



John Took

Why
Dante
Matters

An Intelligent Person's Guide

B L O O M S B U R Y

WHY DANTE MATTERS

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GUIDE

JOHN TOOK

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Preface: Preliminary Confession</i>	x
Introduction: Dante and the Existential Point of View	1
Dante at the Point of Ultimate Concern	1
Dante: Who, What, Where and When?	2
Course of the Argument	13
1 Dante, Self and Selfhood	17
Love-Procession and the Love-Imperative: Preliminary Considerations in the Areas of Theology and Ethics	17
Patterns of Self-Relatedness: Being as <i>Ahead</i> of Self, as <i>Away</i> from Self and <i>Alongside</i> Self	30
A Phenomenology of Being	54
2 The <i>Vita Nova</i>	63
Preliminary Considerations: New Life and a New Book	63
Love and Love-Understanding: The Pilgrim Way	66
A <i>Commedia a minore</i>	90
3 The <i>Convivio</i>	97
Far-Wandering and Friendship: The Courage of the <i>Convivio</i>	97
Feasting and Faring Well: A Guide for the Dispossessed	101
Problems of Perspective and a Civic Ontology	139

4	The <i>Commedia</i>	147
	Preliminary Considerations: Spiritual Journeying and the Courage to Be	147
	A Song of Ascents: The <i>Commedia à la lettre</i>	148
	Journeying under the Aspect of Seeing (<i>Inferno</i>)	154
	Journeying under the Aspect of Striving (<i>Purgatorio</i>)	161
	Journeying under the Aspect of Surpassing (<i>Paradiso</i>)	169
5	The Power of the Word: Issues in the Area of Language and Literature	175
	Being, Becoming and the Sanctity of the Word	175
	The Triumph of the Image and a Writerly Text	187
	Conclusion: In Conversation with Dante	199
	<i>Further Reading</i>	201
	<i>Index of Names</i>	205

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PREFACE:
PRELIMINARY CONFESSION

Forse ancora per più sottile persona si vedrebbe in ciò più sottile ragione; ma questa è quella ch'io ne veggio, e che più mi piace.

(*Vita nova* xxix.4)

Provided only that it deliver the goods, the Introduction following hard upon the heels of this preface will, I hope, make it clear what this fresh meditation on Dante sets out to do – namely to confirm how it is that, over and beyond his status as a cultural asset and indeed as a cultural icon, he still matters to us. The undertaking, I know, is problematic, not least in that like all the great representatives of our tradition – be it Shakespeare in the sphere of letters, Rembrandt in the sphere of portraiture or Beethoven in the sphere of music – Dante matters in as many different ways as those entering into his presence. What follows, then, far from being yet another account of his life and work, is simply my own sense of how it is that, every more specifically historical consideration apart, he enters still into communion with all those busy at the point of ultimate concern, of what in truth it means to be under way on the plane of properly human being. While, then, others of greater discerning may see here matters of still greater moment, that is what I myself see and that is what pleases me most.

John Took
University College London

INTRODUCTION:
DANTE AND THE EXISTENTIAL POINT OF VIEW

DANTE AT THE POINT of ultimate concern – Dante: who, what, where and when? – course of the argument.

DANTE AT THE POINT OF ULTIMATE CONCERN

Why, then, does Dante matter?

In truth, for any number of reasons: for the theologian by way of his proceeding in terms not of the proposition pure and simple but of the agony and ecstasy of spiritual journeying, of the I-self anxious in respect of his or her coming home as a creature of ultimate accountability; for the philosopher by way of his particular brand of Christian Aristotelianism and of the possibility this holds out of a unique form of properly human happiness here and now; and for the rhetorician by way of his sense of the word as but the intelligible form of this or that instance of specifically human being in act and of the image not now as a matter of elaboration or adornment in respect of the plain sense of the text, but as a first port of call when it comes to laying open the *how it stands and how it fares* with the individual (Martin Heidegger's 'wie einem ist und wird') at the point of self-losing and self-finding.

But to speak in this way of what amounts to the high-level concerns of the text – to a setting up of the theological issue, that is to say, in terms of the more or less anxious I-self, of the philosophical preferences of the day, and of the word and of the image as that whereby the individual knows self and is in turn known in the truth of his or her presence in the world as a creature of moral and intellectual determination – is already to point on to

what actually and ultimately matters about the Dantean utterance, namely its taking up of every specifically cultural inflexion of the spirit in a meditation upon the positive *being there* of the individual in the fullness of his or her proper humanity. Short of this – of this commitment to the *being there* of self in the fullness of its proper humanity and to this as but the first and final cause of every spiritual striving – the text lives on as a matter merely of historical interest, as but the more or less predictable product of its immediate circumstances. Sensitive, by contrast, to – as Dante himself puts it at one point – the “butterfly-emergence” of the one who says ‘I’, it straightaway transcends those circumstances in favour of something still more resplendent, of a nothing if not lively encounter with all those – past, present and as yet unborn – engaged at the point of ultimate concern.

DANTE: WHO, WHAT, WHERE AND WHEN?

But with this we are getting ahead of ourselves, for if only by way of honouring the kind of otherness always and everywhere entering into sameness as the condition of good conversation we need to pause for a moment over Dante himself, over the *who*, *what*, *where* and *when* of his own presence in the world.

Dante was born in Florence in 1265 under the sign of Gemini to a White Guelph family of erstwhile comfortable though in recent times of more modest means. Of his childhood and early education we have little to go on other than by way of inference and probability: of inference in the sense of a child doubtless more than ordinarily responsive to the sights and sounds both of the city and of the Florentine countryside and of this as making in turn for a lively imagination and love of myth and of mythmaking, and of probability in the sense of a preliminary initiation in the area of reading, writing and arithmetic with access further down the line to texts such as the *Disticha Catonis* or the *Liber Esopi* or the *Elegia* of Arrigo Settimello as likewise part of an elementary curriculum. But more decisive still, certainly as time went on, was the personal encounter, the presence to him of the poet,

INTRODUCTION

encyclopaedist and civic dignitary Brunetto Latini and of the poet and philosopher Guido Cavalcanti, the former in respect of a certain kind of pre-humanism or preliminary encounter with the poets, philosophers and rhetoricians of old, and the latter in respect both of the style and of the substance of versifying in the vernacular, both of the accountability of form to content within the economy of the whole and of the precise nature of love in its twofold substance and psychology. But neither, as far as his formation as a philosophical spirit was concerned, was that all, for in the wake of Beatrice's death in June 1290 (a matter to which we shall come in due course) he sought consolation in the theological schools of Santa Maria Novella, of Santa Croce and, on the other side of the river, of Santo Spirito, the sermons, lectures and disputations thereof – respectively Dominican, Franciscan and Augustinian in complexion – serving further to shape and substantiate his ever more complex spirituality.

Meanwhile events moved on apace on the domestic, the military and the civic fronts. On the domestic front there was the death of his mother Bella somewhere between 1270 and 1275 and of his father Alighiero in either 1280 or 1281, at which point responsibility for the estate, such as it was, fell principally on Dante himself, though on a Dante generously assisted in this respect by his brother Francesco, a friend in need at every stage along the way. And then too there was his betrothal in January 1277 to Gemma Donati of the powerful Black Guelph family in Florence, to whom he was married possibly in 1285 and by whom he had three or maybe four children – Pietro, Jacopo, Antonia and, again maybe, a Giovanni as his first-born son. On the military front, by contrast, there were the twin actions of Caprona and of Campaldino towards the end of that same decade, the former furnishing some of the martial imagery of the *Inferno* and the latter, according to a letter no longer extant but seen by Leonardo Bruni, marking the beginning, Dante says, of his every misfortune on the political stage of Florence. More obviously decisive, however, as the beginning of that misfortune was his enrolment, probably in 1295, in the Guild of Apothecaries and Physicians as a first step towards serving on the governing councils of the city and, by 1300, on the priorate

itself as its supreme legislative organ, by which time, however, the prospect of a Black Guelph *coup d'état* aided and abetted by both the papacy and the House of Anjou loomed more than ever large. Versions of Dante's precise whereabouts during the unspeakable violence of November 1301 vary, but however that may be he must have fled the city by the end of January 1302, for by then he had been condemned *in absentia* for, among other things, fraudulence in public office, and, by March of the same year, to be burnt alive should he be taken upon Florentine soil.

Exile for Dante, as perhaps exile always is, was a scarcely less than agonizing experience, each successive inflexion of the spirit being qualified in the self-same moment by its polar counterpart: heroism by a sense of humiliation and of the hopelessness of it all, resolve by resignation, and resilience by an inkling of repentance, all this making at another level of consciousness for a resurgence of courage and for a need to define afresh the reasons of his existence. Sustained even so, for the moment at any rate, by hopes for a speedy return thanks to the good offices of Cardinal Nicolò da Prato as peacemaker he withdrew to Verona where he was hosted by Bartolomeo della Scala as prominent among his patrons in exile. But the Black Guelph administration in Florence was more than equal to the cardinal's plan for a more inclusive administration, Dante for his part, having conferred in vain with his colleagues in Arezzo relative to a speedy resolution of it all, making his lonely way back to the Scaligeri in Verona. True, the imperial adventuring of Henry VII of Luxembourg held out fresh possibility for a return, but what with his naïveté relative to Italian and especially Florentine civic scheming, his near-astonishing lack of proper preparation and his death in August 1313 it all came to nothing, Dante thereafter repairing afresh to Verona as the guest this time of the Cangrande della Scala nobly lauded in the *Paradiso*. True too that something approaching an amnesty was offered by the Florentines in the course of 1315 ("something approaching" in that there was here no mention of Dante by name), an offer which, having by this stage redefined the parameters of his existence (the "may I not anywhere gaze upon the face of the sun and of the stars" of his response to

INTRODUCTION

the offer), he dismissed as unworthy both of his name and of his suffering. Before long, therefore, and at the invitation of the kindly Guido Novello, he found a fresh home in Ravenna, where until the hour of his death in 1321 he was both honoured as a poet, scholar and diplomat and comforted by the presence to him of some at least of his family.

Coming, then – but for the moment with comparable brevity – to his accomplishment as by turns, and indeed latterly in one and the same moment, poet, philosopher, pedagogue and prophet, we may begin by saying that, having experimented in the tradition of Siculo-Tuscan versemaking going back to the court of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen in Palermo, Dante, in the first of his major works – the *Vita nova* dating in an ideal chronology from somewhere between 1293 and 1295 – settled on a *prosimetrum* designed by way of its prose component to clarify the circumstances and significance of certain at least of his lyric poems. Ostensibly – and to the deep reasons of the *Vita nova* as a meditation upon the nature and finality of love as but a principle of radical self-transcendence on the part of the conscientious lover we shall in a moment return – the text offers an account of Dante's experience of Beatrice as, precisely, a bringer of blessing, and this from his first encounter with her as a child all the way through to, and beyond, her premature death in 1290. First, then, comes the childhood and youthful encounter and Beatrice's first greeting of the poet, an encounter marked from the outset by the tremulousness and indeed by the trauma of it all and yet at the same time by the ecstasy and transformative power of the epiphanous presence. In consequence, however, of a moment of misunderstanding (Dante had resorted to the strategy of 'screen ladies' or intermediary figures for the purposes of maintaining a proper decorum), Beatrice saw fit to deny her greeting, at which point Dante, confused by the power of love both to delight and to distress, set about rethinking the whole thing, about redefining love as a matter not so much of *acquisition* as of *disposition*, of – by way precisely of praise as a matter of standing in the presence of the other and of the greater than self – knowing self in the ever more ample substance of self. The idea, however, was easier to contemplate

than to live out, for no sooner had Beatrice died than the seeds of temptation were sown by the sight of one looking kindly upon him, by a 'donna gentile' or 'gracious lady of the casement' appearing in her compassion to hold out the possibility of a surrogate happiness, of, more exactly (for the psychology of it all is nicely complex), a way back to Beatrice in the flesh. Once more, then, Dante's was a state of spiritual turmoil, a crisis of conscience admitting of resolution by way only of a fresh vision of Beatrice in glory and of a steady commitment to speak no more of her until such time as learning, wisdom and a more complete insight into the meaning of it all was properly his.

Dante's, then, was from the beginning an exploration both of the dialectics and of the deepening substance of his experience as a poet and philosopher, the first of these things, the dialectical component of his spirituality, enjoying vigorous expression in the so-called *rime petrose* or 'stony rhymes' of the middle part or thereabouts of the 1290s. Here, certainly, it is a question of the triumph of possession over disposition, the now impossible difficulty and intractability of his love making only for its violent to the point of orgiastic resolution, for a more or less violent imposition of self upon madonna as but the cause of his frustration and despair. No less committed, however, and, with it, no less eloquent are those now specifically moral *rime* dating from much the same time and looking somewhat after the manner of Brunetto Latini to educate Dante's chosen readership in the ways and means of true nobility and social elegance, essays, these, in the civilizing substance of the poetic line and destined eventually to find their way into the alas incomplete *Convivio* or *Banquet* of his early years in exile.

The incompleteness of the *Convivio*, a work dating in an again ideal chronology from about 1304 to 1307 and by its own account a response to the catastrophe of that exile, is in fact of the essence, for here especially the tension generated by Dante's successive and indeed simultaneous spiritual allegiances – by, in short, his commitment both to a species of philosophical idealism making for an ecstatic resolution of self on the plane of seeing, understanding and desiring and, in the very same moment, to a

INTRODUCTION

species of Peripateticism making for an abrupt shortening of the spiritual perspective – moves centre-stage, its magnanimity thus surrendering at last to the fragility of the project, to a foundering of the text upon its own leading emphases. Ostensibly, then, what we have here is but a partial implementation of the original idea, just four books of the fifteen originally envisaged, but four books pulsating all the same with an unmistakable Dantean energy, with an unwavering commitment to the urgency of the matter to hand. Perfectly exquisite, therefore, is the first book with its sturdy commitment to – as Dante himself suggests in its twilight moments – a fresh feeding of the five thousand, of those “many men and women in this language of ours burdened by domestic and civic care” and to that extent living on at a remove from their proper humanity. No less urgent, however, when it comes to the aforesaid philosophical idealism are Books II and III, where it is a question now of philosophy understood as but the love of wisdom coeval and consubstantial with the Godhead and as making in man for a radical assimilation of the creature to the creator, for a fresh making over of the former in the likeness and image of the latter. And then finally, as the first course proper of Dante’s banquet (everything so far being but an hors d’oeuvre) comes an account in Book IV of the true nature of nobility, of *gentilezza* as a matter less of wealth, manners and social lineage than – much after the manner of the night sky as host to its many bright stars – of the encompassing of every moral and intellectual virtue in man, of his every discrete striving of the spirit. Again, however, it is with the ascendancy especially of Aristotle as if not the founder then the finisher of the entire art and science of moral philosophy that the difficulty and, with it, the ultimate impossibility of the *Convivio* as a stable expression of Dante’s complex spirituality commends itself as an object of contemplation, the *Convivio* – the nothing if not large-souled *Convivio* – thus living on in anticipation of something still greater to come.

If, however, by the magnanimity or ‘large-souledness’ of the text we mean its preoccupation less with the idea pure and simple than with those to whom that same idea is present as a principle of

properly human well-being and thus of properly human happiness, then what applies to the *Convivio* applies also to the ideally contemporary *De vulgari eloquentia* and to the *Monarchia* as dating probably from the middle of the second decade of the fourteenth century, from – probably – 1314 or 1315.

Taking to begin with, then, the *De vulgari eloquentia*, here again we have yet another text incomplete by virtue of its incompleteness, of its gradually being overtaken by the more ample and inclusive linguistic and literary sensibility of the *Commedia* as now shaping up in Dante's mind. First, in Book I, comes the linguistic aspect of his meditation, his reaching out by way (a) of a now secure sense of the unique nobility of – *vis-à-vis* Latin – the vernacular as the primary and connatural means in man of spiritual intelligence, (b) of a nicely detailed account of the linguistic diaspora contingent upon Babel and of the linguistic geography of Europe as a whole, and (c) of a nothing if not spirited review of the currently spoken forms of Italian up and down the peninsula for a *vulgare illustre* or illustrious vernacular whereby a certain set of people at a certain stage of their socio-political and economic development might know themselves in the distinctiveness of their proper humanity, in the unique *italianitas* of their proper presence in the world. Next, in Book II, comes an account of specifically poetic form as a matter not now of addition or of decoration where the plain sense of the text is concerned but rather as that whereby the would-be poet in the high style knows himself in the twofold truth and soaring substance of his proper humanity. Now to speak in this way of an 'illustrious vernacular' and of the 'would-be poet in the high style' is at once to underline the exclusivity of it all, of its straightaway ruling out the linguistic legitimacy of anything approaching the merely local or (as Dante himself puts it) the 'municipal' and the poetic legitimacy of anything approaching the merely meretricious or stylistically untoward, and it is precisely this exclusivity that accounts for and confirms the eclipse of the *De vulgari eloquentia* as Dante's last word in the area of language and of literary aesthetics. But for all that, its generosity and indeed its greatness of spirit live on intact, for this, no less than the *Vita nova* and the *Convivio* before it and the

INTRODUCTION

Commedia after it, is an essay in the ontologization of the matter to hand, in the bringing home of form – be it linguistic or literary – to the individual or the group of individuals as that whereby he, she or they might stand securely in their own presence as creatures of orderly being and becoming.

More readily open to interpretation in terms of the tradition in which it stands – in terms, that is to say, of the tradition of publicistic literature reaching back to and indeed beyond the Investiture Contest of the eleventh century and turning upon the relationship between the prince and the pope within the economy of the whole – is the *Monarchia*, conceived probably in the wake of Henry VII's demise in August 1313 and belonging therefore to the middle years of that decade. Taken in the round the work constitutes a nothing if not sustained account of the Roman idea pure and simple, of, more exactly, the prior and subsistent necessity of the Roman imperial project as the ground and guarantee of peace, piety and prosperity in Christendom as a whole. Straightaway, therefore, it is a question of the indispensability of monarchy or of government by one to man's proper perfection as man, to (as far as society as a whole is concerned) the total actualization of the possible intellect or of his collective power to orderly understanding and (as far as the individual is concerned) the free passage from seeing and understanding to being and doing, to knowing self, that is to say, in the freedom of self. Then, in Book II, comes a no less systematic statement of that same indispensability under its Roman aspect, Rome no less than Jerusalem figuring from beforehand as the instrument of divine willing, of God's plan for man as a creature of moral, intellectual and ultimately eschatological accountability. And finally, in Book III, comes the properly polemical moment of the *Monarchia*, polemical to the point of gladiatorial (Dante's own expression on the threshold of the book) in its commitment (*a*) to a step-by-step dismantling of the long since hallowed forms and formularies of papal hierocratic consciousness (few of them, he thinks, standing up to scrutiny), and (*b*) to a programme of political dualism, to the notion of man as having by nature two ultimate ends (the temporal and the eternal), two means to those ends (the moral and the theological

virtues respectively), and thus two authorities – the prince and the pope – to confirm him in his proper well-being here and hereafter. And it is at this point that the existential intensity of the text yet again shines through as its innermost and abiding substance, for what matters ultimately about the precise configuration of princely and papal power in Europe is its function as the in-and-through-which of man's proper well-being as man, as that whereby both the individual and the group to which he or she belongs, and indeed mankind in the totality thereof, might rejoice at last in the twofold fullness and freedom of their proper humanity.

With this, then, we come to the miracle that is the *Commedia*, to a miracle in the sense that what we have here, in a single pass of the mind and imagination, is (a) a confessional statement at once opening out onto the fully and unequivocally prophetic, (b) an account of the substance and psychology of human being under the conditions of time and eternity second to none in point of power and precision, (c) a now fully immanent eschatology such that what a man *will be* under the aspect of eternity he already *is* under the aspect of time, and (d) a final and indeed triumphant vindication of the image as the in-and-through-which of spiritual intelligence, as uniquely adequate to the matter in hand. Dante, then, as protagonist in his own poem and thus speaking in the first person, finds himself, in the midst of his days, astray in a dark wood, the straight way being lost. Anxious, therefore, to make his escape to the sunlit uplands beyond but prey to the inexplicability and fearfulness of it all, he discerns a shadowy figure turning out to be the great Roman poet Virgil who, as himself a singer of exile and homecoming, summons him to an alternative journey: to a descent into the pit there to behold the endless forms of self-betrayal and thus of spiritual disfiguration as but the downside of man's proper power to moral self-determination; to an ascent of Mount Purgatory there to witness the struggle of the penitent spirit to affirm self over self on the plane of properly human loving; and finally to a crossing of the circling spheres of Dante's geocentric universe there to encounter as but the ground and guarantee of his own being and becoming the One who *is* as of the essence. While, then, at every stage of the journey Dante the protagonist in his

INTRODUCTION

goats and learn to ply thy teeth on stubborn crusts." Such strains under an oak did I and Melibœus sing, the whilst our little hut was cooking our barley.

(*Eclogue* II.48–68)

COURSE OF THE ARGUMENT

Dante's, whatever else it is, is a steady engagement at the level of specifically cultural concern, a steady preoccupation, that is to say, with the leading issues – be they theological, philosophical, linguistic or literary-aesthetic in kind – of the day, and a steady negotiation with the leading lights of the traditions in which he stands. Theologically, then, it is a question of his rejoicing in the at once Augustinian, Dominican and Franciscan components of his spirituality, in the psychology and phenomenology of far-wandering traceable to the Bishop of Hippo, in the genius for orderly exposition proper to Thomas, and in the by turns, and indeed often enough simultaneously, renunciatory and reformist spirit of those who, like Francis, saw themselves as but the latter-day representatives of Christ's poor. Philosophically, by contrast, it is a question of his rejoicing in the kind of Peripateticism or neo-Aristotelianism progressively decisive for the substance and structure of human experience in its moment-by-moment unfolding, while linguistically and rhetorically it is a question of his pondering the power and persuasiveness of the classical utterance for everything coming next by way of the vernacular initiative, the latter, he thought, wanting for nothing in point of sweet *concinntas*.

But this steady engagement at the level of specifically cultural concern notwithstanding, what we have in Dante – and this now is what matters – is a bringing home of each of these things, of each successive emphasis in the area of theology, philosophy, language and literature, to the existential issue as the encompassing, as the whereabouts of its proper functionality. This situation is everywhere discernible in the text and everywhere decisive for its interpretation. It is discernible in the *Vita nova* as the great

work of Dante's early years where it is a question of love properly understood – of love, that is to say, as a matter less of possession than of praise – as that whereby the lover knows himself in the kind of 'transhumanity' (the 'trasumanar' of *Paradiso* I.70) as but humanity itself in its proper coming about. It is discernible in the *Convivio* in its preoccupation not merely nor even primarily with the routine emphases of classical and medieval philosophy precisely as such, but with a love of wisdom making in its espousal for a more ample and indeed for a more authentic species both of private and of collective self-affirmation. It is discernible in the first book of the ideally contemporary *De vulgari eloquentia* in its seeking out and settling upon an ideal form of the Italian vernacular as that whereby a new Latin race rejoices in its proper distinctiveness, and it is discernible in the second book of the *De vulgari eloquentia* in its preoccupation not now with the legerdemain of classical and late medieval rhetoricism but with the poetic utterance as the means of a now soaring spirit, as that whereby the would-be poet in the high style knows himself as beloved of the gods. It is discernible in the *Monarchia* where, for all its publicistic complexion, it is a question of Rome in all its latter-day resurrection as but the ground and guarantee of a full, free and flourishing humanity, and it is discernible in the *Commedia* where by way of a nothing if not arduous process of self-confrontation, of self-reconfiguration and of self-transcendence the soul knows itself at last in its properly ecstatic substance, its proper coming forth on the planes of knowing and loving.

It is this, therefore, this constant referral in Dante of the cultural to the existential as always and everywhere a matter of ultimate concern, that determines the shape and substance of what comes next in these pages. First, then, and by way of preparation for a close encounter with the text proper, comes an account of – as Dante himself understands it – self and selfhood in respect (a) of its theological and ethical profile, (b) of the structures of consciousness proper to man as he seeks to bring home the occasional to the ontological on the plane of seeing, understanding and desiring (being as *ahead* of itself, as *away* from itself, and, by

INTRODUCTION

way of conscience as but a matter of *with-knowing*, as *alongside* itself), and (c) of a phenomenology of being, of the *mood* of this or that instance of specifically human being as transparent to the *truth* of that being. Following on from this, and constituting the main business of the book, comes a meditation on the *Vita nova*, on the *Convivio* and on the *Commedia* as, each after its manner, an essay in ontic emancipation, of the freeing of self for the proper fullness of self. And finally, as on the face of it a corollary but in truth as entering into the mainstream of the argument, comes a review of the specifically linguistic dimension of the matter, language, both in its unadorned and in its musical and rhetorical elaboration, testifying in Dante's sense of it to the status of this or that individual man or woman as fully and unequivocally *there* in the world, as present to self in point both of actuality and of intelligibility. No language, no presence. Merely possibility.

Dante, Self and Selfhood

LOVE-PROCESSION AND THE LOVE-IMPERATIVE:
 L preliminary considerations in the areas of theology and ethics – patterns of self-relatedness: being as *ahead* of self, as *away* from self and *alongside* self – a phenomenology of being.

LOVE-PROCESSION AND THE LOVE-IMPERATIVE:
 PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS IN THE AREAS OF
 THEOLOGY AND ETHICS

At the beginning of Dante's meditation as a poet – indeed as *the* poet in European letters – of specifically human being and becoming stands the One who *is* as of the essence, the God of the old and new dispensation, the One who, suffering in his self-sufficiency no addition, subsists beyond the structures of time and space as the leading paradigms of human awareness. All circumscribing but uncircumscribed and a stranger to every material co-ordinate, he comprehends – in the sense of containing within himself – every kind of substance and accident, every modality of being either as possibility or actuality. Perfectly centred in respect of his own being, he knows himself and is known by way of a continuous process of love-overflowing, the stasis or stillness of the Godhead thus coinciding with the most complete kind of *ecstasis* or coming forth; so, for example, on the unity and undividedness of the Godhead, these lines (142–45) from Canto XXIX of the *Paradiso*:

Vedi l'eccelso omai e la larghezza
 de l'eterno valor, poscia che tanti

of man, Dante thinks, in something as singular as it is stupendous, to wit, in each and every individual as a new creation and as empowered in respect both of its proximate and of its ultimate finalities. Taking the argument step by step, then, we may say this, that Dante's, when it comes to the theology of creation as a whole, is an amalgamation of primary and secondary causality, of God's enlisting the angels or Intelligences for the purpose of actualizing the idea pure and simple as present to the divine mind; so, for example, these lines from early on in the *Paradiso* with their nicely Platonizing – or, more exactly, Neoplatonizing – sense of the idea as received from on high and as modulated here below by those same Intelligences as responsible within the economy of the whole for its positive implementation:

Dentro dal ciel de la divina pace
 si gira un corpo ne la cui virtute
 l'esser di tutto suo contento giace.
 Lo ciel seguente, c'ha tante vedute,
 quell' esser parte per diverse essenze,
 da lui distratte e da lui contenute.
 Li altri giron per varie differenze
 le distinzion che dentro da sé hanno
 dispongono a lor fini e lor semenze.
 Questi organi del mondo così vanno,
 come tu vedi omai, di grado in grado,
 che di sù prendono e di sotto fanno.

Within the heaven of divine peace whirls a body in whose virtue lies the being of all it contains. The next heaven, with all its many lights, distributes this being essence by essence, each alike distinct from it and yet contained by it. The other circling heavens thus variously dispose the distinctions borne within them in respect of their proper fruit and finality, which organs of the universe, as now you see, proceed step by step, receiving from above and fashioning below.

(*Paradiso* II.112–23)