Chapter Five
Gramsci’s Analysis of Canto X of Dante’s Inferno

It was never Gramsci’s intention to work out a theory of literary criticism, but he did on occasion have things to say about various literary texts that have important theoretical implications. One such occasion was his analysis of Canto X of Dante’s Inferno.\(^1\)

Gramsci’s interest in Canto X spans a period of more than twenty years, from his student days at the University of Turin on the eve of World War I to the early 1930s, when he occupied a cell in the prison for the infirm and disabled in Turi di Bari and was composing the 2,848 manuscript pages that eventually comprised the Prison Notebooks.

Personal experiences, historical judgments, and a critical methodology based in large measure on Marxist premises flowed together in Gramsci’s interpretation of Canto X. It hinged on the ‘little discovery’ to which he referred in a letter he sent from prison to his sister-in-law Tania Schucht on 26 August 1929,\(^2\) where he spoke of an intimate, dialectical relationship between the doctrinal content and the poetic force of Canto X. As I will argue in the concluding section of this essay, what Gramsci had to say in this letter and in other scattered remarks can be read profitably in the larger context of his debate with the philosophy and aesthetics of Benedetto Croce and, more generally, with Italian idealist thought.

Gramsci’s study of Dante exemplified his belief that it is necessary to situate literary works within the always complex and contradictory nature of historical reality. But for Gramsci

the effort to understand an author and his work in historical perspective was not an exact science, a way of avoiding value judgments by taking refuge in the realm of positive data. Exactitude was the point of departure, not the point of arrival, of literary criticism, as far as Gramsci was concerned. He was convinced that critical readers needed all of their emotional resources as well as intellectual powers to deal adequately with dense, multi-dimensional works such as the *Divine Comedy*, which lived insofar as the reader was able to penetrate and to interact with the creative energy present in them. His models for criticism, in the Italian tradition at least, were Francesco De Sanctis and Renato Serra, who based their approach to literary materials on an all-important spontaneous and intuitive moment in the reading process. Gramsci followed their example. Erudition and ‘science’ were not enough. In reaction against what he felt to be the dry-as-dust academicism of much Dante scholarship, which made the *Divine Comedy* into ‘a tower that was impenetrable to the uninitiated’; he tried to combine philological rigour and historical research with an emotional openness to the reading experience.

**Gramsci as a reader of the Divine Comedy before his imprisonment**

In his student days, Gramsci was an assiduous and responsive reader of the *Divine Comedy*, which he studied under the tutelage of Professor Umberto Cosmo at the University of Turin. During the period from World War I to his stay in the Soviet Union in 1922–3, he sometimes turned to the verses of Dante’s epic poem for both enlightenment and consolation.

In a theatre review written in 1917, for example, Gramsci noted that meditation upon the love between Paolo and Francesca as depicted in Canto V of the *Inferno* could have a beneficial influence on modern readers and theatregoers assaulted by degraded forms of sexuality that ‘completely ignored the spiritual force present in love in its highest form’. On another equally grave matter involving the idea of ‘faith’, the young Gramsci also appears to have looked to Dante for guidance. One day several of his socialist comrades were struggling to formulate a definition of the word when Gramsci interrupted them by quoting from *Paradiso*, Canto XXIV: ‘Faith is the foundation of things hoped for, and the evidence of things unseen; this to me is its essence’. This was a concept first enunciated by Saint Paul. But if translated into secular terms, it can also be read as a concise conceptualisation of the kind of faith that constituted the foundation, the ‘essence’, of Gramsci’s political commitment to building a socialist society of the future.

Young Gramsci found correspondences between his own feelings and ideas and those of Dante. Such a correspondence occurred during the early tempestuous phase of his

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5. The episode referred to here is recounted by Carlo Boccardo in Quercioli (ed.) 1977, pp. 39–40.