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DANTE'S ENCOUNTER WITH LIVING "SHADOWS"

Dante's *Commedia*, later known as *Divine Comedy*, is a journey to the afterworld, experienced by the poet as a dream. The inhabitants of this otherworldly space are described as images: their meaning will be the focus of the present paper. Dante understands this dimension of the afterlife according to the Medieval conceptualization of the three specific places that are described in the three *cantiche* of the poem. The dead appear in the two first books, *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, as living shadows who still carry their mortal bodies with them in image- and voice-form. In *Paradiso*, they have turned into lights, who still wait for their resurrection within eternal bodies. Moreover, these three places are dominated by distinctive temporal notions: an endless time in Hell, the different times corresponding to each individual punishment in the Purgatory, and the awaited end of time in Heaven.

The scenario, which is going to be developed by the poet in his work, is most clearly described in the first, introductory *canto*. Prior to the beginning of his journey, he gets lost "in a dark forest", where wild animals bar his way. Then suddenly somebody appears who "looked speechless through long silence". Dante addresses him with these words, asking for protection: "whoever you are, whether a shadow or a real human being". The answer is: "I am not a man, but I was once a man (*uomo già fui*)" (*Inferno* 1, 73). The speaking shadow is introduced in this way. Some hints at its previous life enable the poet to understand that he is facing Virgil, who lived more than one thousand years before him. He greets the great poet of Antiquity as his "master" (*maestro*) and his unequalled "model" (*autore*).

The *volume* Dante maintains to have studied "so long" is nothing else than Virgil's masterpiece, the *Aeneis*. In the latter's sixth book, the Trojan Aeneas, the later founder of Rome, descends into the Netherworld in the aim to ask his father Anchises about the future. The role played there by the Cumaean sibyl is undertaken in the *Commedia* by Virgil, who only in the *Paradiso* will leave the task to another soul (*anima*), that of Beatrice, "who is worthier than me" (*Inferno* 1:65 and 1:122). Already the introductory verses of Dante's poetical journey to the afterworld evoke notions that have informed the perception of the dead's afterlife in two different cultures – the "shadows" of Antiquity and the "souls" of Christian tradition.

European imagination was nourished by the ancient rhetorical figure of the "living shadow", which regained its full poetical potential with Dante. He attributes the explanation of his rather original interpretation of this figure to the words of the ancient poet Statius, who, according to legend, was a Christian convert. It first appears in the 25th canto of the second *cantica*, which corresponds not only to the work's middle, but also to a key moment and a real turning point in Dante's journey. Since a soul is going to experience a new transformation, through which it will be led into Paradise, there is a need to provide some elucidations about its body of shadow. The poet's claims of having seen souls in the hereafter could sound hazardous, given that Christian doctrine taught that they were bodiless. Dante's shadows were not inspired by theology and were introduced as a tribute to Virgil's otherworldly journey. He worked out a double strategy whereby such special images were simultaneously defined *by analogy with shadows* and *in contrast to bodies*.

A double bodily association is already present in the shadow we cast on the ground, and it can be reduced to this general principle: *an image is like a shadow, which differs from the body but is produced by a lighted body*. Sensorial seeing leads first to imagination and later to conceptualization.

As a natural bodily image, the shadow has constantly played a role as a source of inspiration and guidance for image-making. It worked simultaneously as a proof and a loss, as an index and a denial of the body, whose clear outline was blurred and made hard to recognize. On the other hand, the body was, in Dante's eyes, a living phenomenal reality and, as such, a *persona*. This latter word, which indicated a mask in ancient theatre, was already used by Thomas Aquinas to describe whoever lives in his/her own body. Unlike Virgil, the pilgrim Dante was still a *persona*. In the sixth circle of Hell (*Inferno* 6:36), the two travellers catch sight of an illusory image (*vanità*) that looks like a person (*che par persona*).

Like the border between life and death, the threshold between bodies and shadows, despite their being so strongly associated in the sunshine, can hardly be crossed. Rather than as a stimulus to transgression, Dante interpreted it as an outcome of transcendence. Accordingly, the analogy of image and shadow in its mimetic association with the body led him, in a further step, to acknowledge the ontological difference between shadow and body. Through their shadows, bodies cast their image on the ground, whereas the dead do not *cast* any shadow, since they *are* shadows.

Ancient thought made clear that shadows cannot be touched in the same way as images can be hugged. Already Homer describes an unsuccessful embrace that causes disappointment. As Odysseus tries to clasp the image of his mother in his hands (*Odyssey*, 11:205-210), it vanishes "like a shadow or a dream". In Virgil's poem (*Aeneid* 6: 699-700), Aeneas throws his arms around his father's neck, but "the image escaped his hands" (*manus effugit imago*). He sees "bodiless beings" (*sine corpore vitas*), who come towards him as "empty images" (*cava sub imagine*). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (402-443), such an experience of shadows is associated to Narcissus' mirror-image: what he saw was only "the shadow of an image" (*imaginis umbra*) that, after coming and staying with him, also went down in his company.

Similar expressions are also encountered in Dante's work. In the second canto of *Purgatorio* (2:76-84), he sees a soul approaching and trying "to embrace him". Since this attempt fails, the poet cries out: "O empty shadows, which exist only in their appearance!" (*Oh ombre vane, fuor che nell'aspetto*). Only by his voice he recognizes the figure standing before him as his friend Casella, who states: "As I loved you once in my mortal body, so I love you now albeit bodiless". In the 21st canto (130-136), Dante and his guide meet with the roman poet Statius. As soon as Dante introduces Virgil to him, the former discourages him from any embrace: "Brother, leave that alone, as you are a shadow and you only see a shadow" (*Frate, non far, ché tu sei ombra et ombra vedi*). Statius admits with embarrassment that he "forgot our nonentity and treated shadows as solid bodies" (*trattando l'ombre come cosa salda*).

The different phenomenal appearance of Dante's body vis-à-vis his shadow is first hinted at in the third canto of *Purgatorio*, in the very moment as he leaves the dark depths of Hell and comes out to the sun-lighted slopes of Purgatory (*Purgatorio* 3:16-18). Since the sunshine is behind him, he casts a shadow on the ground in front of him: "The sun was broken in front of my figure" (*rotto m'era dinanzi alla figura*), "which was an obstacle to its rays". This does not happen with Virgil: is he still at his side? The guide reassures the poet with these words: "It is already evening in the place where the body, through which I once cast a shadow (*al quale io facea ombra*), is buried" (*Purgatorio* 3:24).

The next instant, as a host of souls fix their attention on the shadow cast by Dante on the rocky ground, Virgil confirms to them "that you are really seeing a human body, and that's why the sunshine is cut through with him on the ground" (*il lume del sole in terra è fesso*). It is by God's will that Dante still has a body, "against which the sunshine is broken" (*rotta*). Similar explanations will be given frequently during the visit to the Purgatory. The souls, engaged in improving their status, get frightened when they realize that Dante breaths and casts a shadow, and mistake him for an intruder. In the circle of the voluptuous, he is asked why "you can make of yourself a wall against the sunshine". They whisper to each other's ears: "That one does not look like having a fictitious (*fittizio*) body" (*Purgatorio* 26:12), and, in so saying, they provide a definition of their own status. The shadow is understood as a visual marker signposting the solid matter (*cosa salda*) which has been lost by the souls.

Dante understands shortly later why the gluttons, who, as souls, need no nourishment, can lose weight and may look like starving people. Then Virgil steps aside and is finally willing to reveal the origins of the bodies of shadow. He encourages the poet Statius to verbally show the "cosmic view" (*la veduta eterna*) wherein even the bodies of shadow have a place (*Purgatorio* 25:31). Statius deals with this in three steps. First, he sums up the process whereby the body is created through human conception, in keeping with Aristoteles. Second, he follows theological scholasticism in his statement that God creates immortal souls, which share in both human and divine qualities, as they manifest themselves in the body's life.

Later on, Dante/Statius relies exclusively on his own thought in describing the origins of the bodies of shadow. The soul preserves the shaping power (*virtù informativa*) it pos-

sessed before separating from the body. The poet has recourse to the natural metaphor of the rainbow created by sunlight in the air imbued with rainwater: in the same way, the shell of air that surrounds the souls in the afterworld takes shape in a form through which they can manifest themselves "by their own power" (*virtualmente*). A second natural metaphor hints at flames, which are obliged to follow the fire in any direction: in the same way, the new shape (*sua forma novella*) conforms to the soul, and "that's why we call it shadow" (*ombra*). Nevertheless, this bold comparison implies a basic distinction. Whereas, in this world, the soul manifests itself in the body, in the afterworld it can find expression only in a very idiosyncratic type of shadow. It happens therefore, so says the soul, "that we have to speak, laugh, and cry", and the Purgatory visitor is invited to become convinced of this, since "the shadow is formed" (*l'ombra si figura*) by such affections (*Purgatorio* 25:110).

In this strongly investigated passage Dante takes a risk. He speaks of the miraculous making of an image, in which the soul lives again in the afterworld. As shown by Étienne Gilson, there was no place for the existence of shadows in the theological universe. Rather, they are inventions of a poet who transposes Virgil's model into a Christian context. Whereas the ancient viewed shadows as indicators of lost bodies, the souls of Purgatory prepare themselves to a further transformation into lights, which will resurrect within their bodies on the day of Last Judgment (*il gran dì*). Dante is bound to the shadows he meets with not only through their reminiscences of past lives, but also through their hope in a shared future.

Already in the 11th canto Dante admits to his artist's pride, which will be something he will have to expiate in the same way as the dead artists on the terrace of the arrogant. Despite such manifestations of humility, in the third *cantica* he runs another risk, which his narrative qualities had hitherto been unable to achieve. The ascent to the sphere of planets in Paradise is a new task, which cannot be accomplished by relying on the shadow notion. He invokes the god-poet Apollo, but only Beatrice can help him to understand what he is going to see. The image problematics emerges here in a new form. Since the souls leave their body of shadow behind them, they are transformed into lights, whose association with shadows can only be perceived as contradictory. In the light, the shadow has vanished.

The afterworld traveller, who is still living in his own body, has literally lost his footing. Souls move about weightless and as quickly as light in aether. Dante describes them as "living lights" that are like countless mirrors reflecting divine light: "Then I saw one thousand souls hastening towards us" (*Paradiso* 5:103). One of them, "nested" within a lighting cover as all other souls, comes closer and speaks to him. As the poet inquires about its identity, it shines "of a brighter splendour", since, in this way, it shows its joy for the question (*Paradiso* 5:109). Other images come to be associated with this nocturnal "constellation" of stars. In the 19th canto, the "beautiful image" (*bella imago*) displaying an eagle with open wings proves to be a multiple composition, where each soul radiates like a ruby. Accordingly, the eagle can also speak with several voices. Dante is now reporting something that "nobody has hitherto described and not even the boldest *fantasia* may be able to imagine" (*Paradiso* 19:1-3).

God's vision creates the light radiated by the souls. But it can be wondered whether they have already achieved their final status. An answer is given by Solomon in the 14th canto: "our vestment" (*vesta*) of light will be preserved and will even radiate of a brighter light, when the flesh, now glorified and hallowed, will cover again our *persona*, re-established in its living wholeness" (*Paradiso* 13:43-45). Consequently, "the splendour that shines hereabout will be surpassed by the appearance of the body (*carne*), which is now covered with earth" (*Paradiso* 13:55-57).

The souls' return to their new, immortal bodies is an audacious thought, which Dante cannot avoid borrowing from Christian tradition. Nevertheless, he regains his poetical freedom by adding that souls are "nostalgic about their dead bodies" (*mostrar disio d'i corpi morti*; *Paradiso* 13:63). Since very early times, human beings reacted to their existential challenges by opposing the *faces of images* to the *facelessness of death*. Because of death, they found themselves entangled in the enigma of an absence, to which images owe their oldest meaning. Their presence in this world responds to a definitive absence. In the myths associated with funerary cults the dead come always to a place where they are waited for by the living within an image. Therefore, the ontological meaning of images was connected to death, since it is only in the realm of death that the appearance of an image is able to attract a new being.

At the core of Dante's otherworldly journey lays an image theory grounded in the distinction between image and body. These two notions differ from each other from a double perspective: on the one side, bodies *are not* images, and on the other hand, images *have* no bodies. Shadows are cast by mortal bodies, and not by souls, which experience a new life as bodies of shadow. Since the latter could but be understood as *images*, they could not be mistaken for living *bodies*. Only Dante's dreaming self could cross the border between life and death. Awareness of death – which, from an anthropological viewpoint, can be described as the genetic moment of human image-making – eventually led Dante to work out the poetical imagery of a journey into the afterworld, which has become world literature.