‘Tutto avem veduto’?
Enumeration and ‘Forgetfulness’ in Dante’s *Commedia*

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Abstract. Despite the *Commedia’s* nominal aspiration towards encyclopaedism, Dante consistently draws attention to the apparent incompleteness of his vision. One of the primary ways in which this is accomplished is, paradoxically, through Dante’s use of enumeration. Scholars have frequently interpreted the poem’s rosters of souls as symptomatic of its epic impulse towards totality, and though they have often examined Dante’s use of preterition in these cases, less attention has been given to those instances where they draw attention to characters ‘present’ in the afterlife, but conspicuously absent from the poem’s narrative. In this paper, I focus on two particularly suggestive cases. The first occurs in *Inferno* 6, where Ciacco informs Dante that he will meet a figure named ‘Arrigo’: an encounter that does not take place. The second is in *Paradiso* 15, in which Cacciaguida alludes to Dante’s ancestor Alighiero I, telling him that he is among the penitent prideful in *Purgatorio*. Though Dante spends a great deal of time on this terrace, he does not meet his namesake. I propose here that, far from being any kind of mistake, these ‘forgetful’ moments cast significant light on the poem’s shifting treatments of absence, as well as its overarching narrative strategies.

Dante’s *Commedia* consistently underscores its project of containing the universe within its hundred cantos. Its final vision seeks to draw together the poem’s carefully arranged and expansive cosmos, ‘legato con amore in un volume’ (*Par.* 33.86).¹ It is, as many have observed, a poem which strives towards encyclopaedism.² Despite this nominal aspiration, however, there are moments in which the poem draws attention to its own incompleteness. Commentators have long noted the conspicuous absences of certain characters


in the *Commedia*, not least Guido Cavalcanti, alluded to in *Inferno* 10, and St Augustine, who is named but does not appear in the Heaven of the Sun in *Paradiso* 10. One of the subtler ways in which Dante delineates narrative voids of this kind is, paradoxically, through his use of condensed enumerations of souls in the afterlife. The poem’s deployment of rhetorical *enumeratio* has often been read as symptomatic of its epic impulse towards totality: each enumerated person, place, or thing invariably brings its own context to bear on the narrative world of the poem itself. As scholars have routinely observed, Dante’s frequent use of preterition in these moments allows him to suggest a cosmos larger than can be described in the poem’s finite textual space. Less attention, however, has been given to those instances where such enumerations reference characters ‘present’ in the afterlife, but conspicuously absent from the poem’s narrative. In the opening remarks of their 2010 *Anthropology of Absence*, the editors note that experiences of real-world absences are predicated upon ‘confrontation with the incomplete,’ and here I wish to suggest that Dante introduces generative literary incompleteness at key junctures in the *Commedia* precisely and paradoxically in order to convey the fullness of its universe. In order to contextualize the issue, I will first examine a particularly well-known example of preterition, before shifting focus to two suggestive, though far less critically frequented, enumerations of souls which exemplify the *Commedia*’s structured incompleteness. Both moments draw attention to characters absent from the poem’s narrative: characters which seem, in some way, to have been ‘forgotten’ in its construction. I submit that, far from being any kind of mistake, these moments are integral to the *Commedia*’s shifting treatments of absence, and the effects of absence more broadly on the development of its poetics.

Dante repeatedly stresses that Hell is thronging with souls, and frequently deploys rhetorical strategies to imply numbers greater than the poem can name. This limitation is directly addressed as early as *Inferno* 4, where Dante expresses his inability to name each of the virtuous pagans he sees in Limbo. Having enumerated some thirty-five of them, he concedes that ‘Io non posso ritrar di tutti a pieno, / però che sì mi caccia il lungo tema, / che molte volte a fatto il dir vien meno’ (*Inf.* 4.145–47). Though this roster of pagans present in

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6 ‘I cannot here draw portraits of them all: / my lengthy subject presses me ahead, / and saying often falls far short of fact.’
Limbo will, in fact, be further extended by Virgil in *Purgatorio* 22, it serves as an early indicator that the *Commedia’s* 'lungo tema' will be in constant tension with the expansive cosmos it seeks to contain. A further programmatic example of this is Virgil’s naming of the lustful in *Inferno* 5:

> ‘Ell’è Semiramis, di cui si legge che succedette a Nino e fu sua sposa: tenne la terra che’l Soldan corregge. L’altra è colei che s’ancise amorosa, e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo; poi è Cleopatràs lussuriosa.
> Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo tempo si volse, e vedi’l grande Achille, che con amore al fine combatteo.
> Vedi Paris, Tristano; e più di mille ombre mostrommi e nominommi a dito, ch’amor di nostra vita dipartille
> 

*(Inf. 5.58–69)*

Each of these figures adds their own allusive texture to the *Commedia’s* rich thematisation of desire, widening the poem’s historical and intertextual scope. These elements, in conjunction with the list’s sheer vertiginousness, inescapably recall those catalogues typical of the classical epics: the *Iliad*’s catalogue of ships (2.484–759); the *Aeneid*’s list of warring kings (7.641–782); the *Thebaid*’s account of the seven against Thebes (4.32–245). In deploying this hallmark epic mechanism, Dante foregrounds the influence of his classical sources in a canto which also brings the poetics of the *dolce stil novo* under close scrutiny. That tantalising ‘più di mille’, moreover, performs the list’s incompleteness, offering a view of Hell’s second circle as one replete with souls, the full enumeration of whom would extend well beyond these lines. As I have already intimated, extensive critical attention has been given to Dante’s use of preterition in *Inferno* 5 and elsewhere, and it is not my intention here to revisit that well-frequented critical arena. To the contrary, though with this epic strategy of enumeration in mind, I propose to examine those enumerations of souls in the *Commedia* which are nominally complete, but which in fact reveal telling gaps in the poem’s narrative. The first of these occurs, whether by design or not, in the canto following the elliptical enumeration of the lustful.

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7 ‘“This is Semiramis. Of her one reads / that she, though heir to Ninus, was his bride. / Her lands were those where now the Sultan reigns. / The other, lovelorn, slew herself and broke / her vow of faith to Sichaues’ ashes. / And next, so lascivious, Cleopatra. / Helen. You see? Because of her, a wretched / waste of years went by. See! Great Achiles. / He fought with love until his final day. / Paris you see, and Tristan there.’ And more / than a thousand shadows he numbered, naming / them all, whom Love had led to leave our life.”’

8 Though see, for example, Thomas E. Mussio, ‘The Poetics of Compression: The Role of *aposiopesis* in the Representation of Conversion in Dante’s *Commedia*, *Italica*, 81.2 (2004), 157–69; Usher, ‘“Più di mille”’.
‘Tutto avem veduto’?

The twinned stilnovistic and epic impulses of *Inferno* 5 fall away in canto 6, which depicts the punishment of the gluttons. In stark contrast to canto 5, it is marked by a sparseness of character, metaphor, and even poetic substance, tying with *Inferno* 11 as the *Commedia*’s shortest canto by an appreciable margin of fifteen lines. In a structural and linguistic reflection of the punishment of bodily excess, *Inferno* 6 is, textually and texturally ‘thin’. Despite the sparseness of the canto, it nevertheless contains a notable enumeration of damned souls. In his dialogue with the glutton Ciacco, Dante expresses a wish to know the fates of eminent Florentines whose deaths predate the poem’s fictional setting in Holy Week of 1300:

Farinata e’l Tegghiaio, che fuor si digni,  
Iacopo Rusticucci, Arrigo e’l Mosca  
e li altri ch’a ben far puoser li’ringegni,  
dimmi ove sono e fa ch’io li conosca;  
ché gran disio mi stringe di savere  
se’l ciel li addolcia o lo’inferno li attosca.  

*Inf.* 6.79–84

This enumeration is markedly different from Virgil’s in the previous canto. Aside from its relative concision, it makes no recourse to preterition: there is no sense that Dante names more souls than are listed in the text. It is a complete, self-contained enumeration. For our purposes, it is also significant that Ciacco’s response to Dante’s enquiry is definitive: ‘Ei son tra l’anime più nere; / diverse colpe giù li grava al fondo: / se tanto scendi, là i potrai vedere’ (*Inf.* 6.85–87). The result of this exchange is that Dante’s list of souls becomes a narrative prolepsis: Ciacco confirms that all of them are already in Hell, and that Dante can expect to encounter them later in his journey. Sure enough, he will shortly meet Farinata degli Uberti in the circle of the heretics (*Inf.* 10.32–120); Tegghiaio Aldobrandi and Jacopo Rusticucci will be seen among those damned for violence against nature (*Inf.* 16.40–45). Still further down in Hell, in the ninth pocket of the eighth circle, Mosca dei Lamberti is among the sowers of social and political discord (*Inf.* 28.106–08). By the end of *Inferno*, then, each of the souls in Dante’s list is accounted for, apart from one. Scholars and readers have never agreed on who ‘Arrigo’ is, and the poem offers us no clues. His identity, however, is less important than the fact that he is named at all: whoever he is, Dante-as-poet primes our expectations for an encounter with him as with the other Florentine magnates, but Arrigo is never so much

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9 ‘Tegghiaio, Farinata- men of rank- / Mosca, Arrigo, Rusticucci, too, / and others with their minds on noble deeds, / tell me, so I may know them, where they are. / For I am gripped by great desire, to tell / if Heaven holds them sweet- or poisonous Hell’.

10 ‘These dwell among the blackest souls, / loaded down deep by sins of differing types. / If you sink far enough, you’ll see them all.’

as named again in *Inferno*. This despite the fact that Virgil tells Dante at the bottom of Hell that ‘tutto avem veduto’ (*Inf*. 34.69): they have seen everything there is to see. It is only at this disquieting moment in *Inferno* 34 that we in fact become retrospectively cognisant of what has *not* been seen.

Far from being any kind of mistake on Dante’s part, I would suggest that Arrigo’s narrative exclusion casts significant light on the function of absence in *Inferno* as a whole. One of the key ways in which absence is experienced, after all, is through the violation of expectation: we register absence when our expectation of presence is deferred.\(^{12}\) Once Ciacco has told Dante that he will meet all of the souls he has named, every subsequent canto evokes a degree of readerly anticipation. Under this principle, Arrigo’s conspicuous non-appearance in *Inferno* leads him to constitute what literary theorist Timothy Walsh calls a ‘structured’ literary absence, defined as a missing textual element whose absence is linguistically signalled, as distinct from ‘pure’ literary absence, where no such signalling takes place.\(^{13}\) The distinction is clearly illustrated in an example from *Purgatorio* during Dante’s dialogue with the poet Bonagiunta da Lucca:

\begin{quote}
E io a lui: ‘I’mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
ch’è ditta dentro vo significando.’
‘O frate, issa vegg’io’ dis’ elli, ‘il nodo
che'l Notaro e Guittone e me ritenne
di qua dal dolce stil novo ch’i’odo.’
\end{quote}

\((Purg. 24.52–57)\)\(^{14}\)

Long glossed as a blueprint for Dante’s conscious overturning of thirteenth-century poetic praxis, this moment also instantiates the *Commedia*’s deployment of structured absence. Guittone D’Arezzo and Giacomo da Lentini (the ‘Notaro’, or ‘Notary’) are directly invoked here as Bonagiunta’s and Dante’s artistic predecessors, but despite Dante’s engagement with both poets on the thematic and lexical levels, neither appears as a character in the poem.\(^{15}\) Like Arrigo, logic dictates that they must be somewhere in the poem’s three realms: the *Commedia*’s fictional setting in 1300, after all, comfortably postdates their deaths in c.1260 and 1294 respectively. Of course, this could be said of any person whose death predates the *Commedia*’s narrative, and who is not named in the poem itself. Herein lies the importance of the distinction between


\(^{14}\) ‘“Dear brother, now I see,” he said, “the knot / that kept the Notary, Guittone and me, too, / from reaching to that sweet new style I hear of.”’ Translation adapted.

structured and pure absence: the absences of Arrigo, Giacomo and Guittone are made conspicuous in a way that those of, say, Gallo Pisano or Mino Mocato, named alongside Guittone and Giacomo as poets of fame in *De vulgari eloquentia* (1.13.1), are not.

Naturally, a key difference between the structured absences of Giacomo and Guittone and that of Arrigo lies in the fact that Dante’s encounter with the latter is explicitly introduced as prolepsis: though overt reference to the poets in *Purgatorio* 24 alerts the reader to their absence from the *Commedia*’s narrative, expectation of their appearance is not primed as it is in the case of Arrigo. Why, then, should Dante choose to include Arrigo in the poem as a structured absence in this way? I propose that the significance of the choice lies precisely in the fact that it is introduced proleptically but can only be understood retrospectively. After all, for as long as there is more infernal narrative ahead, there is the potential for the encounter to happen. The *apia* provoked by this omission is key to Dante’s system of infernal metaphysics: if the wayfarer has not seen an infernal soul before he emerges from the pit, there is no possibility of his meeting them elsewhere. There is no continuity between Hell and the other realms: while all the penitents of *Purgatorio* are ultimately destined for Paradise, *Inferno* is, in essence, a narrative and teleological cul-de-sac. It is for this reason that such destabilizing non-encounters do not occur in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, characterised as they are by a poetics of return and reunion: no such *apia* can be expected. Though Giacomo and Guittone are structured absences in *Purgatorio*, Bonagiunta does not prime readerly expectation for encounters with them as Ciacco does with Arrigo in *Inferno* 6, and Dante’s progression from Purgatory to Paradise does not, in any case, preclude the possibility of encounter given the theological continuity between the poem’s latter two realms. The infernal omission solidifies the necessity of reading the *Commedia* with a keen retrospective eye, and one which is trained on absence as well as presence. This example of structured incompleteness in *Inferno* is, as I hope now to show, fundamental to an understanding of the evolving poetics of absence at work across the poem. Aporetic infernal voids of the kind occupied by Arrigo will necessarily always be voids, while empty spaces in post-infernal contexts serve markedly different purposes.

Preterition cannot hope to convey the fullness of *Paradiso* as it does in *Inferno*. It is made clear at several junctures in the third *cantica* that the number of inhabitants in Paradise is on a different scale altogether, as in the case of the angels of canto 28:

> L’incendio suo seguiva ogne scintilla  
ed’eran tante, che’l numero loro  
più che’l doppiar de li scacchi s’inmilla.  

*(Par. 28.91–93)*

16 ‘This surge of fire was following every glint. / These glints, en-thousanding, outnumbered far / progressive doubling of the chessboard squares.’
Here Dante alludes to the Arabic fable of the origin of chess, whose inventor claims as his reward a quantity of grains of wheat, starting with one, which doubles for each of a chess board’s sixty-four squares. The resultant number of grains is astronomically large in itself (over eighteen quintillion), and Dante has it ‘en-thousand’ itself, and even this Dantean neologism — which renders *Inferno* 5’s ‘più di mille’ minuscule by comparison — cannot account for the total number of angels. Moreover, in the context of *Paradiso*, this number is no hyperbole: it is, after all, a realm characterised by immense harmonious plenitude. Nevertheless, there is a particularly notable moment of apparent ‘forgetfulness’ in *Paradiso*, once again in the context of an enumeration, which evinces change in the *Commedia*’s treatment of absence as Dante progresses in his journey through a theological space which radically complicates the dialectic of presence and absence.

At the numerological centre of *Paradiso* (cantos 15–17), Dante encounters his crusader ancestor, Cacciaguida. The episode is one rich with pathos, not least because it sees Cacciaguida give the poem’s most notable prophecy of Dante’s imminent exile from Florence: ‘Tu lascerai ogni cosa diletta / più caramente; e questo è quello strale / che l’arco de lo essilio pria saetta’ (*Par.* 17.55–57). It is an encounter, therefore, that is strongly proleptic, but it is also one heavily invested in political and personal history. So important is the personal historical dimension of the prophecy that Dante deviates from his projected narrative in order to have Cacciaguida deliver it, for both Virgil and Brunetto Latini strongly imply, in *Inferno* 10 and 15 respectively, that it will come from Beatrice. Whatever Dante’s motivation, the decision strengthens the juxtaposition of his protagonist’s future with accounts of the Florentine past, and a result of this is that the three cantos are run through with vast rosters of historical Florentine nobles. The longest of these, extending over sixty-six lines (more than two thirds of the length of *Inferno* 6) ends with a familiar strategy of preterition: ‘Con queste genti, e con altre con esse, / vid’io Fiorenza in sì fatto riposo, / che non avea cagione onde piangesse’ (*Par.* 16.148–50). The first of Cacciaguida’s lists, however, has a more focused historical scope, seeking specifically to account for Dante’s ancestors since Cacciaguida within their Florentine context (*Par.* 15.88–148). The fact that it deploys no preterition is perhaps unsurprising: it is an enumeration with a distinctly finite genealogical reach, and one which details the heritage of a family which, Dante strongly underscores, stems from a singular, superior ‘radice’ (‘root’, *Par.* 15.89). To this end, the first historical
figure to whom Cacciaguida alludes is of particular importance to Dante:

Poscia mi disse: ‘Quel da cui si dice
tua cognazione e che cent’anni e piu
girato ha l’monte in prima cornice,
mio figlio fu e tuo bisavol fue.’

(Par. 15.91–94)

The ancestor in question is Alighiero I, for whom Cacciaguida asks Dante to pray in order to shorten his ‘lunga fatica’ (‘long labour’, Par. 15.95) on the purgatorial terrace of the prideful. Intriguingly, though, while Dante spends a great deal of time with the prideful souls, he does not meet his ancestor and namesake. It is a significant instance of what Filippo Fabbricatore has recently termed an ‘incontro mancato’: a narrative meeting which does not happen, but which gestures towards a contingent version of events in which it does, in fact, take place. It is true that Dante stages other incontri mancati in the Commedia, perhaps most notably in Inferno, where the wayfarer believes he has seen another ancestor, Geri del Bello, among the sowers of discord, and lingers in order to try to identify him (Inf. 29.1–36). Nowhere else in the poem, however, does Dante stage such a long-range incontro mancato than at this moment in Paradiso 15: since Dante remains with the prideful between cantos 10 and 12 of Purgatorio, Alighiero’s absence is made conspicuous up to thirty-eight cantos after the prospective encounter. Such far-sighted analepsis requires explanation.

Did Dante-as-poet simply forget to include the encounter in Purgatorio, and use the Cacciaguida cantos as a means to retrospectively include his nearer ancestor in the poem’s narrative? This is hardly likely. Rather, it serves the poem’s thematic and theological trajectories for Alighiero to be ‘present’ in the poem only as an incontro mancato. For, though Dante presents us here with another structured incompleteness, and though it might be expected that its effect on the poem’s theological and narrative textures would be similar to the retrospective non-encounter with Arrigo, the poetics of Paradiso shape this incontro mancato rather differently. The blessed all look forward to a time when they will be reunited with their ‘corpi morti: / forse non pur per lor, ma per le mamme, / per li padri e per li altri che fuor cari / anzi che fosser sempiterne fiamme’ (Par. 14.63–66). The souls of the blessed, that is to say, still experience lack, but in a way that has been completely separated from negative narrative or affective implications: there is no doubt that these

20 ‘And then he said: “The one from whom your clan / takes its cognomen has walked the first ring / of the hill below a hundred years or more. / He was my son, to you great-grandfather.”’


22 On ‘long-range’ narrative contingencies, see Crisafi, Dante’s Masterplot, pp. 43–82.

23 ‘long dead bones, / not only for themselves but for their mums, / their fathers, too, and others dear to them, / before they were these sempiternal flames.’
reunions will happen, it is simply a question of time.\footnote{See Jennifer Rushworth, \textit{Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. pp. 18–53.} Considered in this light, the ‘forgetfulness’ of this moment becomes key to understanding the heuristic journey of \textit{Paradiso}, as Dante gradually adjusts to the third \textit{cantica}’s dynamic of harmonious deferral: whatever incompleteness may be encountered on the journeys through \textit{Purgatorio} and \textit{Paradiso} will eventually be resolved. Had Dante encountered Alighiero among the penitent prideful, the resonance of this fundamental paradisiacal lesson would have been drastically reduced. While \textit{Inferno}’s forgetful enumeration provokes \textit{aporia}, then, \textit{Paradiso}’s reminds us of the relative relaxation of assured divine reunion. Teleologically, it does not matter that Dante does not meet Alighiero in Purgatory: the narrative ‘lack’ of Dante’s ancestor serves, paradoxically, to reaffirm the teleological stability of the poem’s latter two realms, setting the narrative dead end of \textit{Inferno} into sharp relief, and vice-versa.

Both of these cases of structured incompleteness reveal key ways in which the \textit{Commedia} strategically gestures towards that which its narrative does not contain. By encoding absent figures such as Arrigo and Alighiero into the poem, Dante contrives to include far more in his cosmos than the text of his universal ‘volume’ can encompass. In these moments, the afterlife of the \textit{Commedia} expands, both narratively and theologically, beyond the limitations of textuality, allowing it to broaden its encyclopaedic reach. Indeed, operating in conjunction with the perfomatively elliptical catalogues of the likes of \textit{Inferno} 4 and 5, the enumerations of \textit{Inferno} 6 and \textit{Paradiso} 15, in their postured closure and completeness, effectively provide us with a microcosmic view of the \textit{Commedia} itself: constructed as they are around highly generative empty spaces, through which they push beyond textual confines. In these ‘forgetful’ moments, then, we witness a performance of totality which mirrors in miniature one of the \textit{Commedia}’s core mechanisms of expansion and inclusion.