# Joyce, Dante

## and the Poetics of Literary Relations

Lucia Boldrini

# JOYCE, DANTE, AND THE POETICS OF LITERARY RELATIONS

Language and Meaning in *Finnegans Wake*

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Lucia Boldrini's study examines how the literary and linguistic theories of Dante's treatises and the poetics of the *Divine Comedy* helped shape the radical narrative techniques and linguistic inventiveness of Joyce's last novel *Finnegans Wake*. Detailed parallel readings raise diverse issues such as the question of Babel, literary creation as excrement, the complex relations between literary, geometrical and female forms. Boldrini places Joyce's work in the wider context of other modernist writing's relation to Dante, thereby identifying the distinctness of Joyce's own project. She considers how theories of influence and intertextuality help or limit the understanding of the relation. Boldrini shows how, through an untiring confrontation with his predecessors, constantly thematised within his writing, Joyce develops a 'poetics in progress' that informs not only his final work but his entire *oeuvre*. This book will appeal to scholars and students interested in Joyce, Dante and questions of literary relations.

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*For my parents, Luciano and Luciana Boldrini,*
*and for John and Catherine Robinson.*

# *Acknowledgements*

# *Abbreviations*

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|---|---|
| *Conv* | Dante, *Convivio*, ed. G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli. Florence: Le Monnier, 1964. |
| 'DBVJ' | Samuel Beckett, 'Dante. . . Bruno. Vico. . Joyce'. In *Our Exagmination* (see below). |
| *Dve* | Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. A. Marigo. Florence: Le Monnier, 1957. |
| *Exag* | Samuel Beckett et al., *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. London: Faber, 1951. |
| *FW* | James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*. London: Faber, 1950. |
| *Inf* | Dante, *Inferno. La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi. Testo della Società Dantesca Italiana, Milan: Mondadori, 1966–8. |
| *Purg* | Dante, *Purgatorio. La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi. Testo della Società Dantesca Italiana, Milan: Mondadori, 1966–8. |
| *Par* | Dante, *Paradiso. La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi. Testo della Società Dantesca Italiana, Milan: Mondadori, 1966–8. |
| *JJ*II | Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. |
| *Letters* I, II, III | *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. I ed. Stuart Gilbert. London: Faber, 1957; vols. II and III ed. Richard Ellmann. London: Faber, 1966. |
| *P* | James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Chester G. Anderson. Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1968. |
| *SH* | James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer. London: Paladin, 1991. |

*SL*       *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann. New York: Viking, 1975.
*U*        James Joyce, *Ulysses*. London: Bodley Head, 1960.
*VN*       Dante, *Vita Nuova*, ed. Edoardo Sanguineti. Milan: Garzanti, 1977.

All translations from Dante's works are mine unless otherwise indicated.

# Contents

# Introduction: In the Wake of the Divine Comic

> L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse;
>
> . . .
>
> Voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo
> per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale
> vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,
>    metter potete ben per l'alto sale
> vostro navigio, servando mio solco
> dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale.[1]
>
> *(Par* II, 7; 10–15)

> Skim over *Through Hell with the Papes* (mostly boys) by the divine
> comic Denti Alligator
>
> *(FW* 440.05–6)

In canto XXV of the *Inferno,* abandoning his (often only nominal) deference towards the *auctoritates* of the literary past and the mask of the unworthy follower ('io non Enea, io non Paulo sono'; 'I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul', *Inf* II, 32), Dante tells of the complex and terrible metamorphoses to which the thieves are subjected, and underscores his poetic invention by bidding Lucan and Ovid be silent, because the changes they described in their works could not stand comparison with what Dante is now witnessing – or, as we are to understand, with his own superior inventiveness:

> Taccia Lucano omai là dov' e' tocca
> del misero Sabello e di Nasidio,
> e attenda a udir quel ch'or si scocca.
>    Taccia di Cadmo e d'Aretusa Ovidio,
> ché se quello in serpente e quella in fonte
> converte poetando, io non lo 'nvidio . . .    *(Inf* XXV, 94–9)

(Let Lucan now be silent, where he tells of the wretched Sabellus and of Nasidius, and let him wait to hear what is now being fired. Of Cadmus and Arethusa let Ovid be silent, for if he converts by his poetry the one into a serpent and the other into a fountain, I do not envy him . . .)

Dante's boastful self-appraisal in this literary duel ('scocca' describes the moment the arrow is fired from the bow) achieves a double result: the poet acknowledges two of his main sources of inspiration, Lucan and Ovid, and, at the same time, marks his departure from the pagan models he is imitating and their mythical subject-matter. The principal issues are thus that of originality, understood both as temporal anteriority and as novel treatment of one's poetic material, and that of the competition with one's sources and models in order to surpass or defeat them; what is really at stake, then, is the assertion of one's own rights to authorship, the victorious reversal of Harold Bloom's notion of anxiety-laden influence into an appropriation and metamorphosis of the earlier poet, guided by an awareness of the superiority of one's poetic weapons. But those who live by literature ·die by literature, and Dante's success in his competition with his predecessors has transformed him into a model to be appropriated and transformed to new ends by his successors.

Joyce's relationship with Dante is to an extent comparable to the one thus sketched by Dante: by inscribing Dante's literary theories and techniques into his text, appropriating (thieving) and transforming (metamorphosing) them for his own purposes, Joyce can be said to be implicitly proclaiming his own 'Taccia Dante'. By means of this silent silencing, however, Joyce also allows Dante's voice to resound through his work, acknowledging his source and giving a clue to one of the many (and always insufficient) poetic, structural and exegetical models for *Finnegans Wake*.

Joyce started reading Dante already when he was at school, and his interest in the Italian poet never lapsed.[2] Of course, Joyce was not alone: while, apart from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries had shown scant interest in Dante's works,[3] Blake's illustrations of the *Commedia*, the medievalism of the Romantics, or even more specifically, the German Romantics' writings on Dante, introduced by Coleridge into Britain, are just three instances of the Florentine's increasing prominence in the landscape of past literary masters from the late eighteenth century. Coleridge, Hunt, Shelley, Byron, all read Dante, wrote on him and borrowed from his works. Whereas the Romantics' picture of the medieval poet was often of a proud, solitary and cheerless figure and their concern was mainly with the dark but lively *Inferno*, later in the

nineteenth century Dante became for Ruskin the 'central man of all the world . . . representing in perfect balance the imaginative, moral and intellectual faculties, all at their highest',[4] while Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites promoted an image of Dante and of his work as both highly sensual and spiritual, focusing on the poet's love and on the figure of Beatrice, and often privileging the *Vita Nuova*, which had generally been neglected until then.[5] In the early decades of the twentieth century, Dante was a main source of inspiration for the modernists, to the extent that it has been claimed that 'Dante has dominated the imagination of [Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Beckett, Stevens, Auden] as has no other writer',[6] while another critic has argued that 'One of the ways we could describe an aspiration of virtually all the major modernist writers in English is that they were all trying to write the *Commedia* of the twentieth century . . . there is a sense in which Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, Beckett, and Eliot, in addition to Pound and Joyce, were simply imitating *the* Italian, Dante Alighieri.'[7]

Why was Dante so central to the modernist project of 'making it new' (to use Pound's slogan), and why was he so relevant, in particular, to Joyce's radically new narrative technique in *Finnegans Wake*? With Dante, the Italian language achieved a semantic and lexical flexibility and range that were unthinkable before him. Bare mathematical statistics show the scope of Dante's linguistic innovation. The linguist Bruno Migliorini points out that the vocabulary of the Italian language increased from 4,000–5,000 words at the turn of the first millennium to 10,000–15,000 around 1300.[8] Compared with this 'common language', the extension of Dante's lexicon is stunning: nearly 28,000 words, a figure that becomes even more striking if we consider the lexical range of contemporary Florentine poets: Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti, for instance, used just over 800 words in his poetry. It is not surprising then that Dante should have earned the reputation of 'father' of the Italian language, a claim which Joyce characteristically acknowledged while simultaneously pointing both to the 'distortion' inherent in Dante's technique and in his own treatment of language, and, implicitly, to the 'metamorphosis' and 'distortion' to which his 'model' will also be subjected: 'May Father Dante forgive me', he is reported to have said, 'but I started from this technique of deformation to achieve a harmony that defeats our intelligence, as music does';[9] nor is it surprising that Dante should be the author to whom modernists turned in their project of renewing literary language.

As we shall see in chapter 4, Dante's impressive expansion of the vernacular was not due to some kind of 'baroque' exhibitionism, but it was in fact both justified and necessary on account of his programme, famously stated at the end of the *Vita Nuova* (his autobiographical *Künstlerroman*, to use a modern term), to go beyond the immediate perceptual reality in order to say what had never been said by anyone before – in order, that is, to express the *novum*, the divine, the ineffable (*VN* XLII). Joyce's trajectory too may be said to be informed by a poetics of the *novum*: it appeared at least as early as his own autobiographical *Künstlerroman*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, cut short like the *Vita Nuova* exactly when Stephen announces his intention to forge the 'uncreated conscience of [his] race' (*P* 253). It is also central in the *Wake*'s (in)ability to tell in 'nat language' (*FW* 83.12, night language, not language), through techniques that can be profitably aligned with the (im)possibility of representing the ineffable in the *Paradiso* – the 'something itself' ('DBVJ' 14) that is its subject.

But this is Dante the poet. In the first three chapters of this book I argue that Dante the theorist, concerned with a diachronic and synchronic study of the language and with the signifiying structure of the polysemic text, was an equally powerful model that Joyce confronted in his construction of *Finnegans Wake*.

Several of Dante's works, including his treatises *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Convivio*, were available to Joyce in Dublin in either Marsh's or the National Libraries. Given the young Joyce's propensity for delving outside the mainstream literary canon (reflected in Stephen's spending his time among the dark and dusty tomes of Marsh's Library to read medieval books of the Italian Trecento, *SH* 181, and the fading leaves of Gioacchino da Fiore's prophecies,[10] *U* 49) or for putting the mainstream into the service of his semi-heretic, or at least very individualistic, aesthetics, it would not be out of character if already at this early stage he had at least browsed through these less canonical, generally less well-known works by the Florentine.

I have found no clear evidence in Joyce's earlier writings of any direct uses of Dante's linguistic and literary theories; at this point, for Joyce too, Dante is still very much the poet of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*. This lack of explicit evidence should not suggest however that Joyce would not have been aware of the existence of these works and their contents. As his curriculum included the history of Italian, it is more than likely that mention would have

been made of the *questione della lingua* ('the question of the language'), an issue which in Italy – a nation politically divided until the nineteenth century and in which regional differences and desire for national unity have always constituted motives of tension – flared up especially in the Cinquecento and the Risorgimento.[11] In the Cinquecento in particular Dante's position became a motive for fierce debate from the moment Giorgio Trissino rediscovered and then printed a manuscript of the *De vulgari eloquentia* and brought it to the attention of his contemporaries, including Francesco Bembo (whose statement on the *Divine Comedy* appeared in one of the papers that Joyce had to take for his honours examination,[12] and whose *Prose della vulgar lingua* existed in Marsh's Library in manuscript form) and Machiavelli, who pointed out the contradictions between the treatise and Dante's practice in the *Commedia*, thus casting doubt on the attribution of the treatise, to the point that some scholars even accused Trissino of forging the work. (An Italian translation of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* published in Venice in 1644 and opening the first of six tomes of a large work collecting various works on the Italian language by Trissino, Bembo and several other scholars who intervened in the *questione della lingua* was also available in Marsh's Library; the National Library, apart from a number of editions and translations of the *Commedia*, also had a translation of the *De vulgari eloquentia* by Ferrers Howell[13] and at least one of *The Banquet* (*Il Convito*) by Katharine Hillard, also containing the 'Epistle of Dante to Can Grande' in the appendix.[14])

Joyce's life on the Continent and the ten years he spent in Trieste would have made all of Dante's works available to him. Scholarly interest in the *De vulgari eloquentia* in particular had been sparked anew in Italy by the Risorgimento, when the *questione della lingua* and Dante's position within it – debated, among others, by Alessandro Manzoni – was once again brought into focus and linked to the political issue of Italy's struggle for independence and unification, issues that the Triestine *irredentisti* would take up again.[15] In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth publications on the *De vulgari eloquentia* and Dante's other treatises continued to increase.[16] In 1916 a new manuscript of the *De vulgari eloquentia* was discovered in Berlin, and it kindled again discussions on this much debated treatise, on Dante's linguistics and on the authorship of some of his works, including the *Epistle to Can Grande*.

Nino Frank claimed that Joyce's interest in Dante declined and

finally ceased as he wrote *Finnegans Wake* ('Dante's importance was to
recede, and only Vico's philosophy, with its "turn" and "return,"
would remain part of the inspiration of *Finnegans Wake*'[17]), but I
would argue on the contrary that Joyce's understanding of the way
he could rely on and exploit Dante's works culminated with the
*Wake*, and that it is possible to speak of a specifically 'Dantean
poetics' of *Finnegans Wake*. By this I am certainly not trying to suggest
that Joyce's use of Dante in his earlier works was 'immature' or that
his 'understanding' of the medieval poet was limited. It has been
pointed out that 'The Sisters' opens with a reference to the portal of
Hell in the *Inferno*,[18] and I have argued elsewhere that, from the
start, the Dantean subtext enables Joyce to confront the aesthetic
and ethical implications of his literary practice through a use of
textual references that is already much more problematic than
simple parody, the borrowing of a structure or a humble following in
literary footsteps, and that this confrontation already implies – as is
the case in all of Joyce's works, up to and including *Finnegans Wake* –
a reflection on the nature of the relationship between the modern
author and his precursors.[19]

Mary Reynolds has demonstrated in *Joyce and Dante* how subtly
Joyce wove references to Dante into all his books, in order to both
shape and give depth to themes as different as love, father-figures,
rebirth. Yet Reynolds's thematic approach finds more suitable
ground in Joyce's work up to *Ulysses*, whereas *Finnegans Wake* is
discussed in general, though very perceptive, terms. As I have said, I
believe that it is precisely in the *Wake* that Joyce's use of Dante
becomes most pervasive and far-reaching. In the work of the Italian,
Joyce could find an unprecedented and unequalled complex
semiotic, structural and linguistic programme, and if plurality and
polysemy are two of the main structural and thematic aspects of the
*Wake*, then Dante is the obvious antecedent to look at, not only in
order to go back to his works but also to parody them, 'thieve' from
them, 'metamorphose', surpass and 'silence' them.

Polysemy, or plurality of meanings, and linguistic plurality will
accordingly be the focus of the first three chapters of this book.
Dante was the first to design and apply to his own poetry a fully-
fledged model of literary interpretation, which he based on the
exegetical theory of the four meanings of Scriptural writing. Admit-
tedly, the system did not work too well; as I shall argue in chapter 1,
its application and parody in *Finnegans Wake* also exposes its contra-

dictions and ultimate failure. This is not to say, of course, that Joyce was exploiting a failed model in a facile show-off of literary superiority; on the contrary, the adoption of the model also involves a reflection on the nature of signification and on the deviations and distortions that the writer must face in order to achieve polysemy. If for Harold Bloom the only way forward for the later poet is to misread the precursor, and thus to be condemned to suffer from the anxiety of the latent 'guilty' knowledge of this misreading even as the process allows the successor to achieve his own greatness,[20] Joyce's fully conscious recycling of Dante (as well as of any other writer) shows, rather, how it is in fact the precursor that already contains, or even determines, the possibility, for the later poet, to distort his works; the operation should therefore be described not so much as 'misreading' but as a reading between the lines which will expose *any* model's limitations. This also involves an awareness of one's own unstable position, as the silencing of the earlier writer always entails the possibility of being 'silenced' in turn in the future: Dante's 'Let Ovid be silent' is counterbalanced in the following canticle by Oderisi da Gubbio's warning about the futility of taking pride in one's own artistic supremacy:

> Credette Cimabue ne la pittura
> tener lo campo, e ora, ha Giotto il grido,
> sì che la fama di colui è scura.
>   Così ha tolto l'uno a l'altro Guido
> la gloria de la lingua; e forse è nato
> chi l'uno e l'altro caccerà dal nido. (*Purg* xi, 94–9)

(Cimabue believed that he held the field in painting, and now Giotto has the cry, so that the former's fame is dim. Thus has the one Guido taken from the other the glory of the language; and he perhaps is born that shall chase the one and the other from the nest.)

Another will always come who will overturn, displace and replace the present prevailing model – a movement that any reader of Joyce will also recognise as typical of the pattern of supersession at work in literary as well as family genealogies in *Finnegans Wake*. Interestingly the last sentence in the lines above – 'he perhaps is born' – has been interpreted as referring to Dante himself, whose name has displaced that of the two Guidos (Guinizzelli and Cavalcanti); but this also entails that Dante is guilty of the sin of pride at the same time as he describes both its futility and how it is punished and expiated. Although this apparent contradiction can be explained by saying

that, in this context, Dante may be showing that he is conscious of his own supremacy now, but also of his inevitable later displacement, one can only be struck by the frequency and the extent to which Dante's pride informs so much of his writing, a point I shall come back to in chapters 2 and 3.[21]

The same process of 'thieving' and 'metamorphosing' applies to the issue of linguistic plurality: Dante's account of the Babel episode in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (which I shall examine in chapter 2) and then, in the second part of the first book of treatise, his quest for, or rebuilding of, an 'illustrious' language (which I shall discuss in chapter 3), may have suggested to Joyce possible ways of exploiting the theme of Babel and provided a structural model of linguistic construction, but they also offered a system to be parodied and distorted into a principle for organising the plot (e.g. in the pattern that relates linguistic, alcoholic and excremental distillation – see chapter 3) and for composing the *Wake*'s protean and highly unusual 'characters' (e.g. HCE as a language that rises and declines, itself to be declined and articulated in various forms). Joyce's treatment of Dante's linguistic history also allows the reader to look back at Dante as a Nimrod figure proudly attempting to reverse history by achieving what had been denied to his Biblical/mythical precursor.

I must clarify at this point that although this book aims to offer primarily a reading of Joyce rather than of Dante, the obscure words of *Finnegans Wake* may also throw unexpected light on aspects and implications of Dante's works that have not been given much attention, or bring into focus startling conclusions that many eminent Dantists have found difficult to accept. As I shall argue in the next three chapters, for instance, it is difficult to be aware on a first reading of the treatises of the extent to which Dante's project of linguistic redemption in the *De vulgari eloquentia* brings him perilously close to the sin of pride symbolised by the tower of Babel which he endeavours to redress, but if one goes back to the treatise and reads it in conjunction with the *Wake*'s fusion of different roles (HCE and Shem, the language and the tower, the hunter and the hunted, linguistic synthesis or distillation and technique of characterisation), one arrives at an almost perverse image of a Dante who is both saviour and sinner, builder of the Tower and redeemer of Babel. To give another example, the impasse of Dante's theory of polysemy in the *Convivio* is generally read as a flaw which contributed to its abandonment, and contradictions are pointed out between the