DANTE ALIGHIERI, *PURGATORIO* XXVI.139-148

Simone Marchesi

El cominciò liberamente a dire:
"Tan m'abellis vostre cortes deman,
qu' ieu no me puesc ni voill a vos cobrire.
Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan;
consiros vei la passada folor,
e vei jausen lo joi qu' esper, denan.
Ara vos prec, per aquella valor
que vos guida al som de l'escalina,
sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor!".
Poi s'ascose nel foco che li affina.

El: The action unfolding in these lines takes place on the seventh and last "cornice" (ledge) of Purgatory, where the souls purge their disposition to hetero- or homosexual love by staying immersed in flames (see BURGWINKLE 2004, 573-579). The character about to speak is Arnaut Daniel, who has just been pointed out to the protagonist by Guido Guinizzelli, a fellow practitioner of vernacular poetry, as "miglior fabbro del parlar materno" (a better craftsman in the native tongue, v. 117), a producer of literature superior to anything written in either *oc* or *oïl* (vv. 118-119, for which see TOYNBEE 1902), and ultimately a better poet than the currently more famed Giraut de Bornelh (vv. 119-120).

Before the *Comedy*, Dante has already spoken highly of Arnaut in his Latin treatise *On vernacular eloquence*: at II.ii.8-9 (ranking him the highest for love poetry, in the paragon of Provençal and Italian poets who had dealt with the three great themes of *salus, venus, virtus*), at II.vi.6 (where he cites the incipit of one of his *canzoni*), and again at II.x.2 and II.xiii.2 (as the inventor of the un-rhymed stanza, i.e. the *sestina,* a lyrical form that Dante claims to have adopted from him). On Dante and Arnaut, the following general

treatments still prove very useful: BOWRA 1952, BONDANELLA 1971, PERUGI 1978 (in part., 116-144), SHAPIRO 1982, and BAROLINI 1984 (in part., 96-118 and 173-186).

Arnaut is at the center of a triad of Provençal poets presented in various guises in the *Comedy*: before him we find Bertran the Born in *Inferno* XXVIII, and after him Folquet of Marseilles in *Paradiso* IX. On this "gallery" of poetic portraits, its relation to the previous discussion of the Provençal canon in *Dve* II.ii.8-9, and the dynamic equilibrium of a 'Folquet-like' Arnaut in Purgatory followed by an 'Arnaut-like' Folquet in *Paradiso,* see BERGIN 1965.

The eight lines that Dante attributes to his Arnaut (with quite a tormented philological history, for which see PETROCCHI 1966-67, 3: 456-459, FOLENA 2002, 262 and BELTRAMI 2004) are the most extended stretch of non-Italian vernacular in the whole poem (for a potential meaning of this precise length, see SMITH 1980, 101-102). Placed *in limine* to one of the Canto XXVII, these lines retrospectively call attention to Dante's concern with language in the 'parallel' Canto XXVI of *Inferno* (with the first guide, Virgil, addressing Ulysses in the Lombard vernacular –as per XXVII.20– after having perhaps addressed him in Greek –as per XXVI. 75), as they anticipate the similarly engaged passage in *Paradiso* XXVI.133-138, where it will be Adam's turn, as first *fabbro* of human language, to discuss the various names of God in the different ages and idioms of Mankind). On the question of parallel cantos in the *Comedy*, see HAWKINS 1980 and BROWNLEE 1984; on the *cauda* to the three Cantos XXVI, see also FIDO 1986.

Tan m'abellis: since the early twentieth century the phrase has been recognized as an allusion to the incipit of Folquet of Marseilles' canzone *Tan m'abellis l'amoros pensamen*, which Dante cites as one of the examples of the highest metrical form, syntax, and diction in *Dve* II.vi.6 (see, for instance, the commentaries by CHIMENZ, GIACALONE, BOSCO-REGGIO, HOLLANDER, FOSCA). Different readers have taken the simpler diction and syntax characterizing this passage as a sign of different attitudes that Dante might have had vis-à-vis Arnaut. It has been read either in an emulative light, with Dante recuperating Arnaut's keywords and prominent stylistic features and importing them into his text (BOWRA 1952, 469-470; WILHELM 1995, 93-94), or in a corrective light, with Dante deliberately undoing Arnaut's original diction

and style to present a morally 'better' version of his predecessor's poetics (NEVIN 1983, 80-81; HISCOE 1983, 151-154).

On the meaning of the verb, which is the exact equivalent of the Italian 'piacere' (to like, to find pleasing), see again *Paradiso* XXVI.132, still in Adam's speech about the arbitrary nature of human semiosis; to this parallel (which was perhaps first noted in the commentary by GRABHER), one may also add the retrospective relevance of the phrase "com' altrui piacque" (as was liked by someone) in *Inferno* XXVI. 141 (one line from the end of the canto), an expression Ulysses uses to describe the God-send shipwreck in which he found his demise (which is in turn taken up again, in a redeemed and redeeming context in *Purgatorio* I.133, to evoke Dante's own successful 'crossing' to the island of Purgatory). Bridging two cases in which the different verbs (*piacque* and *v'abbella*) point to the arbitrariness of actions and language, Arnaut's use of the Provençal form of the latter in the acception of the former may constitute perhaps a further (though certainly subtler) signal of the parallel quality of the three Cantos XXVI.

no me puesc ni voill a vos cobrire: according to some commentators (ranging in attitudes from the more poetologically-inclined SAPEGNO to the more theologically-determined HOLLANDER), the line may contain another signal (rhetorical this time) of the palinodic attitude with which Dante infuses his Arnaut. The former champion of the *trobar clus* here seems actually to renounce the artificial and programmatic obscurity of his earthly poems. The gloss is probably accurate, especially given the *leu* (or 'stilnovistic') diction dominating the Provençal lines Dante writes for Arnaut (see PEIRONE 1966). This verse contains, however, one further feature that may deserve commentary; namely, the two modal verbs, which are far from being neutrally arranged, with the first (I cannot) seeming to express an impossibility that the second (I want not) qualifies as depending on a choice. By having Arnaut's soul at first concede and only then (though immediately after) embrace self-revelation, the text of the poem seems to be presenting readers with a portrait in words of a character whose generous and charitable attitudes still need to make their way through the habits contracted in his previous life. The "fire that refines" the souls of Arnaut and his fellow sinners may, in other words, still be working through the residues of an earthly self. (On the dynamics of self-correction discernible in the speeches of

several characters in the early cantos of *Purgatorio*, see GRAGNOLATI 2005, esp. 140-150, with essential bibliography and considerations that may be relevant to the present context).

Ie sui Arnaut, que: this kind of internal signature – which is admittedly typical of Arnaut's poetry (see, e.g., the famous envoy "*Ieu sui Arnautz qu'amas l'aura,"* a favorite of Petrarch's) – is a marked form of self-identification for the *Comedy*. In the poem, characters actually tend to displace their name from the account of their present condition, when they phrase it in a relative clause. More common than this circumstantial *sphragis* is either the phrase "I am the one [or someone], who" (as in *Inf.* XIII.58 and XVIII.55; or, closer at hand, in Guinizzelli's question to the protagonist at *Purg.* XXIV.49: *colui che fore / trasse le nove rime* […] ?) or the expression "I am one, who" (as in *Inf.* VIII.36 and XXIX.94; or, interestingly enough, in response to the last occurrence of the previous form, *Purg.* XXIV.52: *I' mi son un che, quando / Amor mi spira, noto*).

Plor et vau cantan: to be read in conjunction with the following carefully-structured and chiastic phrase, this second dichotomy is potentially oxymoronic. The effect is lessened contextually, given the penitential attitude of the souls in Purgatory, who often refer to their condition in contradictory terms. None does so more clearly and incisively than Forese Donati in *Purg.* XXIII.72: "io dico pena, e dovria dir sollazzo" (I say suffering, while I should say pleasure) and 86: "lo dolce assenzo d'i martìri" (the sweet wormwood of the torments). The conceit, however, is certainly not foreign to Arnaut's modus operandi: see, for instance, "Pero l'afan m'es deportz, ris e jois" from *Sols sui qui sai.*

Consiros vei: on the semantics of the first word see NOCITA 2006. Some readers may find amusing that Renaissance (and even a few modern) commentators appeared to have interpreted the term as "con si ros" –thus producing renditions like "in such red (i.e., fiery) crossing [it: *guado*]" (cfr. the glosses *ad loc.* by LANDINO, VELLUTELLO, DANIELLO, VENTURI, PORTIRELLI). The word indicates a reflexive attitude. On a possible source for these and the previous lines as well as for the rhyme-words of the tercet to be found in Guillem de Berguedà, see PERUGI 1978, 127-130 (with a further antecedent proposed in BAROLINI 1984, 117-118).

la passada folor, / e vei jausen lo joi qu' esper, denan: the lines are carefully constructed around a series of oppositions, which may be rendered graphically as follows:

consiros [A] vei {B} la pasada {C} folor [D]
vei {B} jausen [A] lo joi [D] qu'esper, denan {C}.

The chiastic structure [AB / CD // BA / DC] is reinforced by the etymological equivalence of A^1 and D^1 (*jausen lo joi*), the double verb/noun inversion (evidenced in the disposition of {} and [ ] signs), and the semantic as well as chronological opposition of "vei" and "esper." (For a similar, albeit simpler, structural reading of the distich, see YOWELL 1999, 392). The second line has also long since been assigned an Arnautian pedigree, containing a quite discernible echo of the erotically and etymologically charged "jauzirai joi" in Arnaut's *Lo ferm voler*.

valor: one of Arnaut's keywords that undergoes a drastic revision and redefinition in Dante's version of his spiritual poetics (see the introductory gloss by BOSCO to the BOSCO-REGGIO commentary of this canto, listing "**plor**, **cantan**, **joi**, **folor**" – to which one should probably add also the philologically problematic "escalina," as per SMITH 1980, 102). *Valor* is usually associated with the lady; here the reference is quite clearly supernatural.

sovenha vos a temps: the tone of his *petitio* – which aims, though with a less specific request, at achieving the same goal as Guido Guinizzelli's similarly worded appeal we heard a few lines earlier: *falli per me un dir d'un paternostro* (v. 130) – has brought some commentators, in particular CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, to include Arnaut in a gallery of touching figures such as those of Pia de' Tolomei (Purg. V.130-136), Provenzan Salvani (Purg. XI.121-42) and Romeo di Villanova (Par. VI.127-42), whose portraits are systematically placed at the end of cantos in which other characters receive the leading role. The tonal, narrative, and topographical marginality of Arnaut may actually be read as a corrective refocusing of the text (as well as the Pilgrim's and reader's attention) on spiritual issues in the concluding moment of the long meta-poetic section opened by the appearance of the Latin poet Statius in *Purgatorio* XXI. (For a similar concern, see the final

paragraph of the gloss to this passage in the HOLLANDER commentary.)

poi s'ascose: three reasons have determined the inclusion of this final Italian line in the sample commented here. Not only is it the last line of the canto (the final rhyme of which allows no verse to remain unrhymed in the poem) and perhaps one of the most famously cited lines of Dante's poem in Anglo-American literature (thanks to T.S. Eliot's quotation in *The Wasteland*), it also continues and brings to a conclusion the canto in an Arnaldian vein, quite seamlessly after Arnaut's speech has ended. This line describing the penitent's hiding in the refining fire of Purgatory, apparently little more than a 'marginal' element in the episode's stage direction, resonates with three crucial, recapitulative allusions to a constellation of meta-poetic elements clustered around Arnaut. Woven together we find the notion of poetic concealment (a distinctive trait in Arnaut's poetics), a reification in the realm of fiction of Arnaut's frequent metaphors of erotic fire (e.g. the four lines from *Er vei vermeils:* "D'Amor mi pren penssan lo fuocs / e'l desiriers doutz e coraus, / e'l mals es saboros q'ieu sint, / e'il flama soaus on plus m'art," which may have contextual relevance to the passage), and the theologically-inflected use of a technical verb, *"affinare,"* which belongs no less to the dictionary of the troubadour *fin'amors* than to the proper spiritual workings of redemption in Purgatory (purification by fire as per *Purg.* II. 122, combined with 1Cor. 3: 12-15). (See BONDANELLA 1971 and YOWELL 1989.) A final, but hardly local, ambiguity for Dante.

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*Note: An author's name followed by no date indicates a commentary to Dante's *Comedy*; all commentaries are cited according to the Dartmouth Dante Project.

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