JUDITH REVEL

Lefort/Dante
Reading, Misreading, Transforming

ABSTRACT: How can a reader from 1993 attend to a text from the
1310s? This question haunts the text Claude Lefort devotes to
Dante's *Monarchia*. It is certainly a question of returning to the
content of Dante's essay, but also of nourishing contemporary re-
flection: reading a text also means yielding to inquiries that do not
always belong to it, and testing, by this deformation and trans-
formation, its fruitfulness for today. Can one thus oppose to the
government of the One something that would be more like a com-
munity of ones? Can one hear in Dante the sketch of a thought of
the common?

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In recent years, I have become very interested in Claude Lefort from the point of view of contemporary philosophy — more particularly, contemporary political philosophy and contemporary representations of history, which are the two areas of enquiry with which my own work is concerned. It is therefore from this specific vantage point — both situated and defending its evident subjectivity — that I will suggest some points for reflection based on Dante's *Monarchia* and Claude Lefort's reading of that same text. Accordingly, this vantage point, which is that of a reader, and is therefore subject to all the biases which inform every act of reading, also includes the ways in which Lefort himself misreads Dante's text and in so doing makes it so excitingly complex. Every reading, however philological, is an exercise in cutting up and reinvention. Lefort does not have any philological aspirations, and nor — much more modestly, nearly a quarter of a century later — do I. Rather,

we share the intention to bring a text to life by making it one's own, probably by misreading and transforming it, and by making the questions that it formulates and the proposals that it puts forward resonate in the present. 'We must digest what we read; otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power',[1] writes Seneca to Lucilius on the subject of the exercise of recollecting, remembering, and ordering things read which make up the *hypomnemata*. The brief essay in *reading a reading* — reading the reading that Lefort so brilliantly offers us of Dante — which I would like to undertake here has no other aim than that outlined by Seneca: namely, the modest digestion of two potent subject matters, embedded one within the other, the Dantean material and its Lefortian re-elaboration.

The first point which I would like to address as a way into Lefort's reading is methodological in nature, and concerns precisely the question of reading, that is, the question of what we mean by *reading a text*. Part of the purpose of this point is likely that of protecting Lefort from eventual criticisms which medievalists or Dante specialists — note that Lefort is neither of these — might otherwise level against him. Nonetheless, the 'defensive' nature of this point should not prevent us from understanding that it also corresponds to a serious challenge on the part of Lefort, and one which he puts into practice in his reading of Dante just as in his reading of Machiavelli, or in his reading of texts by Marx. This challenge consists in affirming a mode of reading that is rooted *in the present*, and aims in a way to enact a return to the present. This mode of reading

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1   Seneca, *Epistles*, trans. by Richard M. Gunmere, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2001), II (2001), p. 281 (from Letter 84) [translation amended].

is proposed not *in place of* a philological reading that all of us very often practise in relation to 'our' authors or to the corpus of texts which we confront, but rather *alongside*, or *in addition to* that reading approach.

When he justifies theoretically the principle of such a presentist mode of reading, Lefort paradoxically articulates it in terms of the importance of a historicizing gesture which is, for him, never able to be renounced. Now, historicization paradoxically implies the development of two approaches which are both distinct and complementary: on the one hand, the restitution and analysis of past systems of thought (in the case with which we are concerned, this particular system of thought is itself rooted in other systems of thought, starting with the Aristotelian notion of the 'possible intellect', which is a key focal point for much of Lefort's commentary, but also including 'the writings of important Christian authors',[2] from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas); on the other hand, the concomitant, constantly reaffirmed desire to situate oneself in relation to one's own present, because the present cannot be grasped in its specificity save in the play of oppositions and continuities, whether partial or total, which qualify it as such.

The present can thus be understood through a process of differentiation, on the basis of what it no longer, or no longer entirely, is. But it can also be understood through the effects of continuity and the echoes elicited by the description of a former time, that is, a scene of past thought which seems on the surface radically different. In a historical, philosophical, political landscape, there one day arose a particular inaugural moment, a sort of moment of emergence — Lefort speaks of 'an immense step beyond

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2   Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', in this volume, pp. 1–85 (p. 3).

the field of ancient philosophy'.[3] It is this novelty which
needs to be located and analysed, which is also its own
'germination', what has come down to us, seven centuries
later. Precisely because in our own time its belated echo
can still perhaps be heard. 'Dante's modernity', since that is
the title of the essay by Lefort which accompanies the text
of the *Monarchia*, as a consequence includes both his status
as a point of rupture and his ability to talk, even today,
about us.

Lefort briefly cites Kantorowicz — Chapter VIII of
The King's Two Bodies, 'Man-centered Kingship: Dante'[4] —
in the opening pages of his own essay, and comments:

> Dante shows himself to be so dependent on the
> knowledge and language of his time that the reader
> can easily overlook the 'slant so new and so sur-
> prising' that he gives to all the statements that he
> has borrowed and miss his intention and the new
> solutions that he offers.[5]

If this is the difficulty, Lefort also makes the wager that

> we should be less concerned about failing to grasp
> the full extent of his borrowings — through lack
> of the competences of the historian or the theolo-
> gian — or of the use he makes of the debates about
> the relations between religion and philosophy. For
> in this case our confidence in the vigour of his
> thought, or, to use an image dear to Dante, its
> fecundity, is only increased.[6]

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3   Ibid., p. 6.
4   'Man-Centered Kingship: Dante', in Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 451–95.
5   Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', p. 7.
6   Ibid., pp. 7–8.

The principle of reading is as a result largely redefined, because there is no political analysis — whether it concerns an author (Machiavelli) or a text (in this case, the *Monarchia*) — without the central importance of an inquiry into the present; but there is also no conflation of these two 'times', which reading brings into tension, into a totality tasked with revealing their truth. Any ambiguity can be resolved by going back to the extraordinary opening essay of the first issue of the journal *Libre*, founded by Lefort and others in 1977[7] — an article whose title, 'Now', also sounds in itself like a declaration of intent:

> That the historical dimension must be rescued along with the political dimension does not mean that we want to restore a theory of universal history. We reject the viewpoint that stands over and above the social totality as well as the vision of the becoming of humanity as a self-generating evolution or succession of 'formations'. We also reject the notion of a substance called 'Society' and that of a full time or of a continuum of meaning. The term 'historical dimension' is advanced precisely in order to avoid the equivocation attached to the idea of history; in order to suggest that there is no way of understanding the manifestations of social reality in the present which does not also presume their apprehension in time [...]. This means that modern society (in the plural) cannot be placed into history like an actor's gestures and words are placed at the proper moment in the plot. Modern society must be known in its historicity, through events that are not simply constellations of accidents but which are shaped by modern society, thus revealing its relation to change, a style

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7   Lefort, 'Maintenant', *Libre*, 1 (1977), pp. 3–28, English as 'Then and Now', trans. by Dick Howard, Jean Cohen, Patricia Tummons, Mark Poster, and Andrew Arato, *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Radical Thought*, 36 (1978), pp. 29–42.

> of discriminating past and future — or an inability
> to fall back wholly on acquired knowledge or an
> excessiveness which is conducive to the test of
> what invalidates it.[8]

What this means is that if interest in the present is not
enclosed within the narrow confines of a presentist ap-
proach which forgets both the sedimentary thickness of
its own ground and the horizon of projects to come (I am
thinking here of the recent analyses of François Hartog, to
which Lefort's approach does not seem to correspond at
all),[9] this same interest does nonetheless imply something
like 'a style of discriminating past and future', or, in other
words, the identification of moments of transformation
and change, entirely freed from a totalizing vision and yet
entirely effective.

   What the present enables us to think, and what the his-
toricization of the enquiry — whether it is philosophical,
philological, political, or sociological — gives us the means
to understand, is the specificity of a configuration which
is both produced by its own historical conditions (which
need to be described) and irreducible to an overarching
interpretation given in advance. The insistent commentary
that Lefort provides of the notion of *civilitas* is an excellent
example of this: 'let us not be afraid to translate this as civil
society', notes Lefort.[10] In this note, we have both a record
of what Lefort identifies as the novelty of Dante (since
human society exceeds the restricted limits of Aristotelian
community) and, at the same time, the connecting thread
which emerges between *civilitas* and *humanitas* — in other

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8   Lefort, 'Then and Now', pp. 41–42 [translation amended].

9   François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. by Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

10   Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', p. 4.

words, according to Lefort, the relinquishing of a Thomist vision of humanity understood on the grounds of the idea of original sin, and its replacement by the positivity of a collective effort at the realization of humankind's humanity, the secularization of the Christian idea of universal community, and the echo, so to speak in advance, of the modern representation of a community of the human race.

One last point in this rather long introduction devoted to what is meant by *reading*. The necessary historicization of the investigation that we undertake at a particular moment — since 1312 is neither 1993, the date of publication of Lefort's text, nor is it 2019, our own present moment — is in reality also what gives us the greatest freedom in our use of the authors that we mobilize. Not because the art of commentary would suddenly be freed from its fundamental concern of respect for the text or its literal meaning, but rather because every single thought is produced in a context which shapes it and which that thought in turn helps to elucidate. It is in discussing his relationship to Marx that Lefort is most explicit about this strange gesture that constitutes *reading*:

> No matter what help one can derive from commentators, to read Marx is to question him (an effort that today is becoming increasingly difficult, it is true). This freedom requires one: to accept the indeterminacy that accompanies the movement of writing; to test its gaps, its new beginnings in subsequent texts; to be willing to discover a thought being worked on by what it grasps, to let oneself be led to what it grasps; to let oneself thus be drawn to the questions that made Marx speak, questions which he made prominent and which are not concealed by his answers, since it is not a matter of problems and solutions. And the liberty that is so gained increases with the very reading, *which leads*

> *readers to confront their own time, that which they, in turn, must grasp in their own place, now.*[11]

If we replace Marx's name with Dante's, it seems to me that this passage offers us the key to Lefortian commentary:

> […] to let oneself thus be drawn to the questions that made *Dante* speak, questions which he made prominent and which are not concealed by his answers, since it is not a matter of problems and solutions. And the liberty that is so gained increases with the very reading, *which leads readers to confront their own time, that which they, in turn, must grasp in their own place, now*.

This extraordinary lesson in reading contains at least two important elements. The first is that at the heart of the act of reading there is no intention of obtaining from the text anything like an immutable truth, the truth-of-the-text-and-its-author, because the only truth that can be found therein is the patient effort of writing which accompanied the work of thought of which the writing took charge. To call this 'indeterminacy', as Lefort does, does not mean that a text, precisely because it is indeterminate, would be endowed with a universal value, would all of a sudden erase its context, the process and eventual errancies of its own constitution, and could suddenly go forth under the auspices of its own truth — let us recall Althusser's 'scientific' Marx, against which the Lefortian method seems here openly to take a stance. 'Indeterminacy' is quite the opposite, and means situating thought once more in the context of its effort and its tensions, that is to say also in the context of its own history; it means analysing its determinations, and at the same time feeling free to confront afresh, in its wake, in

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11   Lefort, 'Then and Now', p. 32. Emphasis added [translation amended].

the very same gesture, *one's own time* — a time which does not need to affirm the literal, identical repetition of what was in reality the time of Marx, or the time of Machiavelli, or the time of Dante… — but which is committed quite simply, as Lefort says, to *confronting one's own time* and grasping what one designates precisely as 'now'.

I would like now to suggest a few points where we see this double aspect of reading: situating thought once more within the context of its effort and its tensions, grasping its novelty, of course; but also putting its propositions literally to work in our own time, and seeing what they tell us about ourselves.

I will highlight two such moments in particular, both of which essentially relate to Book I of the *Monarchia*. The first point, which is central for Dante, and whose potency Lefort develops, concerns the reference to the *possible intellect*; beyond Lefort, I will propose an interpretation of the *possible intellect* in terms of the constitution of the common of human beings.[12] The second, which is more Lefortian but which is in a way projected by Lefort onto Dante's

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12 [Translator's note: As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note in their preface to *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2004), the notion of 'the common' is 'more awkward' than that of 'the commons', but also signals a new development with a different philosophical content (p. xv). The article by Judith Revel and Antonio Negri, 'Inventer le commun des hommes', *Multitudes*, 31.4 (2007), pp. 5–10 <https://doi.org/10.3917/mult.031.0005> was translated as 'Inventing the Common' (2008) <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp_revel5.htm> [accessed 8 December 2019]. A key term in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2009), the notion of the common has since also appeared in book titles, including Pierre Dadot and Christian Laval, *Commun: Essai sur la révolution au XXIe siècle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014), English as *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) and, most recently, *L'Alternative du commun*, ed. by Christian Laval, Pierre Sauvêtre, and Ferhat Taylan (Paris: Hermann, 2019).]

text, is the very complicated question of the One, in other words, the difficulty of claiming simultaneously the coherence, cohesion, and power of a collective intellect reliant upon the idea that in reality humanity has no outside, that humanity is made up of heterogeneous peoples who are sometimes opposed, and at other times unaware of each other, but all of whom contribute to the progressive realization of the knowledgeable nature of the human race, on the one hand; and, on the other hand (this is the other side of this difficult simultaneity), what Lefort has always clung to as a fundamental point of his analysis, that is, the fact that the One, when it involves self-identity, the suppression of differences, and the erasure of conflicts, is politically death-bringing, and represents, putting it in modern terms, the always possible turning-point of democracy into its opposite. All this immediately begs a question: is it possible to construct an idea of universality which would not immediately mean affirmation of the One? Dante is here an invaluable guide, precisely because the *Monarchia* develops the idea of a cooperative universality, or rather redefines universality not as the ground for human community but rather as what human cooperation is liable to constitute, and accordingly reverses the logical order: universality is an *effect* of cooperation, and not its condition of possibility. In any case, this — and I will return to this point momentarily — seems to me to be what fascinates Lefort about Dante: the possibility of a universality without the One.

Let's take the first of these two points: the astonishing adoption and re-elaboration of the Aristotelian theme of the *possible intellect*. I will discuss this theme quite quickly and do not want to insist on aspects that are well known — Dante's sidestepping of both Aristotle and the Thomist tradition. Because, as Lefort emphasizes in his essay, un-

like Aristotle, Dante does not limit himself to imagining a restricted community, defined by a delimited space, whose limited character would enable precisely the expression of what is in fact Aristotle's real question: the organization of the natural sociability of human beings. For Dante, not only is there no limitation but there can be no such limitation, precisely because the human race includes, as Lefort explains, 'nations of different sizes, peoples who do not know each other, who are exposed to different climates and attached to their particular customs, and whose unity rests on their common submission to the jurisdiction of a monarch'.[13] Lefort goes on to quote the following passage from Book I of the *Monarchia*:

> whatever constitutes the purpose of the civil society of the human race […] will be here the first principle, in terms of which all subsequent propositions to be proved will be demonstrated with sufficient rigour; for it would be foolish to suppose that there is one purpose for this society and another for that, and not a common purpose for all of them.[14]

The overlaying of *humanitas* and *civilitas* is clear here, and immediately redefines what we are to understand by universality; the universal end or cause, so Lefort informs us, is that of humanity understood as *all human beings together*. Universal society is no longer exclusively that of

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13   Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', p. 6.

14   Dante Alighieri, *Monarchy*, ed. and trans. by Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 5 (I, ii, 8 [translation amended]). [Translator's note: All quotations throughout are taken from this translation, which is now also available online at <https://www.danteonline.it/monarchia> [accessed 5 December 2019]. Among the material of this website devoted to the *Monarchia* is the Latin text of Shaw's critical edition: Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, ed. by Prue Shaw, Edizione Nazionale delle opere di Dante Alighieri a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana, v (Florence: Le Lettere, 2009).]

the Church, but rather that of unified humanity; it stems, as Gilson had already highlighted in his *Dante the Philosopher*[15] — a text which guides Lefort's commentary a great deal —, from the secularization of the ideal of universal Christendom.

Dante's second sidestep concerns Thomism. "'[T]he necessity which requires humans to communize the resources of their individual reason"'[16] now functions at the level of temporal society, not — or not only — because earthly life is now valued for its own sake, but because it is in this life that the end which is proper to humans can be realized. The *possible intellect* means, as a consequence, the presence and realization of God, who is cause and end, in the interaction between humans themselves. But this communizing of resources is also a form of interaction, because, if humanity has its own end — the actualization of the intellective power —, the individual itself is insufficient, for it is only from the cooperation of all individuals that this actualization can be achieved. Another quotation from Dante:

> And since that potentiality cannot be fully actualized all at once *in any one individual or in any one of the particular social groupings enumerated above*, there must needs be a *multitude* in the human race, through whom the whole of this potentiality can be actualized.[17]

This cooperation between human beings, between nations, between peoples, needs of course to be understood as sub-

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15   Étienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. by David Moore (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948).

16   Ibid., p. 166 [translation amended], cited by Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', p. 5.

17   Dante, *Monarchy*, I, iii, 8. Emphasis added [translation amended].

ject to the condition of unity (the unity of the monarch). But cooperation is itself subject to the constitution of a unitary model, a unity which is rendered by Dante in the form of a body — the multitude representing from this perspective all the *members* of this body. Now, this organic character, to which I will return shortly, allows for a two-fold operation. The figure of the Church as the body of Christ is here replaced by that of the body of humanity whose unity is in God alone (and whose actualization is reliant upon the rule of one alone, the monarch). But the organicity inferred by the image of the body also enables the relationship which is established between the members themselves to be qualified as *cooperation*, in other words, as reciprocal dependency: the necessity for each person, in their *uniqueness*, and directed by one alone (the monarch), to actualize, that is, to constitute along with everyone else, the possible intellect. The concept of the One-body is built on the basis of a bringing together of the singularities of which it is formed — the term 'singularity' is here deliberately 'imported', but I accept the risk —, which means that the disappearance of these singularities is never required. Lefort immediately grasps the importance of this fact: 'Although already present previously, the thought of *the one* proves to be more profound than that of the whole.'[18] Here, the *one* and the *whole* mean entirely different things: no doubt this is what allows us to understand the way in which Lefort will try against all the odds to create a sort of mirror construction of the Dante of the *Monarchia* and of the La Boétie of the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*. Indeed, how is it possible not to bring into conflict Dante's assertion that unity (the unity of humanity in God) must be realized under the rule of one alone

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18   Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', p. 15.

(the monarch) and La Boétie's obsession with the *Against One*? Perhaps by disconnecting, or by distinguishing, that which relates to *unity* (understood as the articulation of unique ones, as the cooperation of the multitude) from that which relates to the *whole* (understood as the erasure of the unique ones and the reduction to identity). This is what seems to be demonstrated by the analyses which Lefort has devoted to political translations of the dynamics of the whole, from the very start of his intellectual output onwards. For proceeding through *totalization*, asserting the violence which at once covers and reduces the whole also means giving a name, in the modern period which is ours, to the network of totalitarian regimes on which Lefort has worked so extensively.

It is of course necessary to emphasize here, since it is one of the aspects which marks Dante's distancing of himself from Aristotle, the way in which the question of the limitation of the ideal community in space is wholly transformed: the civil society of the human race, universal *civilitas*, knows of no spatial limits. But the same observation also pertains to that other fundamental dimension, history, which much of Book II explores from the days of Rome. For the actualization of the possible intellect also requires a stratification in time: the multitude of members who coexist and cooperate is constituted by a succession of gestures and knowledges, which accumulate slowly. These are quite literally the 'waves' of human activity, whose sedimentation gives birth to human history as the realization of the telos of the human race — a realization which is conceivable only in this history, as a result of sedimentary deposits and successive layers of stratification. In this history, the classical authors have their place, just as Dante has

his — and just as we, who read Dante today, probably have our own place too.

Lefort, whose attachment to history I have already sought to highlight at the start of this essay, is particularly attuned to the *thickness of history* (an expression which, for Lefort, in fact comes from Merleau-Ponty) — a thickness which Lefort finds precisely in Dante. Lefort notes: 'Let us recall what Dante says in the *Convivio*: "And all our troubles, if we really search out their origins, derive in some way from not knowing how to use time."'[19] This remark can be read in two ways: on the one hand, we need to read Dante in the same way that Lefort wanted to read Machiavelli, allowing his oeuvre to unfold as *work*, which evidently implies an essential thickness of time; on the other hand, the actualization of the possible intellect requires the participation of all people *throughout time*. It is in this regard that Dante is astonishingly modern: history becomes here the *milieu* in which the affirmation of humankind's humanity (*humanitas*) in its political form (*civilitas*) is conceived. And Lefort himself concludes his own text by exhorting us to know '*how to use time*'.[20]

I announced at the beginning of this essay a second set of questions, which are certainly rooted in Dante's text but which are also largely projected onto it from Lefort's emergent obsession with the critique of the One, in all its forms (we might mention, by way of example, self-identity, society's closing in on itself, the erasure of social conflict, the State-form, party structures, the historical emergence of totalitarian regimes, and so on). If one searches for it

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19   Ibid., p. 48, citing from Dante Alighieri, *Convivio: A Dual-Language Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. by Andrew Frisardi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), ɪᴠ, ii, 10.

20   Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', p. 85.

within the sphere of political thought, the philosophical
root of this radical critique is represented for Lefort by the
figure of La Boétie, to whom he devotes an essay, in 1976,
designed to accompany a new edition of the *Discourse on
Voluntary Servitude* — whose full title, we must remem-
ber, is the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude or Against One*.
Seventeen years later, when 'Dante's Modernity' is first
published in French, it is once more the figure of La Boétie
who returns and who comes into tension with the text of
the *Monarchia*.

The context of this confrontation is clear, since both
texts are in reality a response to one common question:
what is the basis for the power of one alone? Of course,
the responses of Dante and La Boétie to this question
stem from two diametrically opposed points of view. And
yet Lefort complicates the play of oppositions, because
everything in reality seems to revolve around a different
problem: what are we to understand by the word *one*?
What does it mean? To what does it refer? Having noted
that, according to La Boétie, people, through their desire,
and soon their will to servitude, 'give in to the charm of
the name of the one alone',[21] some sort of unity must
also be recognized amongst humans, without which their
common humanity would lose all its consistency. Lefort
underscores the difficulty that La Boétie faces: humans
have something in common, but they are also 'irreducibly
distinct'.[22] Humanity is one, but how are we to understand
this unity without relating it immediately to the power of
one alone? And even before that: how are we to maintain
the singularities which constitute it? The answer given by
the *Discourse* rests on a sort of reworking of the notion of

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21   Ibid., p. 80.
22   Ibid., p. 81.

a *mould*. There is one *same* mould from which all people are fashioned, because Nature placed in each of them a common ground, which La Boétie explains as follows:

> Hence, since this kind mother has given us the whole world as a dwelling place, has lodged us in the same house, has fashioned us according to the same model so that in beholding one another we might almost recognize ourselves; since she has bestowed upon us all the great gift of voice and speech for fraternal relationship, thus achieving by the common and mutual statement of our thoughts a communion of our wills […].[23]

The common is, in other words, the extraordinary possibility of affirming at the same time the *communion* and the *differences*. Each singularity does not negate the possibility of recognizing the other (precisely because what we have in common is that we are absolutely singular; the common is, here, that of the difference that each of us irreducibly represents); language, which we share, accordingly makes the expression of different voices possible, which in turn also makes possible the communion of wills. Humanity is indeed *one*, but this unity is only conceivable to the extent that it immediately implies the interrelationship between the irreducible singularities that we are. Lefort therefore comments:

> The visible sign of union is deceptive: in truth, nature has made us *not so much united [unis] as all ones [uns]*. However, individuals only discover themselves as ones [uns] *through the relationship* with those with whom they share their life.[24]

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23   Étienne de La Boétie, *Anti-Dictator: The 'Discours sur la servitude volontaire' of Étienne de La Boétie, Rendered into English*, trans. by Harry Kurz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), p. 14.

24   Lefort, 'Dante's Modernity', pp. 81–82. Emphasis added.

In the essay which Lefort devotes in 1976 to La Boétie, an essay whose title is in and of itself a declaration of open war — 'The name of the One' (the One has, in Lefort, gained its capital letter: it is clearly the enemy) —, things are even clearer, and it is important to highlight at least two aspects of that analysis, since they prefigure in a troubling way the commentary on Dante's text which concerns us here.

The opposition, which also recurs in Lefort's 1993 essay, between being *united* (that is, constituting *One*, under the rule of one alone) and being *ones* [*uns*] (in the plural) is already present, and is even put forward in a set and radicalized form. First of all, in a negative manner, because it is not enough to imagine, in front of the One, an other, in a way *its Other*, nor can the problem be solved by setting society in front of the power of the One (the power of one alone). Thinking that society can be a sort of counterbalance to the One can only mean one thing: that our understanding of society 'is embodied as the One, that the plural, denying itself, is swallowed up in the One'.[25] Here there is the danger of that closing in on itself of the social which can make it reproduce in a specular fashion what it had in contrast thought to oppose, whereas it ends up merely imitating those characteristics. Lefort knows well that the logic of the One is not only tenacious but also insidious: 'a tenacious illusion, it is true, from which it is perhaps impossible to free oneself entirely, since in the end it is difficult not to talk about the People, and to resort *to a name which is attractive*

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25   Claude Lefort, 'Le Nom d'Un', in Étienne de La Boétie, *Le Discours de la servitude volontaire*, ed. by Pierre Léonard, intro. by Miguel Abensour and Marcel Gauchet, accompanying essays by Pierre Clastres and Claude Lefort, with additional texts by Félicité Lamennais, Pierre Leroux, Auguste Vermorel, Gustav Landauer, and Simone Weil (Paris: Payot, 1976), pp. 247–307 (p. 292).

in it being in the singular.[26] Perhaps we should remember this warning more often today, and ask ourselves what are, today, all the 'names which are attractive in their being in the singular' and which structure our own relation to the political.

But the radicalization of Lefort's position is also positive, and it goes back to the question of the common mould of humans — to their *common* humanity —, and specifically to the question of language. The 'same mould', the 'same form', do not mean, in La Boétie, something like an identity of human nature which would in advance reduce any possibility of difference. On the contrary, it is the *common capacity for differences* (which is what each of us is) to create connections and to communicate — returning to Dante for a moment, to *cooperate* — which constitutes here the common of human beings.

The theme of concord is essential here, and it is no doubt one of the obvious connecting points between Dante and La Boétie. Dante in fact writes in a surprising passage:

> It is clear then that everything which is good is good for this reason: that it constitutes a unity. And since concord, in itself, is a good, it is clear that it consists in some unity as in its root. What this root is will appear if we consider the nature or meaning of concord, for concord is the uniform movement of several wills.[27]

Of course, it is possible to turn these lines into a commentary celebrating the one as what is good, and pull Dante towards what in fact the title that he himself gave to his text

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26   Ibid., p. 293.
27   Dante, *Monarchy*, I, xv, 4–5.

already signals: the power of one alone, the One as prin-
ciple and commandment — literally, monarchy. But if, as
Dante also indicates in this same passage, the condition of
possibility of this unity of wills is placed in what is the cause
and end of humanity — the realization of the possible
intellect —, in this case concord becomes the measured
and harmonious cooperation of wills in all their differences
in the interaction assumed by that concord. Here we come
close to La Boétie's analyses: concord is that which must
be constructed by interrelating differences, in *a making*,
in a set of practices which literally produce the common.
Concord is not the foundation of human relationships but
rather the effect of their constantly shifting interactions.

Lefort, in a wonderful page of his 1976 essay, lingers
in particular over one specific sentence of the *Discourse*.
This sentence is the same one that he will return to in
1993 in his commentary on the *Monarchia*. We have indeed
received, as he recalls repeating La Boétie, 'the great gift of
voice and speech for fraternal relationship, thus achieving
by the common and mutual statement of our thoughts a
communion of our wills'.[28] Lefort then comments:

> In fact, thinking about the fact of language, we
> are already thinking about the separation and
> the bringing together of subjects, we are already
> thinking about the enigmatic event of freedom,
> which supposes along with the mutual declaration
> of thoughts to each other the moment of a will
> to speak whose conditions cannot be found in
> an earlier state, and whose origin is to be found
> neither in individuals, since it is in order to speak
> that they are ones [*uns*], nor outside of them,
> since it is with and through each other that they
> speak. Thinking language means already thinking

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28   La Boétie, *Anti-Dictator*, p. 14.

the political, freed from the Illusion of the One. For asserting that the destiny of humans is to be not all united [*unis*] but *all ones* [*uns*] means reducing the social relationship to communication and the reciprocal expression of agents, mutually welcoming on principle the differences, arguing that difference is not reducible except in the imaginary and, at the same time — let us not forget to note this —, denouncing the falsehood of those in power who claim that the union of their subjects or of their citizens is the sign of the good society.[29]

But then, without unity, are we doomed to discord? We know Lefort's answer: to admit that the interplay of differences, that conflictuality, what he will call the 'original division of the social', all amount to discord would be to forget what we have learnt from Machiavelli, from La Boétie, and no doubt also from Marx (if we do not reduce him to what orthodox Marxism has made of him) — and even from Spinoza, on whom, however, Lefort never worked.

The question then becomes: where does Dante belong in this genealogy? The power and the beauty of the 1993 commentary stem precisely from the wager that Lefort makes in this regard — it is tempting to add, against the very evidence of Dante's text. But we know, as Lefort reminds us, that reading is misreading, that reading is transformative, and that reading means taking charge. Misreading, transformation, and taking charge do not occur, however, without proper foundations: there is indeed an element on the basis of which turning Dante against himself, or redefining the unity of the *possible intellect* as the *common of differences* and as the cooperation of the *ones*, can indeed be upheld. This aspect is present in La

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29   Lefort, 'Le nom d'Un', p. 292.

Boétie, as well as in Dante, and it is precisely what Lefort aptly perceives. It is fraternity. In *The Discourse*, La Boétie speaks about 'fraternal affection'. Dante, in the *Monarchia*, declares: '"Behold how good and how pleasant it is for *brethren to dwell together in unity* [*habitare fratres in unum*]."'[30]

What ends up emerging, as a result of this strange diagonal line connecting fourteenth-century Florence and sixteenth-century France, is that fraternity is the name of that which escapes the individual and the One, that fraternity is the necessary third party between the *freedom of the ones* and the *equality of all* which is at once the promise and the guarantee of the common as a cooperation of singularities.

Perhaps, then, if we remember Dante's modernity and if we pin our colours to that mast, if we make this fraternity which unites us without erasing each of our singularities our very own, the realization of a *civilitas* worthy of the *humanitas* which we share becomes conceivable.

<div align="right">TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
JENNIFER RUSHWORTH</div>

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30 Dante, *Monarchy*, I, xvi, 5, citing here from Psalm 132, v. 1 according to the Vulgate numbering, or Psalm 133, v. 1, in the Authorized Version. Emphasis added.

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