

you. Itching—on its own—is monological while tickling is dialogical.

10

But all itches are not created equal, to paraphrase Xinzhong Dong—a contemporary neuroscientist and an itch-specialist.

11

One can then surely advance a typology of the itch. But the one I would provide here is by no means exhaustive. So there are two types, to begin with: “acute” itches and “chronic” itches. Contact with itchy substance—or even a mild touch—may yield an acute itch. There are of course many other means and mechanisms whereby an acute itch may be produced. On the other hand, a chronic itch is scandalously stubborn, abusively persistent, even more than satanically diabolical: that damn itch lasts six weeks or even longer. It even robs one of sleep and thus makes one the most wretched creature on our planet. According to a recent report, nearly 20 percent of children and 5 percent of adults have some form of chronic itch, caused in a great variety of ways. But “perhaps the most common type is the spontaneous itch,” as the popular health-writer Greg Rienzi tells us. This type of itch, as he submits, is

produced “without an obvious stimulus—and it’s contagious, like a yawn.” In other words, the very thought of itching can set it off. Further, there’s this thing called the “psychogenic itch.” It is also known as the “phantom itch”—something that amputees experience in their missing limbs. Moreover, there’s the “neurogenic itch.” This type is carried by a whole host of diseases such as kidney, liver, HIV, leukemia, lymphoma, among many others. As Rienzi further points out, “unlike itch activated by primary sensory fibers on the skin, neurogenic itch involves neurons in the spinal cord or brain that somehow get triggered. The result can leave you scratching all over.”

12

One can also think of cognitive itching—in the very neighborhood of the American Marxist cultural theorist Fredric Jameson’s “cognitive mapping”—as I surely do. But what is this thing called cognitive itching then? To put it bluntly: Cognitive itching is produced by those thoughts that make you want to scratch your head.

13

Probably the great Italian epic-poet Dante has either the chronic itch or the neurogenic itch—or both—in mind when, in the *Inferno* of his *Divine Comedy*, he punishes

those liars he finds disgusting by nothing short of “the burning rage/ of fierce itching that nothing could relieve,” to use Dante’s own words in English translation. I find a parallel in the Book of Deuteronomy—the fifth book of the Christian Old Testament: “The Lord will smite thee with the scab and with the itch, whereof thou canst not be healed.” (Not long ago, I saw in my dream that several anti-people and fascist and male chauvinist politicians I find utterly disgusting in reality miserably died of the neurogenic itch!)

14

When one itches all over, or when one wrinkles one’s nose because it itches, or when the beautiful woollen sweater one wears keeps itching, or when the bites causing nodular and even inflamed swellings itch, or when one even scratches off the eyebrow because it itches relentlessly, or when one cannot but rub one’s private parts even in public because they itch, or when the devil’s itch or fire-ant itch remains a daily torment, or when one even makes a statement like this: “the metaphysical presuppositions of cognitive science are causing genuine itches, then everyone ought to care about scratching in the right place,” one may then rightly think of the realism and materialism and even the metaphysics of the itch all at once.

15

So the itch can be literal, metaphorical or tropological, phantasmal, spectral, metaphysical. There are case-studies that tell us that the specter of the itch continues to haunt many people; that amputees continue to experience the phantom itch in their missing limbs; and that the metaphysics of the itch continues to baffle the hell out of medical scientists, for instance. It’s not for nothing that Xinzhong Dong—whom I quoted earlier—asserts: “We still don’t fully understand the itch.” Let me add: Hence our effort to understand it shows no signs of abatement today.

16

That the body is fundamentally a material site of struggle—a material site of both oppression and opposition—has been amply theorized by both Foucault and Fanon. One can safely assert that the body constitutes the fundamental site of the itch as well. In fact, the itch is—among other things—*bodily* in character and content. The itch-struggle is primarily a bodily struggle. It is thus a material struggle—like even the class struggle itself—a struggle in which scratching remains a universal constant.

17

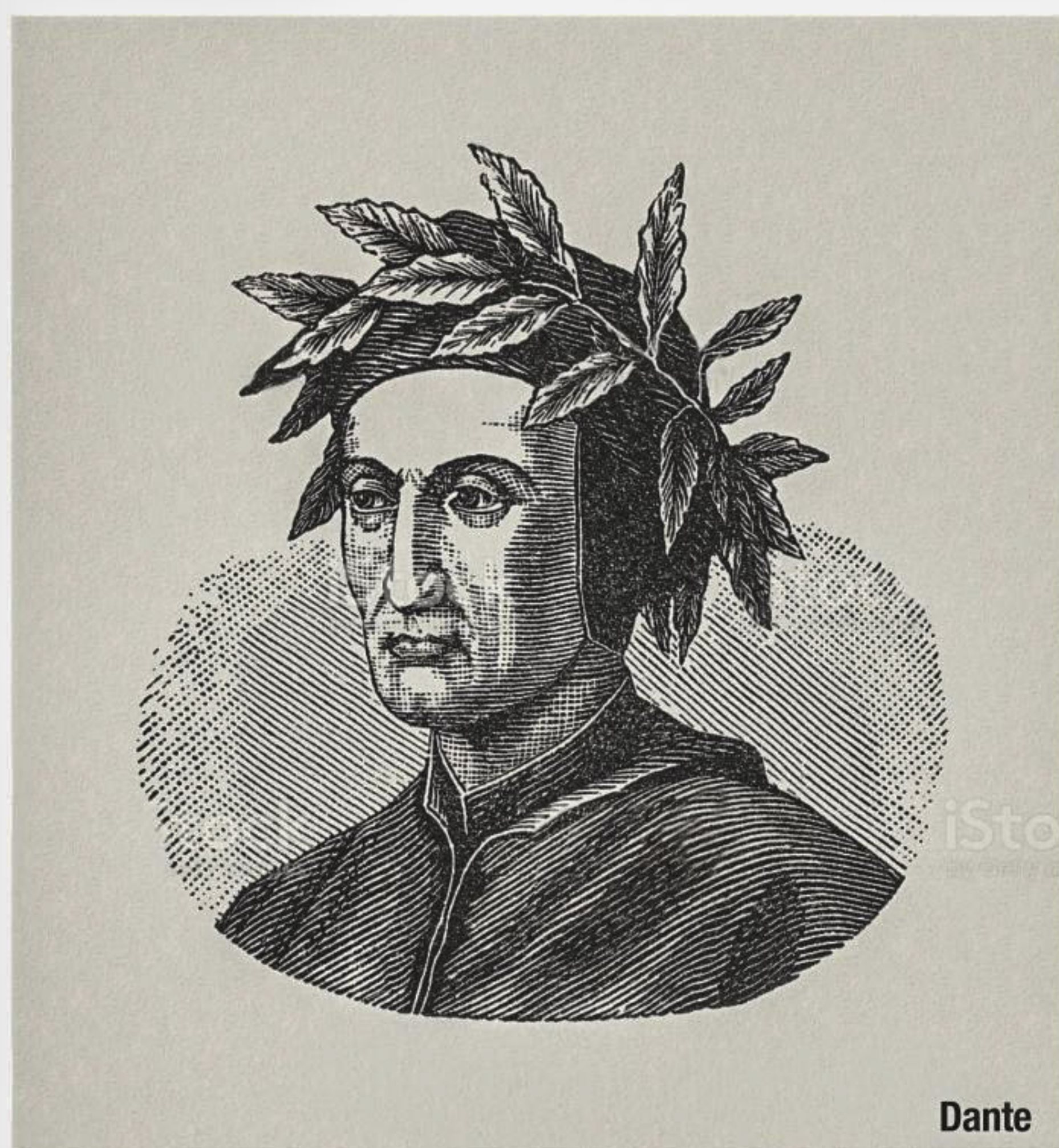
The great Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein explores the tropological potential of the itch in more ways than one Mark, then, the following passage from his relatively-unheeded work *Culture and Value* (a selection of his personal notes on both philosophical and non-philosophical topics): “Philosophy hasn’t made any progress? If somebody scratches the spot where he has an itch, do we have to see some progress? Isn’t genuine scratching otherwise, or genuine itching itching? Can’t this reaction to irritation continue in the same way for a long time before a cure for the itching is discovered?” Tropologically enough, Wittgenstein calls attention to the dialectics of itching and scratching—and even to the cure for it all—in the history of Western philosophy, while unsettling the linear narrative of progress and probably informing the great Caribbean poet Derek



Ludwig Wittgenstein



William Shakespeare



Dante