

“CANONI ASSENTI” OPENING STATEMENT

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The title of this conference, to my ears, expresses a wish, in some ways surely the most fervent wish of any poet: the wish to emerge on the scene, erupting *ex novo*, and not simply to become part of the canon but – in the absence of canons – to *be* the canon itself. For, no matter how much the poet cherishes her predecessors, there is some part of her that, notwithstanding the «lungo studio e 'l grande amore / che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume» (*Inf.* 1-83-84), wishes to stand alone, to be recognized as supreme without the complex negotiations and the intricate business of appropriating one's predecessors, revising them, maybe replacing them. Unable to keep his precursors from existing, Dante literally silences them: «Taccia di Cadmo e d'Aretusa Ovidio, / chè se quello in serpente e quella in fonte / converte poetando, io non lo 'nvidio» (*Inf.* 25.97-9). In these verses Dante states the almost never-stated obvious: that poets experience envy for each other. All this unpleasantness – and envy is an unpleasant emotion – takes place within and because of the canon; absent the canon, the poet would be blissfully free of such labors, emotions, and entanglements.

The wish to silence one's fellows exists perhaps even more poignantly on the Italian peninsula, among Italian poets, who make their art within a culture that values tradition and authority and the canon in a way that is absolutely breath-taking. I mean that literally: Italian investment in authority can knock the breath right out of you. And for poets, who take breath and make it new, arranging it into new sounds, meanings, and rhythms, the labor of dealing with such an investment in tradition and authority can be particularly taxing.

Dante, who took off in a poetic *folle volo* the like of which we have rarely seen before or since, constructed the canons of Italian literature for his day – canons that have to an amazing degree survived into our own time. He began his work of canon-formation early in his poetic career, in his lyrics and then in the *Vita Nuova*, where he sets about the business of canonizing the vernacular tradition and indicating which poets in it are to be taken seriously. He elaborates this work in his Latin treatise *De vulgari eloquentia*, which rigorously taxonomizes the Italian peninsula in terms of its languages and its poets, and then completes the job in the *Commedia*, where he seals poetic fates both *in bono* and *in malo*. For instance, Dante enhances the importance to the canon of the marvellous Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel, to whom the poet Guido

Guinizzelli refers as «miglior fabbro del parlar materno» (*Purg.* 26.117), in the verse appropriated by Eliot for Pound: one poet speaking of another with gratitude and admiration – not envy – in both the medieval and modern instances. In the same canto in which Guinizzelli speaks so generously of Arnaut, Dante writes harshly and disdainfully (always through the mouth of Guinizzelli) of another marvellous poet, Guittone d'Arezzo, discounted for centuries on the basis of Dante's dismissal. To this day histories of Italian literature are based on and perpetuate Dante's work of canon-formation: for instance, the historiographic category *dolce stil novo*, still blazoned in histories and textbooks and used by scholars and students alike, was invented by him in *Purgatorio* 24, as he discourses with a poet about – what else? – other poets of course.

In the context of an Italian literary culture that we could describe as a testament to 'Canoni presenti', indeed 'Canoni iper-presenti', or 'Canoni stra-presenti', my wish to the poet-participants of this conference also comes from Dante, who was able to conjure the companionship of fellow poets as well as the need to silence them. Indeed he wrote one of the greatest poems of friendship ever written – the sonnet *Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io* – to a fellow poet. It is in Limbo, where Dante imagines himself joining the «bella scola» of the great classical poets of antiquity – his precursors, the canon into which he wishes to insert himself – that we first encounter the verb *tacere* in a poetic setting. We recall that this verb will recur in the great silencing of *Inferno* 25: the «Taccia... Ovidio» passage I cited at the outset of these remarks. But in *Inferno* 4 he uses *tacere* not in order to silence previous poets but in order to indicate the kind of fellowship through speech that poets can experience only among each other: «Cosi andammo infino a la lumera, / parlando cose che 'l tacere è bello, / sì som'era 'l parlar colà dov'era» (*Inf.* 4.103-105). In other words, what was spoken of by the poets together cannot be spoken of to others. For poets may envy each other, but they also share a special consortium, accessible only to initiates.

My wish for you is that this conference offer, briefly, a place similar to the one that Dante finds with the great dead poets in Limbo: a psychological «prato di fresca verdura», a locus amoenus of the mind in which with true ease you can discourse or be silent as you please, demolishing and constructing canons at will.