

# The infernal language of *La Commedia*: melancholy, polysemy and dramatic irony

JOEL BALDWIN

I came into a place mute of all light,  
Which bellows as the sea does in a tempest,  
If by opposing winds 't is combated.  
(*Inf.* 3.28–30)

In 1997, Hal Hartley created a seven-minute film installation, *The Other Also*, for Parisian contemporary art museum Fondation Cartier.<sup>1</sup> In it, two characters, always out of focus, have a slow-moving, dance-like, physical dialogue. Repeating fragments of spoken phrases are heard, but no real or obvious verbal dialogue takes place. Reverberating sounds of water droplets, piano notes with delay and synth string chords accompany the static camera angle, heightening the emotive, brooding tension of the performers' slow movement. Its suggested themes are of love and reconciliation, but there is also a distinct sense of melancholy permeating the repetitive music-motion dialogue. The viewer has no distinguishable faces or characters to 'connect' to—there are just blurred lines, vague motivic ideas and a loose narrative—but a depressive darkness is ever-present amidst the beauty of the bokeh light-play. The lack of focus (literally and figuratively, in every aspect of this short film) reflects the irony of love: that forgiveness and unity can only exist alongside the potential for pain, loss and separation; that pure beauty only exists in the abstract. It undoubtedly portrays the theme of the gallery's exhibition for which it was written ('Amour'), but it only does so by layering suggestive material that has the possibility of expressing something about love over a backdrop of a much more obvious sense of loss (auditory, visual and temporal). This semiotic uncertainty—and its melancholic effect—is apparent in many of Hartley's films.

Two years later, Hartley would make a 'fun and action-packed little cartoon',<sup>2</sup> *The New Math(s)*, with music by two contemporary Dutch composers, Louis Andriessen and Michel van der Aa. Far from the slow-moving abstraction presented in *The Other Also*, this film is a sharp-focused, dramatic fight scene with a score of acoustic, vocal, and electroacoustic elements that gradually gain momentum alongside the action. But the obvious dissimilarities end there. Again, there is no acted vocal dialogue and, again, there is an overwhelming sense of melancholy communicated through the on-screen juxtapositions and accompanying musical rhetoric. While the setting is more absurd (comedic martial arts combat during a mathematics class), the structural

---

<sup>1</sup> Hartley, H. (2004). [Liner notes]. In *Possible Films* [DVD]. San Francisco: Microcinema International.

<sup>2</sup> 'The New Math(s)'. *Hal Hartley*. <https://www.halhartley.com/the-new-maths> (Accessed 30 December 2020).

elements of this film (light, colour, movement, sound, pacing) together form a disconcerting negative aesthetic. In Hartley's films (and also in Andriessen's music), this negative aesthetic has less to do with Adorno's aesthetics of material negativity (a non-nihilistic negating of past work to achieve new artistic progress)<sup>3</sup>, but is an aesthetic more closely related to the literature of melancholia and postmodern authors such as Samuel Beckett, where nihilism is expressed, as Shane Weller writes, 'in terms of possibility and impossibility, freedom and necessity, collaboration and resistance'<sup>4</sup>. Appropriately, every scene is shot with 'Dutch tilt' (the camera is always angled obliquely so that vertical lines appear slanted) and the stylized interaction of characters ironically references martial arts films (see Fig. 1.1). But this light-heartedness is offset by a more somber tone from the music, which relays the slowly sung words of William Blake (extracts from *The Book of Thel*) to slow-evolving repetitive fragments from the flute, percussion and string instruments, albeit referencing martial arts films too. Long, 'wet' reverb is used to emphasise and caricature the sound effects (e.g. the ticking clock) and other various electronic sounds in the same way the dripping water was treated in *The Other Also*. Rhythms and pulses increase in intensity as the fight over a mathematical equation unfolds, but a harmonic and thematic stasis is maintained. As a result, a dialogue between stylistic playfulness and serious expression is suggested. But the meaning of this dialogue is less clear, or, at least, polysemous. The uncertainty, melancholy and irony presented in these two films prepares the way for Hartley's and Andriessen's collaboration in *La Commedia* (2008)—from here on abbreviated 'LC'—in which 'Dutch Tilt' becomes the metaphorical frame for Hartley's visuals, and the black mood of Blake is transplanted for the dark melancholy of Dante through the filter of Andriessen's polysemous musical material.



Figure 1.1: 'Dutch Tilt' and fighting in *The New Math(s)*, 2'08" (dir. Hal Hartley. Microcinema. 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Hammer, E. (2015). An aesthetics of negativity. In *Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe* (pp. 180-207). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Weller, S. (2005). *A taste for the negative: Beckett and nihilism*. London: Legenda, pp. 23–24.

In this chapter, I will explore how the melancholy of Dante's *Inferno* is expressed through the postmodern filter of Hartley's films and stage direction—matched by the postoperatic musical language of Andriessen—in the first two sections of LC (1. *The City of Dis*, or *The Ship of Fools*, and 2. *Racconto dall'Inferno*). LC3, *Lucifer*, will be treated separately in the following chapter as, although it is still strikingly melancholic, it will be used as a case study for how concepts of noise relate to the themes of melancholy and intertextuality. In this chapter, I will explore how polysemy and irony are manifested in these sections to produce a negative aesthetic. What are the composer and director communicating about the topography of Dante's hell, or Bosch's hell as it may be too, and a more contemporary understanding of hell in these sections? And does their 'infernal' language just equate to black comedy, or is it more akin to the aesthetics of absence as found in the works of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, who each referenced and explored Dante's *Inferno* through their own writings in intertextual and postmodernist ways?

In order to understand the tension between love and pain—and the resultant sense of melancholy—expressed in LC, it is worth turning to Julia Kristeva, who, in the Preface to the English-language version of her essay collection *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), explains that this kind of dialectic is a 'theoretical stance [that] could well be termed metaphysical'—a type of analysis 'involving otherness, distance, even limitation, on the basis of which a structure, a logical discourse is sutured, hence demonstrable—not in a banal sense but by giving serious consideration to the new post-Freudian rationality that takes two stages into account, the conscious and the unconscious ones, and two corresponding types of performances.'<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Tambling sees this dialectical, ever-questioning process of expression described by Kristeva as central to the 'crisis of language in the *Commedia*' itself: e.g. '*Purgatorio* will be the new sign-system which will countervail the sign system of *Inferno*'.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that both Andriessen and Hartley adopt this polycommunicative approach in setting Dante's text. However, banality is also an important part of the picture for these artists too, which I will explore later. The *intertextuality* of LC4 (*The Garden of Earthly Delights*, discussed in a later chapter) is more potent as a result of the *intratextuality* of the *Inferno* sections that precede it, which present several distinct 'angles' of hell, each one reappraising the one that has gone before. It is this idea of multiple frames for understanding a concept that presents as melancholic in this work—for any obvious pattern or form the music, film or on-stage drama takes, it is always negated by a starkly opposing force. I will explore some specific examples of this in both Andriessen's music and Hartley's

---

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> Tambling, J. (1988). *Dante and Difference: Writing in the 'Commedia'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 95.

films later in the chapter, but in order to understand this negative aesthetic properly, it is essential that a definition of melancholia is established first, and how its defining features can be identified in LC.

## MELANCHOLIA

While there are many definitions of melancholia, there are common threads among them—from Aristotle to medieval examples, to Freud and beyond, whether in literature, art or medicine and psychotherapy—that can be used to bring meaning and relevance to this topic in terms of its relationship to LC and its expression within the work. These common threads are, namely: dialogue (opposing forces interacting), difference (a separation from normality), and death (the inevitability of loss). I shall briefly look at each aspect separately here, although they naturally intersect to a great extent.

By dialogue, I am referring to two main ideas that relate to melancholia and depressive states: (1) the way in which this condition requires an outside stimulus (e.g. loss or pain) or an origin (e.g. a ‘memory event’, ‘the maternal object’<sup>7</sup> or a chronic illness) to speak to or mourn with; and (2) the way in which someone or something—e.g. a person diagnosed with a mental disorder such as Manic-Depressive Illness<sup>8</sup> or an ironic work of art—exists in a state of accepting two contrasting feelings at the same time, or alternatingly, and makes sense of them both by travelling ‘between’ or ‘through’ them at intervals. The first dialogic form is one discussed extensively in psychoanalytical literature—from Freud to Kristeva<sup>9</sup>—and is relevant to psychiatric and medical discussions around depression. Of course, the outworking of a person’s internal dialogue often results in a spoken dialogue and open, discursive relationships between the subject and, say, a psychoanalyst or psychotherapist. This kind of dialogue is certainly relevant to the communicative possibilities of melancholia in theatre and artistic expression. It may also be seen in melancholic artworks that suggest or require a metaphysical interpretation, for example. However, it is the second dialogic form that is of particular interest in relation to LC, for it is this ever-present acceptance of two seemingly opposing states (e.g. historical and contemporary, spiritual and secular, serious and humorous, etc.)—and the desire to discover meaning, or at least some kind of symbiotic existence between them—that best characterises the ironic rhetoric that Andriessen and Hartley use to communicate Dante’s despondency that resonates in the *Inferno*.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, J. (1989). *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 60–61.

<sup>8</sup> See Kendler, K., & Jablensky, A. (2011). Kraepelin's concept of psychiatric illness. *Psychological Medicine*, 41(6), pp. 1119–1126 or Trede, K, Salvatore, P, Baethge, C, Gerhard, A, Maggini, C, Baldessarini, RJ (2005). Manic-depressive illness: evolution in Kraepelin's Textbook, 1883–1926. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 13, pp. 155–178.

<sup>9</sup> See Part II of Radden, J. (2002). *The nature of melancholy [electronic resource]: from Aristotle to Kristeva*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

By ‘difference’, I refer to the position, expression and action of a melancholic *subject*: a wounded character suffering from a depressive pathological condition as a result of loss. Such a character is defined by an abnormality in terms of their behaviour or mood—perhaps by the way in which their language (vocalised or expressed physically) is perceived to be outside normal, ‘sensible’ discourse, or perhaps by an unusual obsession with melancholic objects that signify what they have lost. A melancholic subject’s navigation through mourning requires this adoption of a state of difference (and a changeable relationship with the signifying objects of mourning) in order to come to terms with their ‘failed separation from the maternal object.’<sup>10</sup> This difference may be characterised by withdrawal, defensiveness, or madness. According to Emil Kraepelin’s early twentieth-century view of melancholia, which is ‘somewhat supported’ by more recent evidence, ‘melancholia should be regarded as one of the evidences of beginning senility.’<sup>11</sup> Using representations of madness as a device to create dramatic tension was well-established in twentieth-century music theatre; in a way, adopting melancholia as an operatic subject matter could be seen as a more nuanced, postmodernist expression of the kinds of senility we see in modernist works from Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) to Maxwell Davies’ *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969). Many modernist composers saw the new world of psychoanalysis as Adorno did: as a ‘powerful weapon against any metaphysics of drive and deification of purely dull organic life’.<sup>12</sup> Acknowledging how the world was changing (largely due to globalisation, commerce, industry and modern warfare), they felt the exploration of the mind was a way to move from Romanticism, whose themes no longer fully rang true, to something more ‘profound’. However, in LC, the difference of melancholia (or depression, madness, etc.) is not directly associated with characters—nor its sung or spoken dialogue—nor through a modernist atonal musical language in which the conventional devices of tonality are disrupted. Difference in LC is expressed more subtly through diverse musical references, unsettling metanarratives, polysemy, and often in the non-verbal, non-acted elements.

It is no surprise then that death plays an equally important role in the ‘infernal’ language (textual, intratextual, intertextual, aural and visual) of LC, for it seems to foreground characters with an oversized Freudian melancholy superego. Freud would characterise this part of a person’s psyche as ‘a pure culture of the death instinct’ with a dual role of, ‘on the one hand... [perpetuating] cruelty, on the other... [constituting] its

---

<sup>10</sup> Kritzman, L. D. ‘Melancholia Becomes the Subject: Kristeva’s Invisible “Thing” and the Making of Culture.’ *Paragraph* 14, no. 2 (1991): p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Kraepelin, E. quoted in Primo De Carvalho Alves, L., and Sica Da Rocha, N. Debate on ‘Defining Melancholia: A Core Mood Disorder’ (Parker et al., 2017). *Bipolar Disorders* 19.7 (2017): pp. 522-23.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, N-N. Sublimated or castrated psychoanalysis? Adorno’s critique of the revisionist psychoanalysis: An introduction to ‘The Revisionist Psychoanalysis.’ *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. 2014;40(3): pp. 309-338.

benevolent aspect.<sup>13</sup> This dualistic expression of melancholy equates to the kind of irony ('on a philosophical level'<sup>14</sup>) that Andriessen finds so stimulating and, as he explains, is the 'crux of what [he] deals with as a composer.'<sup>15</sup> Freud alludes to this philosophical irony when considering the ideas of Schopenhauer, suggesting that 'the sexual instinct [as] the embodiment of the will to live' is in tension with Schopenhauer's view of death as 'the true result' and 'the purpose of life'.<sup>16</sup> Melancholia is always expressed as both the desire for death and the need for life—a tension that is very present in LC.

Kristeva brings the three themes of melancholia described above (dialogue, difference, death) together and suggests a way forward for analysing the kind of melancholia expressed in LC. She writes:

...we are confronted with an enigmatic paradox that will not cease questioning us: if loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it, it is also noteworthy that the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow has been repudiated. The artist consumed by melancholia is at the same time the most relentless in his struggle against the symbolic abdication that blankets him.<sup>17</sup>

This poses an interesting question in relation to LC. Is the 'activating sorrow' that LC rejects Dante's own sorrow or is it a sorrow that comes from the postmodern loss of understanding of the political, social and religious realms of the *Commedia*'s original historical context? That is also to ask: to what extent is LC a commentary on Dante's own expression of melancholia, and to what extent is LC its own contemporary reflection on mourning? In order to answer these questions, I will analyse a number of passages from the work to see how its original sources of melancholy are translated into contemporary post-operative meaning. I will not only explore how a kind of death-drive manifests itself through the music, multimedia and characters on stage, but also how a will to live and a will to reconcile old ideas with new ones is communicated through the work too—for it is this ironic tension that is the key to its melancholic drama.

## **LA COMMEDIA: PARTS 1–2**

Below is a table that helps explain the relationship between the material of the opera (textual, musical, dramatic, multimedia) and its continuous thread of melancholia (expressed as dialogue, difference and death). A thorough analysis of each section of LC covering each aspect of these subcategories could easily form the basis of an

---

<sup>13</sup> De Masi, F. (2020). 'The perverse and the psychotic superego'. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 101:4, pp. 735-739.

<sup>14</sup> Andriessen, L. in Pay, D. (2009). 'Don't get too comfortable: an essay and conversation about the ideas and music of Louis Andriessen'. Music on Main. <http://www.musiconmain.ca/dont-get-too-comfortable> (Accessed 28 July 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, S. quoted in Tambling, J. (1996). *Opera and the Culture of Fascism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva (1989), p. 9.

exhaustive monograph. Therefore, rather than a comprehensive study of the entire work, or an in-depth analysis of certain sections, I have chosen to explain this relationship by highlighting key moments in LC1 and LC2 that best express its melancholic themes—those that cover a range of these subcategories at once. While there are many aspects of LC3–5 that also express these melancholic themes—and, while there are many other examples in LC1–2 I do not include in the sectional analysis below—I feel it is these two sections dealing with the journey through *Inferno* that best show the strong melancholic thread, and these key moments and ideas that are most representative of the work’s melancholic ecology. Also, it is particularly interesting to compare these first two sections as in some ways they weave a continuous narrative, while in others they work against each other—an idea in itself that has a lot to do with postmodern melancholy and artistic expressions of negativity. Related ideas of noise and intertextuality will be explored in Chapter Two (using LC3 as a case study), Chapter Three (using LC4 as a case study) and Chapter Four (using LC5 as a case study).

	<b>I. Melancholic Dialogue</b>	<b>II. Expressions of Difference</b>	<b>III. Representations of Death</b>
<b>A. Textual (libretto and subtexts)</b>	Between characters, between texts, ‘sutured discourse’, divergence and revision	Polysemy, oppositions and comparisons	Metaphorical (e.g. ‘the dead canal’ of Part I), Theosophical (e.g. the descent into hell of Part II), and Poetical (e.g. the ‘deathly pale’ Spirits of Part III)
<b>B. Musical (the score and its performance)</b>	Thematic parodies and ‘negative’ structural patterns or ‘negative’ motivic discourse	Contrasts and juxtapositions, identities vs. non-identities, otherness, negation	Repetition, limitation, stasis, sudden changes (loss of material), fragmentation
<b>C. Dramatic (on-stage)</b>	Conscious (between characters on stage) and Subconscious (metaphysical suggestions)	Suggested binaries, such as: Spirit vs. Matter, Good vs. Evil, Loved vs. Lost, etc.	Actions, gestures and the symbolism of death through lighting, scenery, props, etc.
<b>D. Multimedia (on-screen and electroacoustic)</b>	Between characters, between scenes, atmospheric changes, cinematic and auditory effects	Aurality (difference and cross-over of ideas, such as orality and/vs. literacy, or sonic and/vs. visual materials)	Visual representations of self-destructive, behaviour (e.g. smoking, drinking, fighting, discarding, searching) and characters trapped or stranded

Figure 1.2: Subcategories of melancholic expression in *La Commedia* (Parts 1–2)

There is, of course, much crossover between these twelve subcategories, and the nature of melancholic expression means that it often falls between—or is spread over—a number of these categorisations. While a narrative or semiotic event within such a work is expressed internally (intratextually, in a local dialogue with itself), it is always also pointing outwards (intertextually, both to more remote events within the wider work, and in a more referential way to outside characters, themes and works). The latter is explored further in Chapter Three and, while the melancholic expression will be heightened by this wider intertextual analysis, the main

focus in this chapter is on each part's own internal, more short-sighted 'infernal' language—the immediate *intratextuality* and dialogism that can be uncovered through a narrower focus—and only the obvious ways in which these first two sections compliment and contradict each other.

### **PART I: *The City of Dis, or The Ship of Fools***

The opening to LC does not set a scene so much as set the language required to make sense of the work as a whole. It cannot set the scene, for the scene is structurally deficient. Over the course of the work's hour and forty-five-minute duration, only a snapshot of Dante's vision is realised—just under 1.5% in terms of word count (c. 206 lines of Dante's 14,233, from extracts of just 14 cantos of Dante's 100). In order to suture the gaping holes left by omitting (understandably) so much of the text the work is named after, a discourse is stitched together through layered intertextuality and nods to the work's own inevitable inadequacy (as far as Dante's work was an inadequate depiction of the afterlife). Roughly one third of the libretto is made up of other texts, and many of the passages that are lifted from the *Commedia* are fragmented (e.g. LC2's treatment of *Inferno* 21, discussed later in this section) or abridged (e.g. the composer's own adaptation of Cacciaguida's monologue in LC5, discussed in Chapter Three). Some sections of the *Commedia* appear in Dante's own original Italian, but a variety of translations in English (LC1, LC4 and LC5), Italian (LC2), and Dutch (LC3 and LC5) are also used. It is clear that the work is to be heard as different voices from different temporal spheres speaking at once. There will not be an obvious narrative thread apart from the ever-present lack of thread, which is the thread of melancholia. This loss of a singular voice is an unsettling evocation of LC1's titular reference to *Das Narrenschiff* (*The Ship of Fools*).

The *Narrenschiff* (Latin: *Stultifera Navis*) is not only a symbol of madness but also one of melancholy. As Foucault reminds us, Sebastian Brant's satirical allegory of 1494 and Hieronymus Bosch's painting of around the same time depict a real historical situation in which municipalities, aided by sailors, 'expelled'—perhaps due to their 'foreign' origins or because of a considered 'impurity'—bothersome 'madmen'.<sup>18</sup> They were 'delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything... [symbolizing] a great disquiet, suddenly dawning on the horizon of European culture at the end of the Middle Ages... [and its] ambiguity: menace and mockery, the dizzying unreason of the world, and the feeble ridicule of men.'<sup>19</sup> Being expelled, these 'madmen' were at the mercy of the sea—a desolate,

---

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, M. (1988). *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage, pp. 8–11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 11–13.

unpredictable and godless environment—where melancholy reigns. In the hands of such a devil, maybe they will be devoured, purified or driven to a deeper madness, but these vagabonds were no longer the responsibility of the municipalities from which they were expelled. This is the hell of LC1.

Instead of presenting some sort of unifying overture or opening mood, LC presents a series of parallel narratives of ambiguous interrelationship from the outset. Perhaps, presented in isolation—or, at least, with certain narratives removed—some of these musical or visual elements could be associated with a more direct emotional effect not dissimilar to that of an overture or a Romantic atmospheric suggestion. But the potential for textural unity is always subverted. For example, we have the noise of the city heard through loudspeakers along with a wide range of percussive busyness: snapping and ringing sounds, such as the fortissimo whip and bell tree that open the work; the rumbling snare drum rolls and fierce attacks (mm. 21–24, 55, 65–68); the accented metal such as the glockenspiel and vibraphone with ‘hard sticks’ (mm. 25–47), the ‘hard high metal’ sound in m. 62; the pulsating stream of chords on marimba (mm. 19–24) and the loud, punctuating chords of the xylophone (m. 55, as seen accompanied by wind brass and snare drum in Fig. 1.3 below).

The image shows a musical score for measures 55 and 56. The score is written for four staves: Piccolo, Flute, Oboe; Horns, Trumpets; Snare Drum; and Xylophone. The time signature is 2/4. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Piccolo, Flute, and Oboe staves are grouped together, as are the Horns and Trumpets. The Snare Drum and Xylophone staves are grouped together. The score shows a fortissimo (ff) dynamic. The Piccolo, Flute, and Oboe staves have a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 55. The Horns and Trumpets staves have a chordal accompaniment. The Snare Drum and Xylophone staves have a rhythmic accompaniment. The measure number 56 is indicated at the end of the first staff.

Figure 1.3: Punctuating, fortissimo seven-note chords from LC's introduction (m. 55)

This opening seems to be a reference to a hell-like confusion—to the noise of economic activity, technology, work and clutter—as does a lot of what is seen on stage (e.g. construction workers busying themselves, cranes and scaffolding) and on screen (e.g. two women travelling through Amsterdam on bicycles, the press filming and photographing the arrival of Beatrice, Dante addressing an audience with a microphone, a group of musicians busking in a city square, a man outside speaking on a mobile phone) during the sixty-eight measure

introduction. Yet, more subtle and dialogic narratives begin to break through this bombastic clamour as the chorus enters with the following lines<sup>20</sup> from Psalm 107, sung in Latin:

*Hic sunt qui descendunt mare in navibus  
Facientes occupationem in aquis multis.  
Ascendunt ad caelos et descendunt ad  
abyssos  
Anima eorum in malis tabescebat,  
Turbati sunt et moti sunt sicut ebrius,  
Et omnis sapientia eorum devorata est.*

Here are those that go down to the sea in  
ships, that do business in great waters.  
They mount up to the heaven, they go  
down again to the depths:  
their soul is melted because of trouble.  
They reel to and fro, and stagger like  
drunkards, and are at their wit's end.

At this moment (m. 69), Lucifer appears on screen as a calm, disheveled, man in a suit smoking a cigarette in a café bar. He is untouched by the din outside—by those tossed to and fro on the waves of business—yet presumably the one responsible for their trouble and stress. The ‘Emperor of the kingdom dolorous’ (*Inf.* 34.28) is not in the ‘fire eternal’ of the ‘nether Hell’ (*Inf.* 8.73–75), but frozen ‘mid-breast’ (*Inf.* 34.29) in ice, presented as a brooding, melancholic puppeteer, caught in his own strings, inflicting pain on others. According to Hartley, he is ‘a local businessman with failed political ambitions [who] witnesses everything.’<sup>21</sup> Hartley’s Lucifer embodies melancholia: he is represented as being in dialogue with the noise outside, yet withdrawn and separate from it, subtly willing the rabble towards their demise.

We then see (on screen) the two women—who had formerly been cycling—now handing out flyers to passers-by on the street, fear and worry in their eyes. The flyer simply reads ‘RESIST’ (see Fig. 1.4 below). One of these ‘social activists’<sup>22</sup> is distracted by the café bar next to her and becomes less worried about the cause, eventually to be seduced by one of the musicians. Meanwhile, the busking musicians continue to play. As the Psalm opened up the intertext along with its choral bluster, now the film opens up the intratext with its ambiguous interrelations. Barolini describes the opening cantos of the *Commedia* as ‘a carefully constructed sequence of ups and downs, starts and stops; it is a beginning subject to continual new beginnings’... the ‘subversion of absolute beginning’... a ‘programmatic serialization of the poem’s beginning.’<sup>23</sup> Andriessen and Hartley follow suit, creating a sutured discourse based upon difference, contrast, juxtaposition. The ‘ambiguous relationship’ between the film and the music that Novak speaks of presents us with a narrative lacking certainty, yet full of metaphysical tension and blurred binary oppositions.

---

<sup>20</sup> See the appendix for more information on the wider significance of this text, its intertextuality, and its paraphrased translation.

<sup>21</sup> Hartley, H. in Novak, J. (2012). *Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera*. Thesis. University of Amsterdam, p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> Barolini, T. (2018). ‘*Inferno 2: Beatrix Loquax and Consolation*’. *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. New York: Columbia University Libraries. <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-2/>



Figure 1.4: 'RESIST' flyer in the film of the opening section of *La Commedia*, 3'30" (dir. Hal Hartley. 2008).

The on-screen musicians ('The Guild') represent this noise. Hartley describes these characters in the film as the 'companions of rowdy manners... prodigal children who are also quick to strike... [throwing] dice and [drinking] prodigiously... [capering] with pretty women'.<sup>24</sup> This *Ship of Fools* is riding the 'dirty waves' of the 'reeking swamp' (*Inf.* VIII. 10, as translated in LC's libretto) towards the city of Dis. The drinking, capering and fighting that takes place in the café bar during this scene is in stark contrast with the spiritual stillness and certainty of Beatrice throughout. The sense of otherness created by this juxtaposition is at once unsettling and comforting like a melancholic mood. Kristeva's view of art being 'born out of the pain of loss'—by 'technician[s] of melancholia... people on the edge—hysterics, obsessionals, lovers, artists... sufferers of depression'<sup>25</sup>—is what is witnessed at this point. The Guild represent the acceptance of an unpredictability brought on by the loss of their ties to, and the stability of, the mainland.

When Beatrice appears at measure 231, we are momentarily freed from the musical turgidity and cinematic clamour of the sea, the city and its Guild. However, we are not freed from the pervading melancholia, present even in the beauty of Claron McFadden's (soprano) sung lines speaking of love and the presence of God from *Inferno*'s second canto. A moment of relief, yet full of sorrow. This conjures up the 'premise of the *Commedia*' that Barolini speaks of: 'the ability to find consolation and succor in a dead beloved... the very idea of pre-history'.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the opera's overarching narrative device becomes clearer at this point: like Dante's journey, and that of life itself, hope is intertwined with anguish and both will be present to some degree at all times in the dialogue. *Inferno 2* reminds the reader of the divine grace that allows for Dante to travel through these realms of the dead, and so too is LC here presenting the melancholic tension that frames the work.

---

<sup>24</sup> Hartley in Novak (2012), p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> Ives, K. (2008). *Julia Kristeva: Art, Love, Melancholy, Philosophy, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis*. Maidstone: Crescent Moon, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Barolini (2018).

Dante (Cristina Zavalloni, in red) strolls slowly across the stage as Beatrice sings her lines to him (/her). On-screen Beatrice, presented as a famous public figure (also played by McFadden, in white), having waved to the crowds, now descends stairs, also moving slowly. On-screen Beatrice is mute as on-stage Beatrice (also in white) continues to sing high, drawn-out notes. On-screen Dante (a journalist, also played by Cristina Zavalloni) momentarily appears. A flashback (or is it a flash forward?) to Beatrice waving on screen. On-screen Beatrice walks towards the bottom of a set of stairs; is she returning from where she came? Another flashback to her waving. Now she is being chauffeured somewhere in a dark BMW. Lucifer (the businessman) appears on stage and on screen. Despite the activity, nothing is happening; despite the rate of change, time is moving slowly, or backwards, or is repeating itself. This is Lucifer's domain—the domain of 'shadow[s], thick with mud', 'deep waters' and 'disconsolate land' as the upcoming lines from canto eight describe—a canto that contains a 'complex narrative... consisting of an over-arching story-line that is punctuated by a briefer interpolated story.'<sup>27</sup> We are not supposed to have a grasp of what is going on—nor when it is taking place—nor what everything means at this point in the opera... nor perhaps firmly at any point throughout the work. But here, the fourth wall is being chipped away and we are drawn into hell alongside Dante, ready for a journey of sorts.

I do not seek to give a written account of all of this scene's staged/screened/scored events and their interrelations—nor do I seek to cover ground on the 'postdramatic condition' of LC that Novak has explored in the case study for her thesis (2012) and subsequent monograph on 'reinventing the voice-body' (2016)—but it is worth highlighting at this point an overlapping idea that relates to the work's 'oratorio-like dramaturgy'<sup>28</sup>, which is crucial for explaining its melancholic thread. Hartley makes it clear that the music was generally intended to 'fuse' (suture) 'all these other elements... [creating] the circumstances for some sort of flood of associations that are meaningful but hard to state explicitly.'<sup>29</sup> It is clearly not that simple, as I have suggested above, for the film often seems to play a suturing function, and this is highly subjective anyway. However, if we assume that the composer and director worked to allow the music to speak in this way (with a foregrounded and narratorial function), then it suggests that the libretto is oftentimes simply 'music-painting' and abstractly suggesting narrative(s) rather than presenting a Ulyssean journey as such. Furthermore, by allowing the audience to see so much of the orchestra (not in a pit) and each other (the house lights not completely off)—this approach is not only 'anti-illusionist' and a mirroring of the voice-body/voice-gender relationship of the production, as Novak

---

<sup>27</sup> Barolini, T. (2018). 'Inferno 8: In Medias Res . . . at the Gate of Dis'. *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. New York: Columbia University Libraries. <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-8/>

<sup>28</sup> Novak (2012), p. 123.

<sup>29</sup> Hartley in Novak (2012), p. 123.

states<sup>30</sup>—but also allows more characters (us as Dantean protagonists, the orchestra as Virgilian intermediaries) into the dialogue. This has the effect of confusing the time-space arena in which the work is set and performed. Such ambiguities heighten the divergent nature of the work and its sense of loss—of meaning, focus, objectivity and truth; of transcendence, of organic growth, of time; of identity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the character in LC1 that best represents this polysemy and loss of identity is Lucifer. As already mentioned, Hartley's on-screen Lucifer at first appearance imbues the work with a brooding melancholy hinting at the themes of dialogue, difference and death. His complex nature is now developed both on screen and on stage, and any sense of a singular representation of his character is supplanted with an overt dualistic tension as a result of his appearance in these two contrasting realms simultaneously. He is both the lacklustre voyeur in the café bar on screen and the aggrieved site manager on stage; he is the limbless serpent, whispering and influencing from below; and he is the controlling beast, scheming and ordering from above. As Jeroen Willems thoughtfully flicks through the pages of a book atop the scaffolding on stage, the music takes on this same dualistic tone: the calculated, *legatissimo* and non-vibrato chords held by the strings in an icy, inner hell against the contrabass clarinet's *quasi solo*, rumbling, ejaculative utterances from a fiery, nether hell (mm. 467–503). Then, to invert things further, Lucifer (or, at least, Jeroen Willems who has represented Lucifer up to this point) speaks (literally, for the singing has now died away) for Dante, accompanied by his bipolar soundtrack—torn between long chordal depression and low manic bursts—with added noise from Brouwer's tape part. Lucifer has become Dante; Dante has become Lucifer. Infiltrating electronic sounds work against the acoustic sounds, and also work with them (an amplified bass guitar imitates the contrabass clarinet), as the voice of infinite identities utters the following words from canto nine of *Inferno* (lines 64–66 and 79–81, translated by Andriessen):

And then, over the turbid waves  
there came a terrifying noise,  
because of which both shores began to tremble;

I saw more than a thousand ruined souls,  
fleeing before a figure who was walking on the Styx,  
his feet dry on the water

Andriessen chooses not to translate Dante's word, 'fracasso' ('un fracasso d'un suon, pien di spavento', *Inf.* 9.65), which Longfellow translates as 'clangour of sound', Mandelbaum as 'reboantic fracas'. Perhaps as the most fitting description of much of Andriessen's infernal music up to this point,

---

<sup>30</sup> Novak (2012), p. 123.

'fracasso' felt a little too close to home. Nevertheless, it was omitted, along with the four stanzas (twelve lines) that separate these two stanzas. This, in and of itself, is not surprising—we know that Andriessen is picking and choosing, using roughly just one line for every 70 of Dante's—but it is perhaps more surprising that Andriessen has changed the one speaking these lines, in turn completely twisting its apparent meaning. What should be Dante speaking at the entrance to Dis, witnessing the arrival of an angel coming towards them across the River Styx—the one who opens the gate for him and Virgil to allow them in—is instead a commentary by Lucifer. Perhaps he speaks of the same event and is witnessing or recounting it from afar. However, it is more likely that this is a subverting of narrative, of good and evil. Which way is up and which way is down? Who is here to be feared and who is here to be trusted? What is love and what is hate? What is spirit and what is matter? As this section draws to a close, we are just left with rhetorical questions and a hopelessness embodied by a character with no moral compass.

Lucifer's identity then mutates again and sweetly sings words that should still be from Dante, referring to the angel ('I was certain that she was sent from heaven', referencing *Inf.* 9.85, which reads: 'Ben m'accorsi ch'elli era da ciel messo' / 'Well I perceived one sent from Heaven was he'). Yet, with sinister irony, Lucifer seems to be speaking of Dante (of course, Dante in LC is performed by a woman). This is implied by Dante's (Cristina Zavalloni's) appearance on-screen at the moment after Lucifer begins to sing, as her makeup is being applied by an assistant in readiness for reporting (she is a journalist), before being frozen on screen (in Lucifer's sights) at the end of LC1. Lucifer lusts for Dante—for beauty and for what he has lost, having been banished from heaven.

## **PART II: *Racconto dall'Inferno (Story from Hell)***

Andriessen refers to LC1 (commissioned by the Los Angeles Master Chorale and premiered at Walt Disney Concert Hall in November 2007) as something close to a Federico Fellini film—'part nightmare, part dream'.<sup>31</sup> According to the composer, it sets out to explore a range of subjects such as 'politics, time velocity, matter and morality'<sup>32</sup>, yet it is clear to see that these lofty ideas are being presented alongside more profane, polystylistic, and even amusing musical and textual elements too. LC2 (commissioned by Ensemble musikFabrik for a 2004 concert with Cristina Zavalloni in Cologne) narrows the scope a little and is a more focused attempt—musically and narratively—to bring the audience into a specific Dantean infernal landscape. However, it does obviously

---

<sup>31</sup> Andriessen, L. in Crain, M. B. (2007). 'Los Angeles Master Chorale and Louis Andriessen'. *LA Weekly*. <https://www.laweekly.com/los-angeles-master-chorale-and-louis-andriessen> (Accessed 13 May 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

retain the same dramatic tension between the sacred and philosophical on one hand, and the earthy and comedic on the other. In LC2, the composer particularly wanted to explore the boundaries of narrative suggestion through music, feeling that the polyinterpretability of singer Cristina Zavalloni's 'appearance and singing style'<sup>33</sup> would allow him to play with listeners' expectations, associations and reference points.

As a comic story of devilish characters escorting Dante through a particularly cartoonish version of hell (lifted from *Inf.* 21–22) unfolds over the next twenty minutes, the power of the comedy in the *Commedia* is made strikingly apparent: it is there to highlight loss and difference. What is comedic about a fierce senior black devil and his evil companions other than their loss of humanity and their distance from normal behaviour or normal appearance? Comedy is a journey from ignorance to pain with the hope of a love somewhere beyond the boiling tar. The absurdity of this 'story from hell' adds a gravity to the preceding section's intensity and will make the vision of Lucifer that follows more dramatic. And so, at this point, Andreissen and Hartley pull us down from the familiar, everyday realms of hell (busyness, stress, greed, lust) to the other side of hell where everything seems turned upside down—where what happens is so inhumane it is humorous, because the journey can't possibly end like this. However, such comedic narratives will only be successful if the contrast from what has gone before is obvious enough and the suggestion of a way out is made apparent; the sense of loss at this point must be balanced by the potential for redemption if the comedy is to be made clear. It is this balancing act—along with a more ambiguous intertextuality—that is the essence of what happens musically and structurally in this section.

The most obvious loss in musical terms is a textural one. The opposing forces of the long, held chords and the short, stressed outbursts of notes—along with the electronic sounds—die away to a string of fortissimo two-beat chords, occasionally interrupted by the odd three-beat chord, the rhythmic variety at first limited to this minimalistic bubbling. Harmonies shift and modulate with the use of shared pitches—certain pitch-classes sticking like the thick pot of pitch—'swelling, and then compressing back' (*'gonfiar tutta, e riseder compressa'*, as Dante will later sing at the end of the opening stanza). But when Dante does sing these lines from *Inferno* 21, the chords have already given way to a more obvious bubbling texture: the kind of bass utterances we heard in LC1, now slightly transformed and strung together, no longer opposed by a chordal texture. We have lost the melancholic dialogue in the music, and the only one speaking now is Dante (Cristina Zavalloni), but this allows

---

<sup>33</sup> Andreissen, L. (2004). 'Racconto dall'inferno'. *Boosey and Hawkes*. <https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Louis-Andreissen-Racconto-dall-inferno/15748> (Accessed 13 May 2021).

the suggestion of darkness and the threat of death to settle in, resulting in a more striking dialogue between the music theatre and film drama to take place.

In the room, as the slow tolling of the two- and three-beat chords gets under way, the start of this section is marked by the entire backdrop turning a bright red, the scaffolding creating vertical and horizontal lines, frames being created as if ready to be filled with the comic tale brewing. A crane moves across the stage, followed by Beatrice (Claron McFadden) silhouetted, her white attire made black with only the red surface lit from behind. She is lowered by the moving scaffold tower and then descends to the lowest area of staging, watched by a shadowy Lucifer (Jeroen Willems). Hartley's film shows three still frames with large white writing: (1) '2.', (2) 'hell', and (3) '(stories from)'. The overt use of the plural, 'stories', here in opposition to the official title suggests that, although the staging and libretto project a comical scene based around Dante's boiling stew of pitch (a musical pun, of course), we are supposed to be seeing alternative, less familiar hell narratives in the film. The comic frames of the literal (e.g. the red-coloured scene, the downward movement of characters, suspended musical dialogue, the direct title and reduced intertextuality of the libretto), allow Hartley to be the one to paint with a more nuanced, melancholic brush.

The fifth chasm of Dante's eighth circle of hell—one reserved for corrupt politicians, or 'grafters', who have abused their power for personal gain—comes as almost comic relief about two-thirds of the way through the *Inferno*, which up to this point is generally a little more serious in tone. It is no surprise that the coarse style of these two cantos and their grotesqueries appeal to a composer like Andriessen who—obsessed with balance—often counters a more philosophical style with something more vulgar. In LC2, Andriessen is negating some of the assertive high-mindedness of LC1. While Hartley's film for LC reveals this twisted sincerity at times, it generally offers something less dramatic than the large-scale compositional dialectic of Andriessen's music. For example, the moving symbolism of a member of The Guild (Lucia, who was seduced in LC1), waking up on a beach stranded on a table as waves roll beneath her (referencing the *Narrenschiff*), follows on more seamlessly from the melancholic threads of LC1. Such images represent loss, pain, otherness and separation from love in a more poetic manner and provide the subtlety of melancholic discourse that is needed for theatrical continuity between sections, especially in a work that revels in polysemic and polyinterpretable opportunities. Here, Hartley's persistent melancholy sutures Andriessen's mania, and the partnership begins to make more sense. Together they are exploring the possibility of an 'eminent vernacular', mirroring Dante and

bringing together the power of the low (*'vulgar locutio'*) and the high (*'locutio secundaria'*)<sup>34</sup>, which naturally leads to a dialogue fraught with tension, yet ripe for melancholic drama.

On stage, as Dante sings of the devils who are torturing those who escape from the boiling tar, there is an eerie joining of stage and screen as Lucia waves to her friend, Maria, who has followed her and other members of The Guild to the beach. Maria is struggling across the sand with her bicycle. She does not notice Lucia but on-stage Lucifer does, sinisterly waving back, bringing the focus back to the stage and tying two seemingly disparate worlds together. The hopelessness, struggle and gradual undoing of The Guild on screen is at first contrasted by the direct coarseness of what the devils in this canto are discussing, sung by Dante on stage (e.g. *'Vuo' che 'l tocchi... in sul groppone?'* / *'Should I nick him... on the rump?'*). It is unclear how everything relates. However, as we see on-stage Lucifer scramble up some ladders (unsuccessfully) to try and reach Dante (who obviously sings on the scaffolding above), we realise that perhaps this hell—on the surface so intensely violent and dramatic—is actually quite strangely uneventful. Now the connections are more apparent because the pretense of a complex narrative has been dismantled. It is actually a world more like the mud-dark of Beckett's *Comment c'est (How It Is)* in which, as Gerald Bruns writes, the *'structureless present appears to manifest itself in the attenuation of syntax'*.<sup>35</sup> Narrative, space and time has been devalued by the reduced coherence of any kind of over-arching semiotic patterns in the music, staging or film.

Dante, embodying the senior devil, Malacoda, calls out the junior devils who are instructed to help lead Virgil and Dante out from the stewing pitch. The final devil to be called is *'crazy Rubicante'*. At this point, the dense orchestration subsides and we hear Dante singing the words of Malacoda, completely unaccompanied, *'poco movendo'* (see Fig. 1.5).



Figure 1.5: Dante's brief solo / Malacoda calling on *'crazy'* Rubicante (mm. 190–193)

The strident tutti texture is briefly interrupted for this because it highlights a moment of banality in Dante that Andriessen sees as being important to reveal something of the *Inferno*—and because it is this kind of exposed repetition and syntactic attenuation that allows the banality of the *Inferno* to be enacted in real-time. It draws the

<sup>34</sup> de Benedictis, R. (2009). De vulgati eloquentia; Dante's Semiotic Workshop. *Italica*, 86(2), pp. 194–195.

<sup>35</sup> Bruns, G. L. (1971). Samuel Beckett's *'How It Is'*. *James Joyce Quarterly*, 8(4), p. 318.

audience into the dark pitch (in a way that Beckett or Joyce often seek to do) with a language of ‘direct expression’. As Shane Waller explains, quoting Beckett, speaking of Joyce:

‘[T]his language of direct expression is close to the gestural roots of all language...’ Thus, ‘...by rejecting all “polite symbols” (or arbitrary signs) in favour of a “savage economy of hieroglyphics”, Joyce produces a language that, for all the apparent differences, is in principle identical to that of Dante, Shakespeare or Dickens...’ in which ‘...the shock of the new is the shock of the original, with the emphasis squarely upon a return to origins.’<sup>36</sup>

The banal enables a timeless materiality. When Dante sings of the devils who ‘[blow] their tongues through their teeth’, Andriessen deploys chattering woodblocks and templeblocks. This is followed by a short, comic march; Dante and Virgil are making their way out of this chasm of hell. And then, although the giant ‘Lion’s roar’ effect indicated in the score—following Malacoda ‘[making] a trumpet of his ass’—doesn’t take place in the recorded performance, a more subtle bass drum roll crescendo leading up to this point is played instead. The Guild cellist’s music is blown off her stand as she practices on the beach, in place of the percussive effect.

This vulgar climax releases at once releases the tension that has been created through an interplay of stage and screen—the comic and the serious, and other juxtapositions—and at the same time forces the ear to associate every sound heard from the orchestra with something material. As a result, mm. 268–283 are heard as an intensely dramatic dialogue: an orchestral sigh, instrumental muttering, a marching bass drum. Then another sigh, more muttering, but silence instead of the drum. More sighs, more muttering—growing louder, changing shape, changing tone—occasional marching, regular silences. This musical dialogue is released into a tutti march that was hinted at during the prior vulgarity, but now its fullness and its true peculiarities are made known. The Guild’s composer at the beach begins throwing pieces of manuscript paper away, dissatisfied with whatever the music is written on the pages. This is perhaps a moment of ironic self-reflection that brings Andriessen and Hartley closer together with their creative muse, Dante. It also signals the onward march of Dante within the opera, but suggests that the worst is yet to come. On screen, Lucia and Maria have an extended fight on the beach, which is perhaps Hartley’s more poetic response to the vulgarity of Andriessen’s hell and the ensuing musical dialogue, creating an appropriate Dantean balance that is intensely melancholic.

The first two parts of LC establish the dialogic nature of the work and provide a framework for understanding the intertextuality and noise that continue to build through the next three parts. Through the presentation of ideas

---

<sup>36</sup> Weller, S. (2005), pp. 29–30.

that are disrupted or opposed, an unsettling atmosphere is created for the audience in which it is impossible to establish a singular narrative or singular identities for its characters. Instead we are presented with forces that push and pull one's attention to the different circles of hell. The journey from the limbo of the first circle of hell to the frozen wasteland of the ninth circle is not a straight line. The multi-directional narrative—made up of dualities, ironies and polysemies—results in a melancholic journey that has the glimmering hope of redemption framed by the more obvious, and often comedic, inevitability of death.

## Appendix

The opening lines of LC are sung in Latin (see below, alongside the libretto's English translation):

<i>Hic sunt qui descendunt mare in navibus Facientes occupationem in aquis multis. Ascendunt ad caelos et descendunt ad abyssos Anima eorum in malis tabescebat, Turbati sunt et moti sunt sicut ebrius, Et omnis sapientia eorum devorata est.</i>	Here are those that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like drunkards, and are at their wit's end.
---	--

However, this is not quite a direct quote from The Vulgate, and—despite the libretto's 'Psalm 107: King James Bible' (KJV) translation acknowledgement—the libretto does not acknowledge the fact that: (1) 'Here are those' should be in square brackets as has been changed from 'they' for contextual reasons, and, (2) an ellipsis should have been included between the first and second phrase to indicate the omission of verses 24–25. Of course, libretti are immune from such editorial marks, but these 'marks' reveal something of what is being expressed in LC. For clarity, I include both translations below (Psalm 107 is numbered 106 in The Vulgate):

The Vulgate (Psalmi 106:23–27) reads:

<sup>23</sup> Qui descendunt mare in navibus, facientes operationem in aquis multis:

<sup>24</sup> ipsi viderunt opera Domini, et mirabilia ejus in profundo.

<sup>25</sup> Dixit, et stetit spiritus procellae, et exaltati sunt fluctus ejus.

<sup>26</sup> Ascendunt usque ad caelos, et descendunt usque ad abyssos; anima eorum in malis tabescebat.

<sup>27</sup> Turbati sunt, et moti sunt sicut ebrius, et omnis sapientia eorum devorata est.

The KJV (Psalm 107:23–27) reads:

<sup>23</sup> They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;

<sup>24</sup> These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.

<sup>25</sup> For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof.

<sup>26</sup> They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble.

<sup>27</sup> They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end.

It is also interesting to note that the word 'operationem' (operation) used in The Vulgate has been changed in LC to 'occupationem' (occupation), one assumes to emphasise the occupational (business-minded, transactional, goal-orientated) nature of the foolish (verse 17) who are working at sea in ships—those overly focused on commerce and material gain. However, this word (presumably chosen by Andriessen, or perhaps appearing in liturgy somewhere like this) is not only a better fit with the opening themes of LC, but is arguably more appropriate in the Psalm's own context and a better translation of the original Hebrew word מְלָאָה (melá'kâh), which suggests both personal preoccupation and public service. Rather than labour (as an employee or 'operative'), it implies a dedicated craft or workmanship that, if performed selfishly, will not be divinely approved. Andriessen is correctly interpreting a text that is often misinterpreted.

These minor edits and the way in which this text features—symbolically prominent as an opening passage, yet more subtly poignant with its choral setting in Latin—point to wider semantic and intertextual considerations in relation to LC’s overall communicative aesthetic and philosophy. On the one hand, we have a suggestion that spirituality is more important than materiality, yet on the other hand a removal of the spiritual verses that reference God. On the one hand, we are presented with a text that is oft-cited in liturgical rites (Requiem Mass, Book of Common Prayer, hymns, etc.) and used to honour the efforts of those who toil at sea (consider Jaakko Mäntyjärvi’s setting, *Canticum Calamitatis Maritimae*, from 1997). Yet on the other hand, we are presented with a text that is more in line with Plato’s *Ship of Fools* allegory, in turn referenced by Sebastian Brant and Hieronymus Bosch (and then many others since), depicting a dysfunctional crew on board a ship doomed for disaster—a crew that wouldn’t recognise a worthy captain if it was God himself.

This is both an intensely intertextual passage of scripture and one that has become intensely dualistic in its interpretation. As a result, it is laden with the kind of irony that Andriessen loves to deploy dramatically and acts here as important backdrop to an intensely intertextual and dualistic work.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANDRIESSEN, L. (2004). 'Racconto dall'inferno'. *Boosey and Hawkes*.  
<https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Louis-Andriessen-Racconto-dall-inferno/15748> (Accessed 13 May 2021).
- ANDRIESSEN, L. (2008). *La Commedia: a film opera in five parts*. London: Boosey & Hawkes.
- ANDRIESSEN, L. *Louis Andriessen: La Commedia* (2014) [libretto]. New York: Nonesuch Records Inc.  
<https://store.nonesuch.com/artists/louis-andriessen> (Accessed 31 July 2019).
- ANDRIESSEN, L. and PAY, D. (2009). 'Don't get too comfortable: an essay and conversation about the ideas and music of Louis Andriessen'. *Music on Main*. <http://www.musiconmain.ca/dont-get-too-comfortable> (Accessed 28 July 2019).
- BAROLINI, T. (2018). *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. New York: Columbia University Libraries.  
<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu> (Accessed 1 July 2019).
- BRUNS, G. L. (1971). Samuel Beckett's 'How It Is'. *James Joyce Quarterly*, 8(4), p. 318–331.
- CRAIN, M. B. (2007). 'Los Angeles Master Chorale and Louis Andriessen'. *LA Weekly*.  
<https://www.laweekly.com/los-angeles-master-chorale-and-louis-andriessen> (Accessed 13 May 2021).
- DANTE ALIGHIERI tr. by LONGFELLOW, H.W. (1903). *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. London: Routledge.
- DE BENEDICTIS, R. (2009). De vulgati eloquentia; Dante's Semiotic Workshop. *Italica*, 86(2), pp. 189–211.
- DE MASI, F. (2020). 'The perverse and the psychotic superego'. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 101:4, pp. 735-739.
- FOUCAULT, M. (1988). *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, New York: Vintage.
- HAMMER, E. (2015). *Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- IVES, K. (2008). *Julia Kristeva: Art, Love, Melancholy, Philosophy, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis*. Maidstone: Crescent Moon.
- KENDLER, K., & JABLENSKY, A. (2011). Kraepelin's concept of psychiatric illness. *Psychological Medicine*, 41(6), pp. 1119-1126.
- KRISTEVA, J. (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- KRISTEVA, J. (1989). *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- KRITZMAN, L. D. (1991). 'Melancholia Becomes the Subject: Kristeva's Invisible "Thing" and the Making of Culture.' *Paragraph* 14, no. 2, pp. 144-50.
- LEE, N-N. Sublimated or castrated psychoanalysis? Adorno's critique of the revisionist psychoanalysis: An introduction to 'The Revisionist Psychoanalysis.' *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. 2014;40(3): pp. 309-338.

NOVAK, J. (2012). *Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera*. Thesis. University of Amsterdam.

PRIMO DE CARVALHO ALVES, L., and Sica Da Rocha, N. Debate on 'Defining Melancholia: A Core Mood Disorder' (Parker et al., 2017). *Bipolar Disorders* 19.7 (2017): 522-23.

RADDEN, J. (2002). *The nature of melancholy [electronic resource]: from Aristotle to Kristeva*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

TAMBLING, J. (1988). *Dante and Difference: Writing in the 'Commedia'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

TAMBLING, J. (1996). *Opera and the Culture of Fascism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

TREDE, K., SALVATORE, P., BAETHGE, C., GERHARD, A., MAGGINI, C., BALDESSARINI, R. J. (2005). Manic-depressive illness: evolution in Kraepelin's Textbook, 1883–1926. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 13, pp. 155–178.

WELLER, S. (2005). *A taste for the negative: Beckett and nihilism*. London: Legenda.

## **CD & DVD RECORDINGS**

*Possible Films* (2004) [DVD]. Dir. Hal Hartley. San Francisco: Microcinema International.

*Louis Andriessen: La Commedia* (2014) [CD/DVD]. Dutch National Opera. New York: Nonesuch Records Inc.