and compassion, and through sympathy and compassion to remove blame from themselves on one hand, on the other to dump shame and bad reputation on the men who offended them, as Ugolino explicitly states: «Ma se le mie parole esser dien seme / che frutti infamia al traditor ch'ì' rodo etc.».

⁵ See Foscolo 1979, 442: «La colpa è purificata dall'ardore della passione, e la verecondia abbellisce la confessione della libidine; e in tutti que' versi la compassione pare l'unica Musa».

⁶ See Hollander 1984, 550.

⁷ See Pascoli 1957, 156-59; Padoan 1993, 198-200; Malato 2005, 48-54.

The request of sharing and emotional participation by the listener – or in more appropriate terms the motion of affection – is another rhetorical pattern that the two discourses have in common. Ugolino addresses Dante an apostrophe that hides a new quotation from Vergil, to be exact from the same passage of *Aeneid* II used at the outset of the oration (ll. 6-8: «Quis talia fando [...] temperet a lacrimis?»): «e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?» (XXXIII 42). Francesca, after pointing out her interlocutor's benevolence («O animal grazioso e benigno», l. 88), dares to claim almost paradoxically that she and Paolo would pray to God for Dante's peace in exchange for the pity he shows:

se fosse amico il re de l'universo,
noi pregheremmo lui de la tua pace,
poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso.
(*Inferno* V 91-93)

The last common point we must underline from this perspective is the figure of reticence with which both the damned conclude their tale. It may sound unexpected, since we have seen that exactly the way of the death is what mostly hurts them. Actually, however, covering up those happenings means once again to divert blame from themselves. Francesca merely says that she and Paolo gave up reading the romance: well, after giving up reading, they surrendered to lust and were caught in the act by Gianciotto, so that their sudden murder – admitted by the laws of the age – eternally sealed their sin. For his part, Ugolino uses the reticence to disguise the suspected and really inhuman act of cannibalism he could have committed when «più che 'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno».

Approaching the conclusion, we return for a while to intertextuality. It is remarkable that in Francesca's episode there are many other Vergilian echoes in addition to the one we highlighted above. Claudia Villa has argued that by this echoing Dante works for a kind of transposition of Dido into Francesca and so takes a fundamental step forward in his literary journey to search for and improve his expressive skills in the genre of *comedia*.⁸ In any case, Dido, in *Inferno* V, is the standard bearer and the archetype of a particular group of sinners of the circle of the lustful, called with a significant periphrasis the «schiera ov'è Dido» (l. 85): they are the ones whose carnal love – an appetite that totally overcomes reason as for all the lustful – drives them – in accord with Guido Cavalcanti's thought⁹ – to physical and spiritual death. We can hardly admit that Dante as the author of the *Commedia* – resuming the line of the *Vita nuova* and after a canzone like *Doglia mi reca nello core ardire*¹⁰ – could shape a character standing for such a concept of love with whom he comes to imagine an identification or participation. Different, of course, is the instance of the pilgrim, who will accomplish his purification from any legacy of earthly desire only at the height of *Purgatorio* XXX-XXXI facing Beatrice.

However, Francesca does not speak of such a concept of love. In her words, love is a matter of gentle people with noble mind and refined culture, an elevated sentiment inspired by the highest examples – Queen Guinevere and the bravest knight of the Round Table – of courtly literature, whose

⁸ Villa 2009.

⁹ For Guido Cavalcanti's presence in the background of the problematic concept of love standing out in *Inferno* V, see Barolini 2006, 70-101; from this point of view, Dante would explore in the canto the reverse side (love=death) of his basic idea of love (love=life): «*Inferno* 5 constitutes Dante's most synthetic and compelling meditation on love as a death-force, on love as a power that does not defy death but courts it, on love as a dark compulsion that – far from leading us toward salvation – keeps us, as Cavalcanti puts it, "out of well being" (*for di salute*). We could say, indeed, that *Inferno* 5 is the venue in which Dante conducts an *in malo* exploration of the *Commedia*'s basic premises: the possibility of transcendence through love and the salvific mission of the word» (79).

¹⁰ See particularly ll. 23-38 («Omo da sé virtù fatt'ha lontana: / omo no, mala bestia ch'om somiglia. / O Deo, qual meraviglia / voler cader in servo di signore / o ver di vita in morte! / Virtute, al suo fattor sempre sottana, / lui obedisce, lui acquista onore, / donne, tanto ch'Amore / la segna d'eccellente sua famiglia / nella beata corte; / lietamente esce delle belle porte / della sua donna e torna, / lieta va e soggiorna, / lietamente ovra suo gran vassallaggio; / per lo corto viaggio / conserva, adorna, accresce ciò che trova; / Morte repugna sì, che lei non cura») and 141-47 (ma se biltà tra' mali / volemo anumerar, creder si pòne / chiamando amore appetito di fera. / Oh cotal donna pera / che sua biltà dischiera / da natural bontà per tal cagione, / o crede amor fuor d'orto di ragione»).

precepts have been produced through paraphrases of Guinizelli and Dante himself. Besides, she touches the delicate issue of reading and poetry influence on moral behavior and, trying once again to attenuate her fault and her personal and individual responsibility, she puts the blame at last also on the book and on its author («Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse», l. 137). This is clearly a mystification: good arguments referred to the wrong subject – lust instead of love – and directed to a perverse aim – exculpating and downsizing the import of the guilt –, but it is natural that Dante – the protagonist, I mean – would be particularly sensitive to them. His reaction of deep involvement is then the figuration – or better the evidence – of the suggestion and dangerous impact of the rhetoric of compassion. Pity and fear of the great tragedy of love have been played out; but the question is not sharing, emotional identification, the ethics of mercy or even catharsis, as any romantic or sympathetic reception implies: it is rather and more deeply beyond the veil the power that word has even if regardless of truth.

Francesca's manipulating attitude goes as far as to distort the literary source she invokes as an example, the *Lancelot* in prose, where it is Guinevere, urged on by Galehaut, who kisses Lancelot, not the contrary, as she tells («Quando leggemmo il disiato riso / esser baciato da cotanto amante, / questi, che mai da me non fia diviso, / la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante», *Inferno* V 133-36). Ugolino does much worse, depicting his last times as a sort of Eucharistic rite and along the same lines as the Passion of Christ. There is no doubt that he aims to establish his account upon a content of truth, as the appropriation of Aeneas' elegy and suffering, of the mark of tragic awareness thanks to a prophetic dream, of mythical examples of a parent's devastating sorrow for his son's loss like Hecuba, Niobe or Athamas,¹¹ and above all of Passion and Eucharist demonstrates. Nevertheless, this appropriation does not go under the surface – it is an instrumental and rhetorical coat of paint – and truth lies afar. The truth is what God's judgement has sanctioned plunging the sinner into the bottom of Hell, and no rhetorical performance – though pitiful – can delete or disguise the sin, which besides is reflected and properly revealed in the Count's beastly anthropophagic fury against his enemy. Not without reason, regarding the style, Ugolino's tragic and pathetic oration is strikingly incongruous and incoherent with the context, since the «rime aspre e chioce» Dante recalls at the outset of canto XXXII are really suited to the subject and the situation. In fact, as it seems to me, this is a further evidence invalidating any sympathetic or romantic reading.

Ultimately, Count Ugolino's speech teaches that the art of eloquence and the excellence of the literary patterns are not enough guarantees to avoid the word emptying itself and remaining a dead letter. From Francesca Dante has come a long way: his reaction is the invective against Pisa, which correctly focuses the matter and in a biblical tone condemns the violence and the depravation of political struggle at the time.

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