

ROBIN BLASER

GREAT COMPANION: DANTE ALIGHIERI

the speech born-in-one's-house is that which we acquire without rule

De Vulgari Eloquentia I.1

The language for which we have no words, which doesn't pretend, like grammatical language, to be there before being, but is 'alone and first in mind,' is our language, that is, the language of poetry.

Giorgio Agamben: *Idea of Prose*

Face to face, but without seeing each other from now on, the gods and men are abandoned to writing. This abandonment is the sign given to us for our history yet to come. It has only just begun. My god! We are only beginning to write.

Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Inoperative Community*

Entering the territory – map is not territory – the boy looked up from the book he held in his lap, startled that it seemed the size of half of himself: it was so large compared to Emerson, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, Longfellow around the house – Gustave Doré's *Inferno* of the dark forest, where the boy's mind multiplied the leopard, lion, and wolf in his heart – heart and mind were then entwined – entered the writhing trees, drew back from Geryon, as if to hide, touched the page of flames that were not raindrops, swept his hand over the streaming anguish in the air, felt the chill black of the ice around winged Lucifer, who chewed on something with two legs that he didn't want to imagine – in bed at night after saying "please, if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take" – which was very hard to think about – he returned before he slept to Doré's imagery – under the covers with a flashlight – and nearly always forgot the two small figures high on a rocky promontory, who looked up at the stars – territory is not map – there, going from inside out and outside in, he could not yet think how ancient he was, where the phenomena of consciousness are the phenomena of religion – this is the boy of the house in Idaho, a railcar.

Korzybski

Ruth Padel

painted Union Pacific yellow, by the railway tracks, goldenrod garden of wand – stems – grandmother Sophia Nichols whose telegraphic mind knew the distances – in the sage-brush desert during the Great Depression – entangled with Dante before and after he learned to read – the innocence of walking there is forgotten –

1930

“That means,” said I, somewhat amused, “that we would have to eat of the tree of knowledge a second time to fall back into the state of innocence.”

“Of course,” he answered, “and that is the final chapter in the history of the world.”

Kleist

I address Dante, who is our contemporary, like us, speaking out of human violence – who is implicit in our use of our mother tongues – who is initial and continuously implicated in the courage of poetry – whose art records an attachment to the letter that lay at the mysterious origin of poetry – the dazzlement – who is concealed in the depth of our culture like a blind spot – whose journey in poetry reverses the metaphysics of a transparent language – whose daring in the realms of the sacred proposes *il poema sacro* – propositions of the mind in that scattered territory – of whom the story is told that at the moment he began the Comedy all the rhymes of the world presented themselves and asked to be included – of whom Mandelstam, studying Italian in order to read him, writes:

Saussure

Sollers

cited/Sollers

When I began to study Italian and had barely familiarized myself with its phonetics and prosody, I suddenly understood that the center of gravity of my speech efforts had been moved closer to my lips, to the outer parts of my mouth. The tip of the tongue suddenly turned out to have the seat of honour. The sound rushed toward the locking of teeth. And something else that struck me was the infantile aspect of Italian phonetics, its beautiful child-like quality, its closeness to infant babbling, to some kind of eternal dadaism ... Would you like to become acquainted with the dictionary of Italian rhymes? Take the entire Italian dictionary and leaf through it as you will ... Here every word rhymes.

trans.

Harris&Link

Every word begs to enter into concordanza. The abundance of marriageable endings is fantastic – the astonishment that is

Dante, of whom Yeats wrote in his 1915 poem *EGO DOMINUS TUUS*:

The chief imagination of Christendom,
Dante Alighieri, so utterly found himself
That he has made that hollow face of his
More plain to the mind's eye than any face
But that of Christ –

but is not the self that made this face so plain to our mind's eye after him, and certainly not his arguments for Church and Empire, but more likely the colours he gave to language – first, in his room *una nebula di colore di fuoco* – then, within this colour of fire, a figure spoke in the high language of divinity – *Ego dominus tuus* – eros and nakedness that overwhelm – he thought he saw *una cosa, la quale ardesse tutta* – the voice said, *Vide cor tuum* – he had not recognized his heart in flames where it was eaten – this discovery of Beatrice in the shaping of a world – the colours of this event in language fly in the flag of Italy –

La Vita Nova

The face moves among the beautiful letters, never still in the alpha/omega, the A through Z of our vernacular tongues – born in the house of the heart's mind that is the mind's heart – purposed to make it known to many – that they might flame in their alphabets – saluting all the fedeli d'Amore that they might answer – Dante, drawing upon the Provençal experience of the reason of poems, brings us to Amors – Giorgio Agamben tells us Amors is the name the Troubadours gave to the experience of the advent of the poetic word ... It is difficult to understand the sense in which poets understood love, as long as we obstinately construe it according to a secular misunderstanding, in a purely biographical context. For the Troubadours, it is not a question of psychological or biographical events that are successively expressed in words, but rather, of the attempt to live the topos itself, the event of language as a fundamental amorous and poetic experience – the loved experience is found in the poetics of unmap-ped territory – thus, the New Life is the possibility larger than and other than the mere expression of the sentiments of subjective reality or of the self, which is as much a lifetime creation as is the poesis of the traditional soul – this event of our vernacular speech – not to be confused with language as an object of knowledge constructed by philosophers and linguists, but a part of

La Vita Nova

*Michel de
Certeau
Gozich
Purgatorio vi*

language, a mode of language use, that is a discourse – with the heart of – actual social interaction and practice – witness Sordello – disdegnosa – mourning Sir Blancatz –

And so mortal is the harm (to the virtues)
That I have no suspicion that it will ever be undone,
except in this wise, that they take his heart out, and have it eaten
by the Barons who live un-hearted, then they would have hearts
worth something –

trans.
Ezra Pound

love's reason reasoning, which Dante tells us it would be shame not to explain, enters into the discourses of the territory called world – the poetic is the language of the mapless –

Dante's gift is continuously contemporary in the shape he gave his poem's discoursing – out of the advent of language one's life in language, as if life were the home of it – where the intimacy of sound discloses the Amors of othernesses – in *La Vita Nova*, the interplay of love and reason, poem and prose, Dante and Beatrice, friends and beloved ladies opens into a territory – even Beyond the widest of the circling spheres – where *The Comedy* entangles the amorous with the discoursing of myth, cosmology, philosophy, theology, history, economics, and current issues – even as Beatrice's colours – white, crimson, and green – circle my early morning coffee cup, while I write – this is the polyphony of *The Comedy* – the ever changing polyphony of amorous thought –

the gift of the amorous and poetic experience so entangled – the face haunting the curious laughter of the syllables – that we might speak an ethics out of this mapless century of ourselves – “at home”, so to speak, in the unredeemable and irreparable – transmigrators – of humanism, of religions, of absolutes, of ignorant hierarchies – when the sublime collapses upon us – as it did upon Dante – we are inside the condition of it – marking our footsteps among its uncanny pieces – holding on to the love of our ordinary lives – hearted or unhearted – Dante, “the Tuscan Homer”, as Vico called him, is exemplar of the necessary *poiesis* in a vast territory – not exactly human – even as we take up the task of our ongoing departure from the totality he confronted –

*Hannah
Arendt
Men in Dark
Times
Sollers*

in the difficult matter of God in the streets – *facilis descensus Averno* – it is easy today to descend to Avernus, as the Sibyl tells

Aeneid vi, 126

us in the voices of Posillipo – there the door of Dis is open twenty-four hours a day – like the doors of the current return to religion – whose concern is with the definition of abomination and exclusion –

in *La Vita Nova*, Dante proposes that love, which is meaning, impels speech –

Sollers

the *Inferno* does not come to rest in those brutalities of God's judgment – it is there that speech is fixed once and for all – words stop dead in the depths of a bloody and frozen silence – the entire human body is devoured – in agonizing contrast to the love that eats the flaming heart – Philippe Sollers, in his brilliant contemporary reading of Dante, notices that self-interest – the closed self – is a fundamental characteristic of the damned, which has consequences: Language turns upon and possesses he who believed he possessed it but in fact was only one of its signs –

Sollers

the reader who stops there in the drama of closed meaning will lose Dante – including the Dante who haunts our discordant departure from Christendom – the *Inferno* fascinates with its imagination of the condition of irredeemable loss – the lost good of the intellect – we rebel at the theological imprisonment and abandonment – and suspect that Dante now and again does so too – in this icehouse of language words, we think; must thaw – we are, perhaps, closer to rebellious Rabelais than we know – when Pantagruel hears thawed out words:

he threw on the deck in front of us handful of frozen words, which might have been sugared almonds, like so many pearls of different colours. We saw bright red words, green words, blue words, black words, golden words. And after they had been warmed for a bit between our hands, they melted like snow and we actually heard them, but without understanding a word, for they were in a barbarous language ...

trans.

Burton Raffé

... Panurge asked Pantagruel to give him more. Pantagruel observed that giving words was like making love.

“Then sell me some,” said Panurge.

“Selling words,” said Pantagruel, “is more like what lawyers do. I'd prefer to sell you silence and make you pay more for it ...”

But still he threw three or four handful on to the deck. And we could see sharp words, bloody words (which, according to the

pilot, sometimes went back to the place where they'd been spoken, only to find the throat that uttered them had been slit open), horrible words, and many others unpleasant to see. And when they'd melted, we heard: hin, hin, hin, hin, tick, tock, whizz, gibber, jabber, frr, frrr, frrr, boo, boo, boo, boo, boo, boo, boo, crack, track, trr, trr, trr, trrr, trrrr, on, on, on, on, wooawooawooooon, gog, magog, and God only knows ...

Così gridai con la faccia levata – this I cried with lifted face, from among the sodomites –

Inf. XVI, 76

Inferno – facing Dante's theology – even a Roman Catholic ament from childhood – of the immutable and unchanging – recognizing that it is the vocabulary of his cosmology – of creation and continuation – in the body of thought – this entanglement of language and death – mortality's speechlessness – repetitious or masquerading in our own vocabulary of such territory – I walk into a crisis of where Hell is – out of this cosmology – gone in the teeth – among twentieth-century Constitutions and religious pretensions – Yes! to be “clean of these hell-obsessions” in another world, as Pound said, discovering Hell on the surface of the earth – where, as in Dante, the present might be found – this sense of exit and departure – “from the first canto to the last, the poet's path was the path of the living man” – at stake in the poesis – finding the life of form – in so vast a territory – practiccs of the self and of freedom within these games of truth, turning round and round in, say, your marvelous kitchen – to impart relish – I read this great, vulnerable poem – materiality of language – materiality of form – materiality of men's and women's bodies envisioning – as if they were my own – thus, to unravel the Western paradigm of one sole truth – that cannot find the place of its totality – founded on sacrifice – there or here – our immortalities cannot help with this – Churches, States, even Atheisms are given to personifications of totality – exchanging bed linens – you can vote for a water glass of democracy on the side-table – they never apologize for time misspent, not even in the theories of themselves – now and again, they rehabilitate some lives –

*Ernst Kantorowicz
Frederick II
Michel Foucault*

*Michel de Certeau
The Mystic Fable*

I was talking to Galileo the other day about his rehabilitation – he was disdainful – we wondered who or what is speaking in such ethics of thought – certainly not time regained, let alone eternalized – we were standing there in Rome – in the Campo dei

fiori – at the foot of Giordano Bruno’s monument. He jumped right off his pedestal and said, “Listen, kid, it’s better to burn.” “Hell,” I said, astonished, “I’m 72.” – we three then walked along talking about Bruno’s dialogues and sonnets, dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney, *De gli eroici furori*, and of Plato’s curious blending of the words Eros and heros – “the name *heros* is only a slight alteration of Eros from whom the heroes sprang” – of what it was like to write of heroic frenzies –

Cratylus

In canto X of the *Inferno*, we come upon the open tombs of those who questioned immortality – Epicurus, who argued that happiness is the chief good, “and all his followers” – the last great Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (the title lasted until 1806), Frederick II (d. 1250) – of whom it is said that he had a man imprisoned in a sealed wine vat and left him to perish under watch to prove that the soul died with the body, if it could not escape – and among them Guido Cavalcanti’s father and father-in-law, so condemned while Guido was still alive, neither of whom had so experimented with human destiny – only Florentines in the midst of religious and political strife, who questioned immortality – the crown of such totality – where in modern terms a fortuneteller paradises –

I think of the friendship and estrangement of Dante and Guido, whom Dante names “the first among my friends” in *The New Life*, of whom, in *Hell*, he sends the message to his father that he is still living, who is recalled in the *Purgatorio* for the glow of his poems –

Guido, i’ vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io
Fossimo presi per incantamento ...

Purg. xi, 97

in Shelley’s beautiful sonnet, which translates it:

Guido, I would that Lapo, thou, and I,
Led by some strong enchantment, might ascend
A magic boat ...

Sonnet vi

in Robert Duncan’s version from among the sodomites:

Robin, it would be a great thing if you, me and Jack Spicer
Were taken up in a sorcery with our mortal heads so turned
That life dimmed in the light of that fairy ship ...

There's an ancient prejudice to the effect that one is born and dies a human being

Robert Musil

A completed foundation of humanity should, however, signify the definitive elimination of the sacrificial mythogema and of its ideas of nature and culture, of the unspeakable and the speakable, which are grounded in it. In fact, even the sacralization of life derives from sacrifice: from this point of view it simply abandons the naked natural life to its own violence and its own unspeakableness, in order to ground in them every cultural rule and all language. The ethos, humanity's own, is not something unspeakable or sacer that must remain unsaid in all praxis and human speech. Neither is it nothingness, whose nullity serves as the basis for the arbitrariness and violence of social action. Rather, it is social praxis itself, human speech itself, which have become transparent to themselves—

*Giorgio Agamben:
Language
and Death*

“So!” Jack Spicer said, early in our friendship, “you’re one of those who eat their God.”

1945

In unmapped America, the Puritans had a ferocious time with omniscience, which proposed predestination of human nature, one by one – now, when you get down to brass facts, who in this community should be allowed to receive the body and blood of Christ? – the answer: the successful – speaking in the voice of – the coherence of – capitalism –

In *ESTHÉTIQUE DU MAI*, Wallace Stevens writes: “The death of Satan was a tragedy/For the imagination” – and asks, “What underground?” – it was a dismissal from usefulness – with the shift of Hell to the surface of our own task, Purgatory and Paradise also shift to the imagination of the irreparable –

like you, I walk in contemporary culture – the movement of perpetual departure – I walk the forest of innumerable sounds – I talk with a haunted tongue – how does the body get form? – and clothe itself –

*phrases from
Michel de
Certeau*

The entire Comedy, Philippe Sollers writes, is an apprenticeship in thought, vision, and writing – from the frozen silence to a new poetry – the Purgatory, in fact, is a continuous image of the poetic condition – Dante walks and questions – perhaps the poetic condition is a matter of interrogation – certainly, it is for us, as it was for him – he walks as if he were in the place of langua-

ge – in Sollers words, to the discontinuity that rediscovers the silence and otherness of a new language – the spontaneous, intimate language that is opposed to Hell – and approaches, through successive ruptures, the “umana radice” (human root) – in other words the root of a language exempt from guilt – there in the place where love dictates – enter with you *la divina foresta spessa e viva* – the divine forest green and dense – in apprenticeship – so, Robert Duncan would celebrate Dante’s seven hundredth in 1965, writing of “the sweetness and greatness” of the Divine Comedy –

*Purg. XXIV,
54-56*

We have been walking and climbing all the days of our lives in a forest fire of language – one calls for the good of the intellect – it is existentially given – another calls for the grace note time can be in order to know oneself – when suddenly a voice calls, “O voi” – O, you there in your little barc – as one might from the upper deck of liner call, “You there in your dinghy, watch your shores before you lose your bearings” – we enter the Odyssean language of the *Paradiso* – *L’acqua ch’io prendo già mai non si corse* – in waters that have never been sailed before – we are warned that we may become lost in the waves of the marvellous – among the light substances, if we do not have the *intelletto d’amore*, as through smooth and transparent glass, this discourse with cosmos – the glorious wheel, the radiance speaking, horizon brightening, a swift fire in a cloud, the sun struck rubies of conjugated souls – the ladder of splendours – (*La mente, che qui luce, in terra fumma* – the mind that shines here, smokes on earth) – the mind that is the sky ensapphired – *crystallina*, where the sewer of blood and filth is not forgotten but absent – suddenly, Dante looks down to see the earth – *il varco folle d’Ulisse* – my mind looks back, as Dante’s did, to Ulysses in the *Inferno*, clothed in that which burned him – who tells us, “I could not conquer within me the passion I had to gain experience of the world and of the vices and worth of men” – he talked his companions into making wings of their oars for their mad flight – until, as he says, “the sea closed over us” – in the *Purgatorio*, the siren in Dante’s dream sings of Ulisse mid-sea – here, in the *Paradiso*, Dante looks back through the dangers of language traveling, Odyssean, eager, and infinite – *come all’ultimo suo ciascuno artista* – as with every artist at his or her limit – living sparks, rubies, the river of topazes – the laughter of flowers – to find this rose in the farthest petals, which Charles Olson calls “the longest lasting rose” –

Inf. XXVI

Purg. XXXIX, 22

Par. XXX, 33

Par. XXX, 117

Dante's Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise are signposts – of tradition, which implicates us – of shifts in their landscapes, which implicate us – in imagination of language – Hell, where we are lost in the unredeemable time of our own century – Purgatory, renames the poetic condition – the experiment of writing – the feel of writing – Paradise, where words wander in the wildwood – Dante's *Paradiso* remains in the arms of Beatrice – for hers is the first name of the love that moves his language among the stars – this is, of course, heresy, as the Dominicans recognized when they condemned him in 1335 –

The gods prevent the supreme undecidedness of man; they close off his [/her] humanity, and prevent him [/her] from becoming unhinged, from measuring up to the incommensurable ... The gods forbid that man should be risked further than man. And most serious of all, they take away his death.

What there is to say here can be said very simply: religious experience is exhausted. It is an immense exhaustion. This fact is in no way altered by the upsurge in the political, sociological, or cultural success of religions (... Jewish, Islamic, or Christian fundamentalism; sects, theosophies, gnosis). There is no return of the religious: there are the contortions and turgescence of its exhaustion. Whether that exhaustion is making way for another concern for the gods, for their wandering or their infinite disappearance, or else for no god, that is another matter: it is another question altogether, and it is not something that can be grasped between the pincers of the religious, nor indeed between those of atheism.

Coming upon the inability of man, who is lost in time, to take possession of his own historical nature,

poets who took the initial steps into our uncovered Hell ran wildly into a dark forest – *una selva oscura*, say.

Shelley, living at Lerici on the Gulf of Spezia in 1822, starting to write *The Triumph of Life* – beautiful terza rima in honour of Dante – bring him into a vision – he thinks he sits beside a public way where he sees “a great stream/Of people there ... hurrying to and fro, / Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam” – “one

Jean-Luc
Nancy: *The
Inoperative
Community*

Agamben:
*Infancy &
History*

mighty torrent" – a chariot comes "on the silent storm of its own rushing splendour" – and in it sits "a Shape, as one whom years deform" – and the charioteer, "A Janus-visaged Shadow," drives the "wonder-wingèd team" – whose shapes are lost "in thick lightnings" – "a triumphal pageant of a captive multitude" that becomes a "sad pageant" – half to himself, he asks, "And what is this? Whose shape is that within the car? And why –" when suddenly a voice answers, "Life!" – so,

That what I thought was an old root which grew
To strange distortion out of the hillside,
Was indeed one of those deluded crew,

And that the grass, which methought hung so wide
And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
And that the holes he vainly sought to hide,

Were or had been eyes –

this is Jean Jacques Rousseau – displacing the fierce dignity of Virgil in Dante's *Comedy* – Rousseau, whom Shelley had revered as emblematic of "political and metaphysical transition" – of ordinary language – of revolutionary possibility – of human liberty through oppositional writing – of the stake in desire of any of us

in Shelley's vision, we see the Chariot herd, tether, and role over the wise, the famous, age and youth – now, Rousseau insists upon this endless passing on of life – but Shelley interrupts:

'Mine eyes are sick of this perpetual flow
Of people, and my heart is sick of one sad thought --- Speak!'

Rousseau replies with the story of his own love — when "the bright omnipresence/Of morning .../And the sun's image radiantly intense"

'Burned on the waters of the well that glowed
Like gold, and threaded all the forest's maze
With winding paths of emerald fire ...

'A shape of light'

Rousseau tells us that he asked that she "Pass not away upon the passing stream" – she offers him a cup to "quench his thirst":

'I rose; and, bending at the sweet command,
Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,
And suddenly my brain became as sand

'Where the first wave had more than half erased
The track of deer on desert Labrador;
Whilst the wolf, from which they fled amazed,

Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore,
Until the second bursts: – so on my sight
Burst a new vision, never seen before.'

shadows, phantoms, ghosts – "like small gnats and flies" – "like discoloured flakes of snow – which the youthful glow melts"? and the snow extinguishes – even Dante, whom the poem honours with its rhyme, is seen on the "opposing steep" and will be swept away as the chariot climbs – Rousseau continues:

'Desire, like a lioness bereft

'Of her last cub, glared as it died; each one
Of that great crowd sent forth incessantly
'Those shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown

'In autumn evening from a poplar tree.
Each like himself and like each other were
At first; but some distorted seemed to be

'Obscure clouds, moulded by the casual air;
And of this stuff the car's creative ray
Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there.

'As the sun shapes the clouds; thus on the way
Mask after mask fell from the countenance
And form of all; and long before the day

'Was old, the joy which waked like heaven's glance
The sleepers in the oblivious valley, died;
And some grew weary of the ghastly dance,

'And fell, as I have fallen, by the wayside ...'

again Shelley cuts into this continuous flow of despair, leaves us and the poem with only his own question in six words –

'Then, what is life? I cried?' –

before he drowned –

Shelley and Rousseau – like many of us – were enamoured of an absolute – the universal from which human freedom might escape into a community of meaning –

the shift of Hell to our own surface changes the beginning and the end of time – the sacred powerline of our totalities – alpha and omega reverse – unredeemed – into our own responsibility – the task of a community of meaning –

I think of Wittgenstein: "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" – and of his remarks to 'the heretics' club: "and now I shall describe the experience of wonderment before the existence of the world, with these words: the world thus is experienced as a miracle. I am now tempted to say that the correct expression for the miracle of the world, albeit as expressing nothing within language, is the existence of language itself." – and I ponder Giorgio Agamben's reply: "... if the most appropriate expression of the wonderment at the existence of the world is the existence of language, what then is the correct expression of the existence of language?"

"The only possible answer to this question is human life, as ethos, as ethical way. The search for a *polis* and an *oikia* befitting this void and un presupposable community is the infantile task of future generations."

In this task of Hell – indebted to Dante – I hear Ezra Pound's magnificent, poetic interrogation of the great crystal – stained by anti-Semitism and twentieth-century political shame – among us now, as if they owned a percentage of the human mind of – this viscid Western paradigm – transmuted into silence

Phil. Inv. 19

***Infancy &
History***

“To what is the poet faithful?” Agamben asks, uncovering a vocation – faithful to the immemorial, for which we have used the word gods – faithful to the emptiness of language – faithful to what is first in mind, word by word and daily yet unformed – in 1963, an Italian reporter named Luigi Pasquini met Pound in the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini:

“When I reach him he is standing in the sacristy of the church, a tiny room that formerly housed its relics. Above the door is Piero della Francesca’s fresco depicting Sigismondo Malatesta as he kneels before his patron saint. Pound is standing beneath it, surrounded by people.

I approach him slowly, nervously, until I am directly before him, face to face. I look him in the eye, and inquire: ‘Ezra Pound?’

He does not respond. He stares at me, silent, and his mouth hints at a smile.

I insist, and repeat his name. He gazes at me, arching his eyebrows for a moment, but says nothing.

I fear I must be mistaken and address my glance to the woman beside him. She peers up at him, then nods, reassuring me that it is him.

I offer him my hand, and he takes it in his own.

I do not tell him my name, but I make clear that I know his books ... He understands, it seems. He gives a sign of assent, but continues to remain silent.

Our hands are still clasping each other. ‘This is the hand of the great American poet,’ I offer. (‘La mano del grande poeta americano!’)

And at last his voice emerges, his first words, uttered in a tranquil Italian accent without a trace of an Anglo-American inflection: ‘I am not great.’ (‘Non grande.’)

Swiftly I reply: ‘– you are among the greatest.’ (‘Grandissimo’)

But the conversation falters, and I grow uncertain. Through friends I had heard that he was living in Rapallo, but a stray remark from Miss Rudge indicates they have just come from Venice. I try to take up the topic: ‘Where are you living now: in Rapallo? Or in Merano with your daughter, or in Venice?’

He will not reply. He looks at me again, with a mocking gaze.

I persist: ‘Rapallo, Merano? Venice, Rome?’

Nothing. He is still silent, his gaze fixed on me, like someone playing a guessing game.

I press on: 'So where are you living now?' I continue, 'Where?'

At last he lowers his head, slowly, and puts his mouth to my ear so that no one can hear us. His voice is a whisper, rasping: 'I live in hell.'

This leaves me bewildered. Here we are in a church, in a sacristy in fact (even if it is the sacristy of a paganizing temple) – in a place, in short, as far as possible from Erebus or the underworld of Lucifer. And yet he says we're in hell. I fail to understand and want to pursue it: 'Which hell do you mean? The hellish tourism? The inferno of the war, here in Rimini? The hell of Rome? Of Italy? Of the world?'

He is silent again. At last he moves his hands: he places them before his stomach, and slowly lifting them to the level of his heart, as the traces of light in his pupils become like glowing coals, he whispers a suffocated scream: 'Here is hell. Here.'

*cited in L.S.
Rainey
Ezra Pound:
The
Monument of
Culture*