



The tragic complexity of *Purgatory*

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Abstract

The text is part of a broader study on the perception of tragic perspective compared with our contemporary tragic sense. In addition to have a particular narratological relevance, the persistence of tragic level in the second cantica of the *Comedy* produces a decisive effect in Dante's discourse, and proposes a different meaning of Allegory. One of the results of this investigation concerns the dramatic language, which is determined where Dante's allegorical representation takes place, whereas the Allegory itself is forbidden by the variables of the tragic discourse, and is impossible to realize. However, the tragic perspective of the second Canticata is not constant, as in *Hell*, and it has its specific *climax*, marked by the acceleration of the time, the space of waiting, the crisis of salvific destiny, which, in the arc od Dante's narration, bind the characters to doubt and to need to overcome the tragic and irresolvable condition of being without destiny.

Keywords Allegory · Enunciation · Space of waiting · Tragic conception · Undecidability

Complexity of tragic language

For understanding the complex meaning of Dante's tragic conception is necessary to evaluate the distance between the tragic perception in Medieval age and our contemporary reception of tragic sense. The result of this comparative interpretation coincides with a definition of tragic language considered as dynamic whole of levels interacting with each other. Such a model of reference derives from the transformations realized in some fundamental fields of literary topics. For example, and in another context but in a similar perspective, Piero Boitani (2021, p. 24) has written of the traces of *furor* in *Paradise*, a *furor* that goes far beyond the human conception, also in relationship with fury and madness of the inspirations, even basic

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themes for the description of God. In our context the tragic complexity of *Purgatory* indicates a metanarrative and narratological key, useful for the contemporary reader.

Determining the persistence of the tragic focus in the *Comedy* is far from intuitive comprehension, and must be evaluated in all its scope. In a recent study on the tragedy in *Hell*, and on the figure of Lucifer, Sabrina Ferraro (2020) very aptly reminds us that the meaning of medieval tragedy, and especially for Dante, cannot be directly debtor to Aristotelian definitions. Nevertheless, the tragic perspective of Dante's narration, well beyond the distinctions made in *De Vulgari eloquentia*, shifts the axis of tragics and insinuates it into the discourse both with regard to the character's fate and as a genre of poetry. The discourse moves beyond the limits of medieval rhetoric, that is, in a way, as Eliot would have liked, more understandable for our contemporaneity, considering now the narratological status of *Purgatory*. In the meantime, let us say clearly that the tragic horror of *Hell* is quite different from the tragic complexity of *Purgatory*, which draws a very precise semic space on the level of narration and of the enunciation of the discourse, on the level of representation and of rhetoric, especially with a different role of Allegory.

If we wanted to identify at least three of the peculiar aspects of contemporary tragedy, we would have to deal with variants or variations inscribed and largely derived from Dante's *Purgatory*. I will begin by indicating the three paths in question, with the help of contemporary writers, and then I will enter more directly into the discussion about some tragic aspects of the second Cantica. The long and well-known essay by Samuel Beckett of 1929 on Joyce's work (Beckett, 1984, pp. 19–33) indicates, for comparative concordances, more than one motivation regarding a detailed tragic *climax* right in *Purgatory* (and without excluding its interpretation to different degrees in the other two Canticas), summarized in the expression «a continuous purgatorial process at work» and explained in detail in the same essay. Here is an example fragment, which will come in handy later:

Hell is the static lifelessness of unrelieved viciousness. Paradise the static lifelessness of unrelieved immaculation. *Purgatory* is a flood of movement and vitality released by the conjunction of these two elements. There is a continuous *Purgatory* process at work, in the sense that the vicious circle of humanity is being achieved, and this achievement depends on the recurrent predomination of one of the two broad qualities. [...] On this earth that is *Purgatory*, Vice and Virtue, [...] must in turn be purged down to spirits of rebelliousness. Then the dominant crust of the Vicious or Virtuous sets, resistance is provided, the explosion duly takes place and the machine proceeds. And no more than this: neither prize nor penalty; simply a series to enable the kitten to catch its tail. (Beckett, 1984, p. 33)

So, Beckett with his undecidability without possibility of absolute and solution, give us the first interesting dimension for the focus. The other one is assured by a passage from Thomas Bernhard's (1967) novel, *Verstörung (Gargolyes)*, where the protagonist says exemplarily (for us) that tragedy consists in the fact that nothing has ever really died. And from the continuous dynamism of the tragic perspective we pass to our third hypothesis, suggested by Milo De Angelis (2017, p. 37) in a simple and immediately understandable statement: «I seek the contrast, the discord, the war between the forces, the tragedy: which does not

sanction the human condition at the outset, but rather pierces it and makes it recognize with its shaking, and is, in the midst of delirium, dazzled by a sudden clarity. Tragedy cannot consist without light».

The Purgatory climax

Following the three-steps explanation borrowed from our contemporaneity, we start again, with Dante, asking ourselves: why precisely the tragic perspective of *Purgatory*? Because the multilevel design of this dimension of tragedy is essentially purgatorial. Dante's *Purgatory* has the colours of the tragic human being, a set of gradations and developments of destinies marked by two main factors: confession and time. The concept of *Purgatory* is so historically close to Dante (Le Goff recalls that it did not exist until the end of the 12th century) (Le Goff, 1981) that it allowed the poet to attach the idea of history and the idea of human responsibility to the extreme limit of death, valid and functional in the span of a biography. And why? Because it is relatively easier for Dante to capture small stories and big stories in a few lines, and here, in the *Purgatory*, with less exemplary representativeness than in the first *Cantica*. The space, the body, the words of the confession, the need for individual memory, the consideration of family and social judgment, the trust in dignified rehabilitation, all these motives form a mosaic of situations that give less depth to the voice of the individual, and give more value to his feeling of being part of the whole. All these actions indicate needs, and in any case we are still far from the definition of love like lightness and vector of knowledge (well studied by Mira Mocan) (Mocan, 2007, p. 34).

Le Goff emphasizes that Dante always aware of the profound logic of *Purgatory*, sees it as a temporary hell that recalls, transiently and in a minor way, the infernal torments deserved for the sins themselves. As for the atonement of sins and the purification of souls and consciences, for the vast majority of commentators these basic options are guaranteed by repentance in the course of life, and even in its extreme limits and by seemingly impalpable acts like a tear expressing the extreme will. What if we reverse the perspective? What happens if consider the mass of sinners as individuals who relativize and humanize their faults, convinced that this wobble between good and evil (remember: tragedy cannot consist without light) corresponds to life itself?

We would obtain that a mixture of sins and repentances, which would be difficult to cut clean, forms a participative confession, involved, seriously engaged in a sort of "rhetoric of salvation" (so called by Battistini, 2016), understood as a mixed, variable gender, as surprising as it is informal. This set of genres does not escape the competence of Dante narrator even of short stories. If in Hell, in spite of Dante's indulgent and often participative gaze, any kind of human consideration would never suffice to overcome the impossibility of rehabilitation (even in the pathos of Hell, V), now it is precisely that never to be barred, and to introduce asceticism towards a condition of realized purgatoriness. The *while* of *Purgatory*, the space of waiting, the trust in the passage of time that washes away sin, together with the choruses, the moans, the *dissufflations* (as Andrea Zanzotto would call them) (Tassoni, 2016 and

Zanzotto, 2001, pp. 114–120), the exclamations, the whispers, the docked phrases, and the interference of molecules of meaning, end up forming a sort of informal conversation, as soon as which intelligibility is not necessary, not as the impalpable intentionality of repentance.

The space of the enunciation

Leaving aside, for the time being, the in-depth reflection on *Purgatory* as a time of delay, a time of waiting, a time of the unknown, a time of the insoluble and of tension, which are all factors of the dimension of tragedy, we can point out some figures and narrations that concretely manifest the characteristics summarized so far. In addition to Virgil, a tragic figure in himself, caught between the lack of the gift of grace and the eternity of exile, due to the natural prohibition of entry into Paradise, the other characters of the second *Cantica* bear a precise mark of this tragic dimension. Just as the actions in the space allotted to the pronouncement of penitents preserve the trait of difficulty, of effort, of climbing, even of confessing and confessing, as in a continuity of suffering. This dynamics, in any case, leads everyone to ask Dante to give reliable information on earth about the escape of those souls from the pitfalls of Hell (the two main functions attributed to them) to Dante as character: credible messenger of small destinies and designated poet: «e quel che vedi, ritornato di là, fa che tu scrivi» (“and what you see, returned from there, make you write”), Beatrice tells him (Pg, XXXII, 104, 105). Other figures, therefore, are fully included in our register: starting with Belacqua (Pg, IV, 97–135), guilty of precisely the fault of the delay, of which Beckett (in his version) prolongs the effects until imagining him on the operating table, intent on procrastinating, passing through and, without realizing it, dying underneath surgeon’s needles (in *More Pricks than Kicks*, 1934) (Tassoni, 2012, pp. 52–69). There are quick and backlit portraits, such as the one in a few incisive lines by Pia dei Tolomei (Pg, V, 130–136) (among other things, even today overwhelmed by the doubt of the attribution of identity) (Santagata, 2021, pp. 156–161). And there is the splendid portrait, in a motionless pose, of Philip the Fair (Pg, VII, 109–111), almost a statue in an initially melancholic attitude, with his head reclining on his hand, in his first appearance, as in the other (Pg, XXXII), we find him at the center of an allegorical machine, dramatic in itself. It is not tragic, where the personification of the giant pervades the whole scene, dangerous also in reprehending the act of Dante voyeur, visually struck by the monstrous giant «di sospetto pieno e d’ira crudo» (“with full suspicion and crude wrath,” Pg, XXXII, 157). Here it is precisely the difference between the dramatic genre and the perspective of the tragic that assigns to the medieval Allegory a limiting dimension, concentrating on a very precise image, conceptually for the full comprehension of the reader of the time. Here the dramatic plane deactivates the tragic tension, precisely because the effect of the Allegory occupies the entire conceptual explanation, dramatazing for better being understood (see Tassoni, 2016, pp. 121–134).

The reader's perplexities

The reader might be puzzled about the scene of the giant, alias Philip the Fair, intent on possessing and dominating the «puttana sciolta» (“the loose whore,” Pg, XXXII, 149), who turns «l’occhio cupido e vagante» (“the greedy and wandering eye”) (Pg, XXXII, 154) right to Dante. All that happens before the monster drags her away in the heart of the forest. We are again in the middle of an Allegory with well-marked boundaries, well-marked but not immediately intuitive for historical reference, and still playing on the common thread of seeing-not seeing, looking-intra-looking, appearing-disappearing. Dante enters in this scene without any title (as already said, with a *voyeur* attitude), naturally provoking the reaction of the giant. At this point it could be suggested that the entry into the allegorical device, which refers to a precise historical interpretation, risks to represent an arbitrary intrusion, because Dante tries to legitimize his risky position by resorting to the role of witness that he sees with his own eyes (more he sees and more he can tell on his return, as Beatrice advised him to do). The Allegory does not suggest, in this case, the possibility of an immediate and shareable reception, but it is functional to encourage a transfer of meaning, thanks to the dramatization of ideas by images. Faced with the type of code recognizable by the vulgar explanation, included in medieval Allegory, the tragic version of Dante here flees as far away as the monster in the forest, as the allegorical machine gives the possibility of an unrelated explanation, indirect but faithful, without risk and without rest, like a film that asks the scenes of the current story, avoiding the ban didacticity. Allegory in its dramaticity is concentrated in a defined framework and must be closed in the example and in the circumstances to which it refers directly and exclusively. Another thing is the tragic tracing, or of tragic perception in the *Purgatory* journey, something else and completely opposite to those allegorical correspondences. In fact, in the momentary period Dante pursues the unsolvable theme of a person in flesh and blood, who finds himself in a place where he could not be, does not explain or codify the contents, and keeps the tension of the story active, without the need for an ultimate justification. Nor can we neglect, what happens in the enunciation of the Canto XX, that of the «mala pianta» (Pg, XX, 43), so incurable that Ugo Capeto asks God for vengeance, here where shame rhymes with lies and Gascony (*vergogna/menzogna/Guascogna*; Pg, XX, 62, 64, 66). Now, both in Canto XXXII and in Canto XX we find detailed the three constants of tragic enunciation, exemplified at the beginning of the speech, namely: the continuous and circular purgatorial process, the observation that nothing has ever really died, and finally the definition of tragedy as a path which needs light, and which would not exist if closed in itself, and it is possible and sensible if conceived in relation to something else, as it happens in Dante’s *Purgatory*.

The alien suspension

One effect on which is based the tragic dynamic of the momentary insolvability of situations during the journey in *Purgatory* is that of estrangement, and above all of suspension, as a source of waiting for the salvation. A salvation promised through the search within oneself for forgiveness, for the act that purges, for the ethical and spiritual retraction of even unforgivable human actions, which can happen in extremis, at the boundary between certain life and death. Many of Dante's characters seem to share such a redemption opportunity, and are rewarded for it, but they will have to wait, and therefore the time factor is determined and determining in the curve of suspension and necessary alienation from a biographical profile that will appear to the repentant reinterpretable starting from the extreme repentance. In Canto XII Dante himself is invested by the tragic chain of events narrated to him and by the completed short stories that between mythological, biblical and profane sources (especially the Stories of Orosius, Pg, XII, 55–57), attract him in the first part. The attitude of suspension and waiting of Dante himself makes him assume a posture (physical and psychical) half-way between the head turned upwards of the proud, with their recriminations, the claims of dominion and self-affirmation (well known to him), and the humble, peaceful, reverence, *reverenza* of the angel who suggests a different way out. The pilgrim looks to the weight of pride and relies on the lightness of the angel, with the practical promise of lightening from toil (Pg, XII, 118–120). The speed, tone and rhythm, of Virgil when invites Dante, has the same flavor as the solicitous prick used when listening to tragic and lightning events, from Lucifer to the superb Troy, while the angel's intervention is slow, relaxing and persuasive. We could unite in a whole the effects produced in Canto XII: the estrangement, the suspension, the waiting, the sinking into one's thoughts, and on the contrary the testimonies of pride, of arrogance, of raising one's head too high above oneself. This comparison reminds us that tragedy needs light (De Angelis) and that the whole purgatorial process becomes a fundamental element of Dante's intelligence (Beckett), to the point of convincing the poet that nothing has ever really died (Bernhard), to the point of granting him a strange relief from fatigue (Pg, XII, 120 and 125). The perception of the effects of lightness, however, is as beneficial as it is obsolete. In this case we hear Dante complaining to Sapia about the wrath that besets him, thinking about himself under the weight of pride as in the background he would have had for the sin of envy (Pg, XIII). This is a human, ethical and psychic oscillation, which revolves around the risk of mirroring oneself in the pride of others, in the envy of others (recognizing their own pride, their own envy). And in this particular empathic dynamism we recognize that catharsis generates tragedy, as Aristotle maintained (and Dante did not know). Another essential connotation of the invention and, I would say, the reinvention of the tragedy at the level of the Cantica of *Purgatory* is the necessary speed of the journey which, while never losing the sense of its "where," is fundamentally based on listening to testimonies and confessions on the tight thread of imposed speed and a tangle conception of human and earthly time, adapted to the path

and to the plot of *Purgatory*. This sustained path, which would lead to avoiding pauses, delays and deviations, is felt for a good part of *Purgatory*, as we said, like a tight thread that does not allow interruptions, cuts, so that the reasoning as well as the stories and figures often overflow in the next Canto (think, for example, to the *incipit* of Canto XXIV).

Virgil often reminds Dante of his duty to proceed quickly, and it is as if his words remind us readers that the unfolding of the stories must be understood in tune with the commitment of a prompt step that does not allow us to dwell on the drama and the dramatic action itself.

Sembianza munta

Along the arrow of purgatorial time, Dante tries not to be distracted, and on the contrary he sharpens his receptive possibilities, even if with some delay in the passage. The beginning of the Canto XXIV, with the important emphasis, «ma ragionando andavam forte» (“but reasoning we went strongly”; Pg, XXIV, 2), indicates us the directionality, the interweaving that is forming, and the rhythm, which are homologous and corresponding in step and words. The image, which is violent in itself, due to the crude metaphor used by Farinata («munta/ nostra sembianza via per la dieta», Pg, XXIV, 17, 18) offers us a portrait that can be adapted to any presence in *Purgatory*, with allusion to the loss of those human features which allow us to distinguish individuals from each other. The identity, offended by the meagre and milked appearance, forms a sort of intermediate stage between death and punishment, which acts on the manipulation and modification of that in life would have been the physical aspect. We will have to wait for the patient explanation of Statius (Pg, XXV, 94–108) to understand the relationship between the material consistency of the human shadow and the body that resembles it. So far we know that the shrinking, the thinning, and the weakening of the body’s physiognomy create a contradiction useful to introduce the list of greedy people. And from it also derives a very precise metonymy, inscribable in the space of the tragedy, which we understand better when Dante introduces the similarity of the birds along the Nile, comparing to them «la gente che li era» (“the people who were there”); and we read precisely “people,” with a visual effect concerning the thinness connected with the rapidity of movement of an anonymous group, undistinguished for individualities (Pg, XXIV, 64–69). Moreover, under the sign of rapidity develops the real flash-back of the violent and accidental death of Corso Donati dragged by his horse (Pg, XXIV, 85–87), and here with a rhyme association between “rat” and “undefeated body” («ratto» and «corpo disfatto») Foresè’s brother race (the other Foresè who pauses for a while to converse with Dante) points with the other souls towards the salvific outcome that follows the passage through *Purgatory*, in a varying time, different from one to the other. *Purgatory*, in fact, is an intermediate place of frequent crossings and comparisons, as we have just seen with regard to the rapidity associated with the devastating effect of the image, in a decisive connection with the strong narrative intent (it already contains a certain type of story), and as can be seen in the contrasting relationship

between souls destined for Hell and souls encountered in the transit of the *Purgatory*. The purgatorial aspect of the passage finds its exposition as a seal of the tragic character of the movement, and not reassuring or obvious, especially in Canto XXV (Gilson, 1967). The subject is the soul that suffers, torments itself, is punished as if it were endowed with a body, and the discourse broadens towards the themes of punishment, of the atonement, of the suffering felt materially in a sort of psychosomatic intensity of a pain that we know will end when the soul itself is cured, relieved, led to salvation. But this future, this time to be awaited in the time of purification, constitutes the knot of a momentary tragedy of the event. In this sense it could be said that a contemporary poet, such as Mario Luzi, who has crossed much and in various ways the discourse of Dante, has a purgatorial language, even if not entirely tragic.

The tragic tension

To simplify, we ask ourselves: what makes tragic the narration of Canto XX? Let us recall the material narrowness of the path taken «con passi lenti e scarsi» (“with slow and meager steps,” Pg, XX, 16), which cannot fail to have a non-literal impact. In this difficult and invasive passage, and if is possible to eliminate the pressing harmful interferences, Dante sharpens the attention (Pg, XX, 17). The story that follows is tragic precisely because the initial elements of the song are bright, positive, concerning figures such as Consul Fabrizio or Saint Nicholas, far from the flattery of wealth, and so detailed that the mind is focused on these examples, putting the oppressive difficulties of the journey in the background. The luminous trail of the words that pleased Dante (Pg, XX, 28) leads to the harsh confession of Ugo Capeto, who, not by chance, immediately recognizes the privilege of Dante’s role, «perché tanta/ grazia in te luce prima che sia morto» (“why so much grace in you light before you die,” Pg, XX, 41, 42). The semic field of evil and the long metonymic thread keep the tragic register tense: the spear «ch’a Firenze fa scoppiar la pancia» (“that in Florence makes the tummy explode,” Pg, XX, 75), the sale of the daughter-slave (XX, 81), the umpteenth call to vengeance (Pg, XX, 95) and divine wrath (Pg, XX, 96), the accusing the lineage of traitors, thieves and parricides (Pg, XX, 104), lamenting miserable avarice (Pg, XX, 104). Dante also assures an acoustic and kinetic pressure to the Canto: the trembling of the mountain and the repeated cry, which create disorientation and suspension, after the sudden and volitional cut that the two pilgrims actually bring to Ugo Capeto’s speech. The tragic dimension of the Canto XX, which appears as a string stretched within the whole narration, culminates in the sudden reaction of the two listeners who suddenly stop accepting the penitent’s release, and who find themselves, equally abruptly, in front of the scary landscape, the earthquake, the thunder, the cry «da tutte le parti» (“from all the parts,” Pg, XX, 132), with the background of the weeping of the shadows returning to the ground (Pg, XX, 144). A precise ethical and psychological image can be deduced, without a doubt: the violent earthquake of memories, deeds, words, in this Canto becomes a restless

and disturbing force, just kept at bay by Dante, while he has to quickly move away with Virgil from this scene. The ignorance, the inexplicability, the desire to know, the questions in the air, the incomprehension, reduce Dante to become «timido e muto» (“shy and mute,” Pg, XX, 151), that is to say to return to the role of an uninvolved spectator (but how much will he resist the temptation?). The same separating veil interposed between himself and the explanation, the pressing of time, the repressing in himself the desire for knowledge, create a tragic suspension in Dante as character of the story, and contemporarily as an author who, by changing his register decisively, prepares to continue the story.

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