



Openness in Medieval Europe, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, *Cultural Inquiry*, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 85–102

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Interrupted and Unfinished The Open-Ended Dante of the *Commedia*

CITE AS:

Nicolò Crisafi, 'Interrupted and Unfinished: The Open-Ended Dante of the *Commedia*', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, *Cultural Inquiry*, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 85–102 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_05>

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ABSTRACT: This essay interprets Dante's *Commedia* as an 'open work' (Eco). It grounds its open-endedness in its representations of interruption: from fictional obstacles in the protagonist's path in the *Inferno* to the narrator's anxiety over unfinishedness in the *Paradiso*. Taking its cue from Boccaccio's creative rewriting of Dante's life, the essay resists the pressure of 'total coherence' embedded in (and often projected onto) the *Commedia*, in order to reclaim the material vulnerability of the text and of its author.

KEYWORDS: Umberto Eco; open work; open-ended; interruption; unfinished; vulnerability; textuality

Interrupted and Unfinished

The Open-Ended Dante of the *Commedia*

NICOLÒ CRISAFI

‘THE CLOSED [...] CONCEPTION IN A WORK BY A MEDIEVAL
ARTIST’

In his essay ‘The Poetics of the Open Work’, Umberto Eco makes an argument for the correlation between the ‘artistic forms’ that arise across different centuries and places, and the ways in which the discourses of ‘science or [...] culture’ of a period ‘view reality’.¹ From this perspective, the Middle Ages appear to Eco as the very opposite of openness. The essay characterizes the period as a time of ‘closed’ ‘hierarchical’ systems whose artistic manifestations express a ‘fixed’ and ‘preordained’ order.² In contrast to this spirit and aesthetics of the age, Eco hails the art forms of the Baroque as having a more ‘open’, fluid, polycentric, subversive character alive to the ‘multiplicity of possible orders’, which mark what Eco calls ‘the open work’:³

1 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 47–66 (p. 57).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 60.

The closed, single conception in a work by a medieval artist reflected the conception of the cosmos as a hierarchy of fixed, preordained orders. The work as a pedagogical vehicle, as a monocentric and necessary apparatus (incorporating a rigid internal pattern of meter and rhymes) simply reflects the syllogistic system, a logic of necessity, a deductive consciousness by way of which reality could be made manifest step by step without unforeseen interruptions, moving forward in a single direction, proceeding from first principles of science which were seen as one and the same with the first principles of reality. The openness and dynamism of the Baroque mark, in fact, a new scientific awareness.⁴

Although Eco never mentions Dante in his essay, it is clear that his discussion of the Middle Ages is informed by his understanding of the *Commedia*. The essay's line of argument implies a reading in which the *Commedia* is the antithesis of an 'open work'. Firstly, the 'rigid internal pattern of meter and rhymes' that Eco ascribes to a typical medieval artwork surely alludes to the *Commedia*'s closed structure of three canticles, over one hundred cantos, linked together in the interlocking rhyming pattern of *terza rima*.⁵ Secondly, Eco's reference to a 'syllogistic system' alludes to the poem's many doctrinal discussions, echoing another common assumption about Dante's poem, first championed by Benedetto Croce, who claimed that doctrinal passages in the *Paradiso*, in particular, were excessively 'theological' in content and on occasion forwent more 'poetic' elements.⁶ But most importantly, the idea that reality could be made manifest 'step by step without unforeseen interruptions, moving forward in a single direction' can serve as a rough plot summary of the *Commedia* as a whole — the story of a journey of progressive knowledge oriented toward Dante's final vision of transcendence, which ends happily despite the many difficulties encountered along the way. While Dante's journey does indeed proceed 'step by step', as the protagonist makes his way on foot through the three realms of the afterlife of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, in what

4 Ibid., p. 57.

5 Zygmunt G. Barański, 'Terza rima, "Canto", "Canzon", "Cantica"', in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. by Theodore J. Cachey, Jr (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 3–41.

6 Benedetto Croce, *La poesia di Dante* (Bari: Laterza, 1921). Incidentally, Croce's monograph was instrumental in the success of the comparison of the *Commedia* to a Gothic cathedral in Italian Dante Studies (pp. 68–69).

follows I will show how his steps are by no means ‘without unforeseen interruptions’. It is precisely through interruptions that a particular kind of openness emerges through the cracks of the *Commedia* as a counterpoint to the ahistorical image of its text as a monolithic whole. I intend to contest the characterization of medieval artworks as rigidly structured, self-contained, and hostile to interruptions and unforeseen elements by asserting the very category of openness that Eco denies them. As committed to textual airtightness as it certainly is, the *Commedia* also offers a meditation on the text’s fragility and its vulnerability to the damage, loss, misplacement, unfinishedness that were part of manuscript culture in Dante’s time,⁷ the more so for an author who, like Dante, lived in precarious circumstances as an exile. In my argument, the *Commedia* is an open work in the most literal of senses: a work that reflects on the risk of not finding closure while it engages with the prospect of its own, and its author’s, material vulnerability to circumstance. As I will show, spectres of interruption and unfinishedness haunt not only the poem but also its early reception, starting from the most perceptive of Dante’s first readers, Boccaccio. This essay will analyse select passages of the poem where threats of interruption and unfinishedness bring a specific kind of openness into the text: its potential lack of closure due to accidents beyond the author’s control. The *Commedia* thematizes denied closure on three different levels: the protagonist’s fictional journey is interrupted and appears to go awry; the act of narration is shown to be vulnerable to suspension, if only momentarily; and finally, the material text itself is exposed to the danger of unfinishedness or loss.

Running through these episodes, as I will show, is a common thread marked by a specific kind of language that I call the language of possibility. This is constituted by the counterfactuals, subjunctives, and ellipses that, in these passages, help imagine the protagonist’s journey and the poem that narrates it in a state other than it is, thus opening its tale and the universe of the *Commedia* to alternative outcomes and non-normative interpretations. Attending to the text’s thematizations of openness and the language of possibility in the *Commedia* allows

7 Mark Bland, *A Guide to Early Printed Books and Manuscripts* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 212.

a different picture of its author to emerge, one that is more attuned to his vulnerable biographical circumstances as an exile and to the precarious material conditions of writing and manuscript transmission in fourteenth-century Italy. By thematizing unfinishedness and interruption, Dante experiments with, exorcizes, and exceeds precisely the kinds of expectations of a complete, airtight artwork with a concluded plot that are now associated with the *Commedia's* supposedly fixed poetic structure and self-contained universe. It is my contention that a personally vulnerable Dante and materially precarious *Commedia* are at least as important as the self-fashioned but ahistorical image of Dante as an infallible, monolithic author and the *Commedia* as a complete, infallible text above all circumstance. Indeed, Dante's thematization of interruption and unfinishedness exposes the very narrative mechanisms by means of which the *Commedia* presents itself as airtight and monolithic, and challenges its readers to complicate this first impression, imagine the poem as open-ended, and thus take into their own hands the business of interpreting it.⁸

THREATS OF INTERRUPTION FOR THE PILGRIM

The risks of interruption are most evidently thematized as a plot point when they concern the protagonist's fictional journey through the three realms of the afterlife. A broken bridge and a gang of pesky devils force Dante and his guide, Virgil, to detour in *Inferno* xx–xxi, and the beginning of the journey of *Purgatorio* is delayed by over four cantos as the protagonist and his guide try to find their way up Mount Purgatory. The idea that the journey might be cut short is stressed from the very beginning, as the first two cantos of the *Inferno* repeatedly stop-start the protagonist's progress:⁹ the dangers are allegorical and

8 For an argument for Dante as an author who is 'more surprising and less monolithic, who often raises questions rather than solving them, and who, over the course of time, finds himself in vulnerable situations and takes "minoritarian" decisions that may be less evident at first', see Manuele Gragnolati, 'Insegnare un classico: La complessità di Dante e lo spirito critico', in *In cattedra: Il docente universitario in otto autoritratti*, ed. by Chiara Cappelletto (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2019), pp. 179–216 (p. 180; my translation).

9 On the stop-start narration of the first cantos of the *Inferno*, see Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine 'Comedy': Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 21–47.

externalized, as in the case of the leopard (traditionally interpreted as a symbol of lust), lion (pride), and she-wolf (greed) that hinder Dante's path in the first canto and nearly force him to retreat (*Inferno*, I. 31–60); or they are psychological and come from the protagonist's own insecurities regarding his ability and worthiness ahead of such a perilous enterprise (*Inferno*, II). Such episodes have the narrative purpose of raising the stakes of Dante's journey and creating some suspense in its otherwise linear progression. In both these instances, the impasse is solved by the intervention and words of the Latin poet Virgil, who becomes Dante's guide through the first two-thirds of the journey and promises to help lead his journey to its intended conclusion.

I focus here on one particular episode where that conclusion is momentarily placed out of reach and Virgil is rendered helpless. Having progressed through the upper Hell, Dante and his guide Virgil must enter the gates of the infernal city of Dis but find themselves locked out of its walls, unable to continue on their journey. It is the first time that the borders between the circles of Hell are closed off to Dante. The city walls appear as an emblem of exclusion — not the last time in the poem, as I will show later in this chapter — as Dante is mocked by more than a thousand devils that are garrisoned inside (*Inferno*, VIII. 82). Their taunts, questioning Dante's right to traverse the realm of the dead ('Chi è costui che senza morte | va per lo regno de la morta gente?'; Who is this, who is not dead | yet passes through the kingdom of the dead?; *Inferno*, VIII. 84–85), hit the protagonist closest to home, playing on the self-doubts he had voiced at the start of the journey:¹⁰

Ma io, perché venirvi? O chi 'l concede?
[...]
me degno a ciò né io né altri crede. (*Inferno*, II. 31–33)

(But why should I go there? Who allows it?
[...]
Neither I nor any think me fit for this.)

10 Quotations from Dante's poems are from *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 2nd edn, 4 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994). All translations from the *Commedia* are from Robert and Jean Hollander's *Inferno* (New York: Anchor, 2000), *Purgatorio* (New York: Anchor, 2003), and *Paradiso* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

The journey seems seriously threatened with a premature end, and for the first time Virgil is unable to help him. To Dante's dismay, the devils insinuate that the guide alone should be granted access to Dis, leaving Dante to retrace his steps through the upper Hell by himself (*Inferno*, VIII. 88–93) in a repeat of his earlier encounter with the three beasts at the start of the poem. Not only is Virgil unable to talk his way out of the situation, but the prospect of interruption puts a strain on his otherwise confident use of language ('parola ornata'; ornate style; *Inferno*, II. 67) to the point of fragmenting it:

'Pur a noi converrà vincer la punga',
cominciò el, 'se non... Tal ne s'offerse.
Oh quanto tarda a me ch'altri qui giunga!'
I' vidi ben sì com'ei ricoperse
lo cominciar con l'altro che poi venne,
che fur parole a le prime diverse;
ma nondimen paura il suo dir dienne,
perch'io traeva la parola tronca
forse a peggior sentenza che non tenne. (*Inferno*, IX. 7–15)

('Yet we must win this fight,' he began,
'or else... Such help was promised us.
long it seems to me till someone comes!'
I clearly saw that he had covered up
His first words with the others that came after,
Words so different in meaning.
Still I was filled with fear by what he said.
Perhaps I understood his broken phrase
To hold worse meaning than it did.)

It is a commonplace of the scholarship to notice here how this passage is engineered to show Virgil's limits as a guide in the new poetic universe of the *Commedia*. Virgil's fallibility is here emphasized rhetorically in a clash of two registers expressing two sides of his character: on the one hand, the Latin *auctoritas* who composed the epic *Aeneid*; on the other, the vulnerable pagan who is out of his depths in a Christian poem. Virgil's speech begins pugnaciously: the line 'Pur a noi converrà vincer la pugna' (Yet we must win this fight; *Inferno*, IX. 7) stresses the providential necessity of their journey through the afterlife with the decisive future tense 'converrà' (we must) and by employing Latinisms virtually synonymous with the martial epic that Virgil is identified with ('vincer la pugna'; win this fight). And yet, the epic

march of the sentence is cut short in an ellipsis which denies it closure by exploiting interruption for dramatic effect: ‘se non...’ (or else...; *Inferno*, IX. 8). The brief suggestion that things might go differently is enough to wreck the rest of the sentence, effectively throwing into disarray the incipit’s carefully constructed rhetoric as the authoritative epic poet’s turn of phrase is broken off. It is a clash of poetics, with Virgil’s martial incipit beset by an unfamiliar sense of uncertainty and the nightmarish visions it lets into the poem’s imaginary. Confronted with the open-endedness of Virgil’s truncated sentence, Dante’s imagination becomes crowded with fearful possibilities that take on very dark hues.¹¹ The open space left by ‘la parola tronca’ (the broken phrase; *Inferno*, IX. 14) is filled with Dante’s fear, the sentence’s implications growing worse in Dante’s imagination than Virgil perhaps meant (‘perch’io traeva la parola tronca | forse a peggior sentenza che non tenne’; Perhaps I understood his broken phrase | To hold worse meaning than it did; *Inferno*, IX. 14–15).

The episode is by no means rhetorically unique in the *Commedia*,¹² but it is emblematic of the disruptive force of interruption when it comes to the familiar mechanisms of the poem. When Virgil’s otherwise authoritative speech is denied its closure, it becomes literally open-ended, its interpretation up for grabs. Suddenly, the character Dante is tasked with the imaginative business of filling in the gaps left by the guide on whose authority he used to count.

THREATS OF UNFINISHEDNESS FOR THE NARRATOR

The anxiety about the open future displayed by the protagonist of the *Commedia* in this passage is traditionally explained in moralized terms as a function of its narrative structure. Scholars of the *Commedia* distin-

11 For a reading of this passage’s ‘anacoluthon’ and Dante’s ‘pessimistic fantasy’, see Justin Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 106.

12 Nicola Gardini reflects on this passage in his *Lacuna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), p. 46, dedicating a chapter to this and other instances of *reticentia* in the *Commedia* (pp. 46–55). Gianfranco Contini, *Un’idea di Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), p. 143, calls Dante ‘lo scrittore, i cui silenzi, le cui reticenze, le cui oscurità e ambiguità sono ferree quanto tutto il resto’.

guish between two Dantes behind the first-person 'I' in the poem:¹³ on the one hand, the character whose journey through the afterlife is told in the past tense; on the other, the narrator who writes of the journey in retrospect after having returned to earth and comments on it in the present tense. In this view, Dante-character and Dante-narrator have different attributes and different tasks. The character is more naive, more prone to mistakes, while the narrator can comment on his experience and assess it from a more mature and knowing vantage point. The general shape of the *Commedia*, in this view, is linear, the forward journey bending back self-reflexively in its retelling, thus closing off the poem in a reassuring circularity.¹⁴ Dante-character does not yet have the benefit of knowing the triumphant conclusion of his journey, which is reserved for the narrator. Yet gradually, as the poem unfolds, the *Commedia* also starts involving the act of narration in the dangers of interruption, as is the case in one of the narrator's addresses to the reader, when Dante calls upon them to envision precisely 'the event of a sudden interruption of the canticle':¹⁵

Pensa, lettore, se quello che qui s'inizia
non procedesse, come tu avresti
di più sapere angosciosa carizia. (*Paradiso*, v. 109–111)

(Merely consider, reader, if what I here begin
Went on no farther, how keen would be
Your anguished craving to know more.)

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- 13 Charles S. Singleton, *Dante's 'Commedia': Elements of Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1954), pp. 9–11. The twin protagonist of this story is what Gianfranco Contini, *Un'idea di Dante*, pp. 33–62, called Dante 'personaggio-poeta'. On Singleton's and Contini's writings about the Dante narrator-character, see Justin Steinberg, 'The Author', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 3–16.
- 14 On the 'grand, circular, closed construction that celebrates the end of a long arduous journey, and this sense of absolute closure', see Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 135. Rushworth contrasts the closure of the *Commedia* with the open-endedness inherent in the promise of future writing in Dante's youthful work *Vita nova*.
- 15 Elena Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 156. Lombardi discusses the triangulation of desires between the pilgrim, the souls, and the reader on pp. 156–57. On Dante-narrator teasing the reader 'with the possibility of resistance of any form of closure', see Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning*, p. 147.

As the narrator's tale is confronted with a 'veiled threat of narrative interruption',¹⁶ the desire for knowledge that usually propels Dante forward ('di più sapere [...] carizia') is here deformed by a similar kind of anxiety ('angosciosa', lit. 'anguishing'; *Paradiso*, v. 111) to that which took over Dante-character in the fiction when he heard Virgil's truncated speech. Here, however, Dante addresses readers, appealing to them 'to imagine what [they] would have felt had Dante the narrator stopped at this point'.¹⁷ The possibility of the poem's interruption is presented as a known quantity, conceivably part of the everyday experience of both the author and his contemporaries, whom the threat of narrative interruption concerns in different ways but equal measure. The readers may be counted upon to entertain a scenario where the poem is unfinished or its manuscript transmission incomplete — all the more so if they are familiar with the precarious material culture of the time, not to mention its author's track record and well-publicized circumstances. Indeed, the author Dante Alighieri was no stranger to unfinished writing. By the time he was penning the *Paradiso*, he had left unfinished two treatises (*Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*). Before that, in his early *Vita nova*, he had flirted with the potential failure of writing by including in the book the sonnet with two beginnings 'Era venuta ne la mente mia' and the interrupted *canzone* 'Si lungiamente m'ha tenuto Amore', and leaving its conclusion open-ended with the promise of future writing.¹⁸ In writing the *Commedia*, he was composing his most ambitious work in precarious conditions as an exile, its copies circulating in batches over whose integrity and reliability he had no control.¹⁹ No matter how self-enclosed and tightly structured, his poem still relied on its material conditions. How would it be transmitted, received, and interpreted? In thematizing unfinishedness, the *Commedia* expresses Dante's anxiety that he would never see his work bound in a single volume. This fear, of course, turned out to be warranted.

16 Barolini, *The Undivine 'Comedy'*, p. 190.

17 Leo Spitzer, 'The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*', *Italica*, 32.3 (1955), pp. 143–65 (pp. 151–52).

18 On the promise of future writing at the conclusion of the *Vita nova*, see Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning*, pp. 129–162.

19 John Ahern, 'Binding the Book: Hermeneutics and Manuscript Production in *Paradiso* 33', *PMLA*, 97.5 (1982), pp. 800–09 (p. 800).

THREATS OF INTERRUPTION FOR THE HISTORICAL DANTE:
BOCCACCIO'S TAKE

It was Dante's admirer Giovanni Boccaccio who first responded to the *Commedia* as a text vulnerable to interruption. In the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, a short work where he embellishes Dante's biography with his own 'innate talent for narrative', Boccaccio comments precisely on the difficult circumstances of the *Commedia's* composition.²⁰ Reading Boccaccio's take on exile is important for two reasons. His account gives important historical evidence of the material difficulties of writing as an exile, as well as responding creatively to Dante's own anxiety about leaving his *Commedia* in an unfinished state:

conoscer dobbiamo così alta, così grande, così escogitata impresa [...] non essere stato possibile in picciolo spazio avere il suo fine recata; e massimamente da uomo, il quale da molti e varii casi della Fortuna, pieni tutti d'angoscia e d'amaritudine venenati, sia stato agitato.²¹

(we must understand that it was not possible [...] to bring to its end such a high, great, and contrived undertaking; and especially on the part of a man who was troubled by the many and varied chances of Fortune, full of anguish and poisoned with bitterness.)

Writing an ambitious poem such as the *Commedia* takes a long time, as Boccaccio testifies; all the more so for a poet in Dante's situation. Showing the ways in which both the author and his poem were once vulnerable to hazards and circumstance, Boccaccio proceeds to relate two 'accidents that occurred around the time of the beginning and end of the composition of the *Commedia*', which nearly prevented the poem from reaching its conclusion ('il suo fine'; its end). As Boccaccio writes, the first accident was caused by Dante's sudden exile in 1302 ('l gravoso accidente della sua cacciata, o fuga che chiamar si convegna'; the terrible accident of his exile, or escape, whatever one should call

20 Martin McLaughlin, 'Biography and Autobiography in the Italian Renaissance', in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. by Peter France and William St Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 37–65 (pp. 47–48).

21 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), xxvi. Translations from the *Trattatello* are my own.

it). In his tale, exile forced the poet to abandon the first seven cantos in Florence as he wandered through Italy in perpetual insecurity ('per lo quale egli e quella e ogni altra cosa abandonata, incerto di se medesimo, più anni con diversi amici e signori andò vagando'; which, after he abandoned both Florence and all other things, caused him to roam back and forth and stay with several friends and lords, uncertain of himself). The practical man that he is, Boccaccio does not see exile as a fortifying experience or as an allegory of Dante's spiritual journey. Instead, he focuses squarely on the practical problems of exile. The first problem is Dante's sudden displacement, which forced him to abandon his manuscript in Florence and interrupt his writing only seven cantos into the poem. Eventually, the interruption was resolved when Dante's patron, Marquis Morello Malaspina, was sent the cantos and, led on by the *plaisir du texte*, entreated Dante to pick up where he had left off so as to avoid leaving the work unfinished ('che gli piacesse di non lasciare senza debito fine sì alto principio'; that it may please him to not leave such a lofty beginning without a proper conclusion).

The second accident that befell the integrity of the *Commedia* is a direct consequence of Dante's exile. Boccaccio tells us that the last thirteen cantos of the *Paradiso* were lost, as death caught up with the poet before he could bind his work into an authorized copy. Even if apocryphal, the tale is revealing: it responds imaginatively to Dante's own concerns about leaving his text unfinished and unbound, while giving us an insight into what could plausibly be believed to be the material conditions of the *Commedia's* composition and transmission in times of exile. Boccaccio reflects on the ways in which the loss of the final cantos affects so systematic, so structured a poem as the *Commedia*. He has a keen sense for the fact that the *Commedia* is, in its design, a strong coherent whole. He repeatedly refers to the idea of a 'proper conclusion' of the poem, which, though materially lost, still informs and constricts its architecture.²² So strong is this ideal completeness, that, in Boccaccio's tale, Dante's sons Iacopo and Pietro Alighieri feel compelled to reconstruct the integrity of their father's text based on what is left of the poem in an attempt to 'supplire la

22 On ways to mark the proper end of works of literature in the Middle Ages, see John Ahern, 'Dante's Last Word: The *Comedy* as a *liber coelestis*', *Dante Studies*, 102 (1984), pp. 1-14.

paterna opera, acciò che imperfetta non procedesse'; to add to their father's work, so as to avoid leaving it incomplete'; *Trattatello*, xxvi). Their attempt to not let the *Commedia* remain 'imperfect' confirms the fundamental tension between the vulnerability of the material text and the integrity of its architectural design.²³ Boccaccio is perfectly attuned to this important ambiguity. On the one hand, his tale pays homage to the ways in which the *Commedia* is structurally whole and textually bound by design, and invites completion independently of its material circumstances. On the other hand, however, Boccaccio is attuned to Dante's own emphasis on the open-ended nature of writing and textual transmission, and his condition as the vulnerable author of a vulnerable text. Although the design of the *Commedia* invites binding, the physical manuscripts could still be left unbound. No matter how much closure the author built into his text, its final appearance would still be out of his hands, as 'once the long-awaited final *quaderno* had been released [Dante's] readers would be faced with the choice of leaving the text in its vulnerable unbound condition or going to the expense of having it bound'.²⁴

THREATS OF INTERRUPTION FOR THE AUTHOR

As I have shown, there is an important ambiguity in Dante's writing between this desire for a strong architecture and a strong voice on the one hand, and the poet's painful experience and need to dramatize that experience of vulnerability on the other. The last instance of this ambiguity can be seen in *Paradiso* xxv, one of the final cantos of the *Paradiso*. *Paradiso* xxv is a canto on hope and begins with Dante's most treasured hope: that of a return from exile. This hope turns on a big 'if':

Se mai continga che 'l poema sacro
al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro,

23 On the 'sort of idealism' implicit in scribal attempts to reconstitute the completeness of a text, see Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375–1510* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 246–74 (p. 246).

24 Ahern, 'Binding the Book', p. 801. On the tension between aesthetically 'closed' texts and their awareness of their 'openness' to material circumstance beyond Dante Studies, see the classic study by Thomas M. Greene, *The Vulnerable Text: Essays on Renaissance Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), esp. the essay 'Vulnerabilities of the Humanist Text' (pp. 1–17).

vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
 del bello ovile ov'io dormi' agnello,
 nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra;
 con altra voce omai, con altro vello
 ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte
 del mio battesmo prenderò 'l cappello. (*Paradiso*, xxv. 1–9)

(Should it ever come to pass that this sacred poem
 to which both Heaven and earth have set their hand
 so that it has made me lean for many years,
 should overcome the cruelty that locks me out
 of the fair sheepfold where I slept as a lamb,
 foe of the wolves at war with it,
 with another voice then, with another fleece,
 shall I return a poet and, at the font
 where I was baptized, take the laurel crown.)

Here the narrator is pictured as visibly leaner after years in exile, his voice and hair no longer what they used to be (*Paradiso*, xxv. 3, 7). This very famous passage has been interpreted in a variety of ways, but I would like to focus on its inbuilt open-endedness. As a text that mentions a changed voice, the passage is in fact dependent on the shifts in the tone of one's reading. Does one voice the passage with defiance, emphasizing its gravitas?²⁵ Or does one voice it more cautiously, as the delicate hope of an ageing and emaciated man — placing the emphasis on the language of possibility: the tentative mood of hypotheticals and subjunctives, and the fact that it is the narrator (his life on earth still unfolding, his story still unresolved) that speaks these lines?²⁶ Typically of the Dante I am describing, the passage alternates between these major and minor chords. It uses the resounding prophetic mode through triumphant future indicatives ('ritornerò poeta'; shall I return a poet; 'prenderò 'l cappello'; [I shall] take the laurel crown; *Paradiso*, xxv. 8–9), but modulates it through the subjunctives on which they are conditional ('Se mai continga che [...] vinca la crudeltà';

25 For the biblical intertexts in *Paradiso* xxv, see Giuseppe Ledda, 'L'esilio, la speranza, la poesia: Modelli biblici e strutture autobiografiche nel canto xxv del *Paradiso*', *Studi e Problemi di Critica Testuale*, 90.1 (2015), pp. 257–77.

26 Albert Russell Ascoli describes the Dante represented here as "'human, all too human". Dante's coronation [...] is posited as radically contingent, subject to the constraints of history' (*Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 402).

Should it ever come to pass that [...] [the poem] should overcome; *Paradiso*, xxv. 1–4).²⁷ From the narrator's perspective, his life remains open-ended, his future unknowable. Naturally, reading the incipit after Dante Alighieri's death, it is impossible to suspend one's knowledge that, if these lines were ever meant to be prophetic, they failed — one of very few such failures in the author's oeuvre.²⁸ We can only imagine whether the 'molti anni' (many years) spent in exile did make Dante as 'macro' (lean) as he paints the narrator here (*Paradiso*, xxv. 33), and whether age did alter his 'voce' (voice) and 'vello' (fleece [i.e. hair]; *Paradiso*, xxv. 7).²⁹ What we do know, however, is that Dante Alighieri never returned to Florence and that the contingent prophecy of being poet laureate expressed here was never fulfilled. From this perspective, at least, a more cautious reading of *Paradiso* xxv seems justified: these hypotheticals and subjunctives, with their doubts and fears, do not conceal the vulnerability of his narrator and his text, but place it at the heart of the *Commedia*. In this case, the minor chord of vulnerability eventually turned out to be more truthful. As we know, for the author of the poem Dante Alighieri, the open-endedness expressed by the incipit's 'could be's had the last word over the confidence of the prophetic 'will be'.

The early iconographic tradition of Dante Alighieri reflects this ambiguity in certain ways. Whereas the earliest depictions of Dante in manuscripts, panels, or frescos represent him as 'giovanile, sereno, chiaro d'incarnato' (youthful, serene, of fair complexion) and wearing his distinctive cap, two iconographic innovations begin to appear in the second half of the fifteenth century.³⁰ On the one hand, Dante appears more mature and gaunt, as he already did in such early fifteenth-

27 On the shift in mood in the first tercet, see Claire E. Honess and Matthew Treherne, 'Introduction', in *Se mai continga ... : Exile, Politics and Theology in Dante*, ed. by Claire E. Honess and Matthew Treherne (Ravenna: Longo, 2013), pp. 7–10 (p. 8).

28 According to Robert Wilson, Dante prefers obscurity and ambiguity to the possibility of incorrect prophecy. Rare examples of failed prophecy are found in *Epistola* vi and *Purgatorio*, XIII. 91–111 (Robert Wilson, *Prophecies and Prophecy in Dante's 'Commedia'* (Florence: Olschki, 2008), pp. 96–97).

29 On Dante's leanness, see Ledda, 'L'esilio, la speranza, la poesia', p. 261 n. 1, and bibliographical references therein.

30 Anna Maria Francini Ciaranfi, 'Iconografia', in *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (1970) <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/iconografia_\(Enciclopedia-Dantesca\)/>](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/iconografia_(Enciclopedia-Dantesca)/>) [accessed 30 May 2020] (my translation).

century manuscripts as Strozzii 174 (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana), fol. 4^v, and Riccardiano 1040 (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana), fol. 1^v; on the other, he wears the laurel crown that alludes to his poetic coronation.³¹ The earliest representation of Dante to feature both these iconographic innovations is perhaps the best-known one: the fresco painted by Domenico di Michelino in the Duomo of Florence in 1465 for the bicentenary of Dante's birth (Figure 1). Here Dante appears at the centre of the frame, gaunt and laurelled, holding his *Commedia*, surrounded by Hell to the left, Purgatory in the background, and the spheres of Heaven above him. On the right-hand side of the composition lies Florence, such that the poet appears locked out of the gates of his own home city. Behind the city walls, the skyline is dominated by Florence's Duomo, which contains this very fresco where Dante is represented. Through this *mise en abyme* — the fresco of Dante in the Duomo containing the fresco of Dante in the Duomo — the poet simultaneously appears both outside and inside the city: outside, because we see him standing outside of the city walls; inside, because we know that the painted Duomo inside the gates holds Dante's portrait. Thus, the painting preserves the ambiguity of *Paradiso* xxv and Dante's language of possibility, remaining faithful to the poem's own open-endedness when employing counterfactuals and future tense at the time of writing.³² The 'resilient validation of the spiritually, politically and poetically transformative nature of Dante's experience of banishment from Florence' coincides, specifically, with Dante's laureation and ageing, both performed by his poetic use of possibility and performing the two complementary sides of it, bringing closure to the myth of Dante while not erasing his vulnerability.³³ As the last five centuries of Dante iconography demonstrate, his *Commedia* gained him the poetic laurels with which he is now always represented, but also left traces of the arduous and uncertain journey of its writing in representing the poet as emaciated and gaunt.

31 Ibid.

32 Cf. Catherine Keen, 'Florence and Faction in Dante's Lyric Poetry: Framing the Experience of Exile', in *Se mai continga ...*, ed. by Honess and Treherne, pp. 63–83 (p. 82).

33 Robert Hollander, on *Paradiso*, xxv. 1–9. See also the comment by Daniele Mattalia on *Paradiso*, xxv. 9, from the Dartmouth Dante Project, available online at <<https://dante.dartmouth.edu/>> [accessed 30 May 2020].



Figure 1. Domenico di Michelino, Dante and his Poem. 1465. Fresco.
Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence.
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EPILOGUE

I would like to conclude with a quote from Kierkegaard. In a chapter of *The Sickness unto Death* called ‘Necessity’s Despair Is to Lack Possibility’, the philosopher writes about the breath of fresh air that is afforded by thinking in terms of possibility:

When someone faints, we call for water, eau de Cologne, smelling salts; but when someone wants to despair, then the word is: Get possibility, get possibility, possibility is the only salvation. A possibility — then the person in despair breathes again, he revives again, for without possibility a person seems unable to breathe.³⁴

Possibility brings a breath of fresh air to the *Commedia* in a number of ways. The passages I have analysed in this discussion of the inter-

34 Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 38–39.

ruptions and unfinishedness that make the *Commedia* an open work all displayed the language of possibility. Dante's fears of premature and inappropriate endings to the journey through the afterlife and to the journey of writing about it, his hopes for return from exile that I have discussed — these all revolve around counterfactuals, 'if's, and subjunctives: Virgil's elliptical 'se non ...' (*Inferno*, ix. 8), the narrator's 'se [...] non procedesse' (*Paradiso*, v. 110), Dante's 'Se mai continga' (*Paradiso*, xxv. 1). Dante character-narrator is not only the monolithic author in control of the architecture of his poem but also represents himself as involved in the open-ended course of human life. No matter how strongly conceived, the poem itself is equally vulnerable to unfinishedness, corruption, loss. The future of what might happen is for Dante and his poem still open, uncertain, and undividable. When Dante uses the language of possibility regarding his own open future as an author and exile, this Dante shows himself more vulnerable and exposed to chance and mishap than the Dante that carefully controls his narrative and its retrospective interpretation. Attending to the language of possibility in the text thus allows us to take a breath of fresh air as interpreters. Less concerned with the coherence of the *Commedia* and its seemingly incontestable authority as a hermeneutic criterion, readers of possibility can discover a new side of Dante that dwells on alternatives and uncertainty. Retrospective storytelling risks making a life appear necessary, predetermined, its outcome conclusive. To balance this perspective, a focus on possibility allows the teleological linearity of the *Commedia* to open out on possibilities and destinies not taken, representing life not as understood in retrospect but as lived forward, with all the attendant risks of interruption and unfinishedness. Thus, if we return to the Eco quotation with which this essay started, we will find that 'The Poetics of the Open Work' sets out to describe as 'open' precisely the kind of storytelling of which the *Commedia* constitutes a special case. The writing of the *Commedia* does not forget the debt it owes to circumstance for its completion, but dilates its space in the text; it does not disown the need it has for readers or listeners for its fruition, but reminds them of their responsibility in receiving the text and deciding on its interpretation; it does not simply wish to appear as absolutely resolved and self-contained but preserves and lingers in

the time when it was 'in time', 'in movement [...]', 'incomplete'.³⁵ It is this kind of 'open work' that, as Eco puts it, is 'characterised by the invitation to make the work together with the author'.³⁶ This commitment to open-endedness even in the moment of closure constitutes the paradoxical double movement of the *Commedia*.

35 Eco, *Role of the Reader*, p. 56.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Nicolò Crisafi, 'Interrupted and Unfinished: The Open-Ended Dante of the *Commedia*', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, *Cultural Inquiry*, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 85–102 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_05>

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