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EDITOR'S PREFACE

YOU ARE READING THE second volume of *The Dante Journal of Singapore*, written and produced by the students of Yale-NUS College. The College was founded in 2011 and began operations in 2013, we graduated our first class in 2017, and the first volume of the journal was published that year. There is a saying here that if you do something once it is groundbreaking, and if you do something twice it becomes a tradition.

This volume was edited in the wake of COVID-19, economic, racial, and social upheaval. Yet these essays were written two years ago; it is just the feature of academic publishing that we work at an intergalactic speed. What we read, most of the time, are the radiance of stars visible only many years later due to the velocity of their light.

The essays as such represent the students' travelogue, by now a two-year journey. Whereas most final papers in class are quickly written and then summarily hidden away, we worked on them, refined them, and made them exponentially better. The goal of this publication is to build an "authentic learning experience," in the current buzzword of pedagogy. The contributors learn the process of journal submission, revision, and peer review; the student editors learn the process of running a journal. These are essential skills not only for the students who wish to go on to graduate school, but also for any professional field.

Now, thanks to a grant from the College's Teaching and Learning Centre, we are able to make this again into an online and print journal. Thus I am honored and delighted to present to the reader these works—all pieces of undergraduate research that make a real contribution to the 700-year old tradition of Dante scholarship.

With philological precision and theological scope, Kan Ren Jie explores the decisive role Psalm 50, *miserere mei*, plays in the narrative arc of the *Commedia*. Occurring in *Inf.* 1, *Purg.* 5 and *Para.* 32, Kan argues that

“Through his evocation of this Psalm, Dante dramatizes the pilgrim’s conviction of sin and utter abjection, leading to intensified and sanctified desires and actions through purgation, while displaying real, impending hope of attaining perfection and union with God.”

Nicholas Lua’s paper begins with an apt cross-cultural comparison to the classical tradition of Chinese literature to think about poetic friendship across generations. Lua then gives a beautiful reading of Statius’ recognition scene with Virgil in *Purgatorio* 21, and teases out all the haunting powers of failure, redemption, and sweet sadness imbedded in the verses.

For Kevin Wong, his question is the meaning of *antico*, and he carefully catalogues its fifty occurrences. Through this lexical aperture, Wong is able to expand his scope to think about not only Dante’s engagement with Christian and pagan antiquity, but also how Dante propels himself into the future by envisioning himself as a proleptic *antico*.

In “Tale of Two Cities,” Brandon Lim convincingly demonstrates that in *Purgatorio* 13-14, “Dante defines envy not only as a moral and spiritual deficiency in character, but rather, he treats it historically: envy, a passion gone awry, is implicated in the fracturing of familial bonds as well as the decline of family lineages within late medieval Italy.” By applying a historical lens to the fractured nature of the Italian city-states in Dante’s time, Lim explores the pernicious effects of envy that is metastasized across generations.

Carson Huang offers a new reading of a favourite Ovidian myth in “Dante and Narcissus: Controlling a Shameful Gaze.” Huang aptly observes that the Narcissian moments in Dante is always associated with shame. The trick is how to move from self-obsession to realisation and ultimately renunciation. Thus, to control desire is to control the gaze.

For Genevieve Ding Yarou, Dante’s rhetoric of ineffability is key to his poetics. Through her analysis of the myth of Medusa, she persuasively

argues that the pilgrim's ineffability is "a moment of petrification that catalyzes his Christian conversion towards God." How does language, fallen and fragmented since Babel, offer a way through the chaos that is Hell?

The ever enigmatic, ever appealing mystical rose at the end of *Paradiso* is the focus of Faris Joraimi's eloquent and erudite article. He studies the architectonic structure of the empyrean, its enormous cosmic amphitheatre of concentric rings, and concludes: "Embedded in multiple disruptions of these binary relationships, the Rose is the highest expression of God-in-Creation. The individuation of the flower taking the place of the garden suggests the union of the particular with the universal."

Like Joraimi, Lu Yi is interested in the incandescent finale of the *Paradiso*, in particular the incredibly complex three rings. By deploying the work of Arielle Saiber and Aba Mbirika, she brilliantly interrogates how theology and math are united as mimetic sciences of knowledge. And by investigating certain schools of ontology, she explores the question how the study of being is by nature dependent upon yet limited by language itself.

In conclusion, I wish to thank every member of our class (including Jaclyn Tan, Koh Zhi Hao, Michelle Lee, Nirali Desai, Sidharth Praveen, Thaddeus Cochrane), all the contributors, Catherine Sanger, the director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning for believing in this project. Finally I am grateful to the excellent student editors, Carson Huang and Kevin Wong, scholars in their own right—for realizing this project.

Andrew Hui
August 2020



STUDENT EDITORS' FOREWORD

DANTE'S *DIVINA COMMEDIA* IS nothing short of epic, biblical, and monumental. By engaging stories and characters from the Bible, classical epic, European history, and even his own personal history, Dante artfully breathes new life into these existing tales, unifying them in a grand, singular narrative that conveys his own novel imaginings of the cosmological afterlife. To read his *Commedia*, therefore, is to embark on a literary adventure for which one can never *truly* be prepared. Even coming from a Common Curriculum that spanned over vast expanses of time, space, and culture, the *Commedia* proved - at least initially - insurmountable.

We as a class soon began to uncover, piece by piece, the sheer immensity of the poem. Just as the poet was guided, first by Virgil, then by Beatrice, along his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, so too did the students of this class have our own guiding mentor. Professor Andrew Hui has been crucial to introducing a new generation of readers to the *Commedia* and providing a hallowed space for young Danteans.

It is not often that undergraduate classes share their essays in such a way - to be collated and edited by peers, much less into a published undergraduate journal. Final essays, once completed and graded, are left in their folders to be resurfaced at the author's own prerogative. To be student editors of this journal - one which inherits and continues such an illustrious tradition of scholarship - is a joy and a privilege; we were given the rich opportunity to experience, understand, and explore the intellectual horizons of our peers. As Literature majors, we got a chance to see Dantean scholarship through the lens of other disciplines - such as politics, and even mathematics. Through this process of editing, our own intellectual horizons are expanded.

As implied, every reader, from Dante's contemporaries right down to this day, bring with them their own personal and intellectual experiences. Individually, the essays here reflect each scholar's unique style, thoughts, and epiphanies upon their first encounter with the *Commedia*. From the

classical to the contemporary, literary to philosophical, vertical to horizontal readings, the essays that we have for you are but a slice of what our seminars look like. Reflected in our wide mix of essay topics, selections from the *Commedia*, and scholastic lenses, this collection is a microcosm of the diverse community that we have here at Yale-NUS.

This second volume of the *Dante Journal of Singapore* participates in an illustrious scholarly tradition started by Dante's own son. As you join us in this literary heritage, we hope that you, dear reader, will see in each essay a light and behold a jewel of knowledge, or, as Dante does, a star.

Carson Huang ('20) and Kevin Wong ('20)

A Note on Citation

All translations and commentary notes of Dante are from the edition of Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez in their *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 2004, and 2013).

The illustrations that accompany the essays are from
“The Divine Comedy” by Salvador Dalí.



“The Bones That Have Been Humbled Shall Rejoice”: Psalm 50 and the Narrative of Salvation in Dante’s *Commedia*

Kan Ren Jie

AS ONE OF SEVEN penitential psalms, Psalm 50 begins with the words *Miserere Mei*,¹ and highlights David’s acknowledgment of his sin and plea for forgiveness from God. In the middle ages, this penitential psalm was significant as a part of the *trina oratio*² sung three times a day: before matins, terce, and after compline, forming the basis for psalmody prayers. As Clare King’oo has argued, the liturgical tradition surrounding this Psalm reflects a “penitential hermeneutics,”³ originating from Augustine. The “wrathful judgement of God”⁴ against the psalmist and the worshipper for their sins, in turn emphasizing that the various afflictions as “wholly spiritual”, oriented and arising from God. Given the “spiritual” nature of these afflictions, the act of singing this penitential psalms was construed as an act of individual penitence directed towards God.

This orientation toward God explains how Psalmody prayers, where Psalm 50 and other Psalms would be recited, were considered as a “means of salvation” in itself, an act of “spiritual purification through song.”⁵ The pervasive use of Psalm 50 within sacred liturgies thus in the church and in monastic communities shapes a coherent understanding of the repeated references to Psalm 50 in the *Commedia*. With this in mind, I argue that the references to *Miserere* in *Inferno* 1, *Purgatorio* 5, and *Paradiso* 32 re-affirms the penitential psalms as both the means and marker of the pilgrim’s gradual ascent into salvation. Through his evocation of this Psalm, Dante dramatizes the pilgrim’s conviction of sin and utter abjection, lead-

ing to intensified and sanctified desires and actions through purgation, while displaying real, impending hope of attaining perfection and union with God. The references to *Miserere* in the *Commedia* thus anticipate and reflect the gradual redemption of the soul in its ascension. Indeed, such a reading of *Miserere* through the *Commedia* grants us insight into the unique capability of poetry to express and render concrete the abstraction of theological doctrines, pertaining to salvation.

The reference to *Miserere* in *Inferno* aid in the characterization of the pilgrim's state as that abjection and an active conviction of one's sinfulness. Consequently, the reference serves to indicate an utter reliance on an unknown other. This is evident in the first reference to *Miserere* in the *Commedia*:

When I saw him in the great wilderness, "*Miserere*
– on me," I cried to him, "whatever you may be,
whether shade or true man!" (*Inf.* 1.64-6).

Here, this direct reference to the first words of the psalm establishes a parallel between the penitence of David the psalmist pleading for mercy from God, and the mercy sought from a shadowy figure by the pilgrim. In establishing such a parallel, Dante specifies the pilgrim's gradual progress of self-recognition as a form of self-abasement, as expressed in the quoted line of the Psalm: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy" (Psalm 50:1 Douay-Rheims Bible). In this verse, called to mind through the utterance of *Miserere*, it is significant that the psalmist's cry for mercy ("Have mercy on me") is accompanied with a reference to the "great mercy" of God, where the psalmist's supplication is formed on the character of God Himself, rather than any merit of the psalmist himself. Dante's direct reference to *Miserere* expresses of self-abasement and the utter loss of self-reliance, illustrating the pilgrim's gathering of the scattered fragments of liturgy, recollected through memory.

In this manner, the reference to *Miserere* in canto 1 emphasizes the self-recognition earlier displayed in the canto. The turn towards *Miserere*

advances this sudden realization, serving as a dramatization of the Pilgrim's conviction of sin. As John Freccero has observed, a general "incapacity of the will" is displayed within this Canto, where the pilgrim finds himself unable to attain the summit, or return to the straight path, despite his best efforts.⁶ As an expression of the "incapacity" of the pilgrim, the cry of *Miserere* demonstrates a progression from recognition towards penitence, forming the first steps towards salvation.

While Dante does liken the pilgrim to the penitent psalmist, he simultaneously expresses the surpassing penitence of the pilgrim. The evocation of *Miserere* in this canto highlights the utter abjection of the pilgrim, a complete severance from God that surpasses the spiritual state of the penitent psalmist himself. While the psalmist appeals to God's "great mercy," Dante subverts this confidence of the addressee. He cries out in utter confusion to a shadowy being: "whatever you may be, whether shade or true man!" (*Inf.* 1.66). As Robert Hollander observes, "Dante, more lost than David was, has forgotten to whom he should make his petition".⁷

Therefore, the pilgrim's incomplete evocation of Psalm 50, directed in confusion not to God, but to another being, demonstrates the full extent of the pilgrim's fallen spiritual state, one that ironically surpasses the penitence of the Psalm evoked. In doing so, Dante forms the basis for a genuine conversion of the pilgrim, one marked by a "death and resurrection of the self," a where the "inverted values of life" are shattered.⁸

In *Purgatorio*, however, Dante evokes *Miserere* within its liturgical mode: "across the slope there came people a little above us, singing '*Miserere*' verse by verse." (*Purg.* 5.22-3) Here, in contrast to the desperate cry of the pilgrim in *Inferno*, Dante's depiction of the shades singing the psalm methodically "verse by verse" illustrates the singing of the psalms as the means of ensuring a fuller expression of penitence. The Psalm is sung in its entirety, and the singers know that the psalm is addressed to God. Indeed, the shades are later identified as the late repentant: "sinners until the last hour". (5.52-3) In this context, the singing of *Miserere* is depicted by Dante to be an effective correction of this lack of reverence to God in

the course of their lives, particularly reflected in the depiction of this act of singing as penance: "... repenting and forgiving, we came forth from this life at peace with God, who pierces our hearts with the desire to see him." (5.55-7) Here, the depiction of the shades "at peace" with God distances this mode of repentance from the pilgrim's complete severance from God. (5.56)

As such, more than a desperate, abject cry from the pilgrim, Dante recasts *Miserere* as an efficacious act of purgation, demonstrated through the depiction of the effects of this form of penitence upon the shades, whose "desire to see [God]... pierces [their] hearts". (5.56-7) The vivid image of the shades with hearts "pierced" with a desire for God evokes both the intensity of that desire for God, but also the violence and destruction inherent in the act of purging offensive desires, to produce a new desire for God. This image of the "piercing" of the heart can thus be construed as an explication of the ending lines of Psalm 50: "A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit: a contrite and humbled heart O God, thou wilt not despise." (Ps 50:19) Hence, Dante's description of the shades as having hearts "pierced" with desire for God mirrors the similar language of affliction and contrition in the Psalm, emphasizing and bringing to fore the pain of purging sinful desires for a newfound desire for God.

Beyond its effect in changing misdirected desires, Dante further asserts the efficacy of the Psalms by emphasizing its effects on physical habits. This is particularly apparent later in *Purgatorio* 23, where, in the terrace of gluttony, the pilgrim encounters:

And behold, we heard weeping and singing of
"Labia mea, Domine," in a manner that gave birth to
 both delight and woe." (*Purg.* 23.10-2)

As Matthew Treherne notes, the abbreviated "*Labia mea, Domine*"⁹ invokes Psalm 50: 17: "O Lord, thou wilt open my lips: and my mouth shall declare thy praise."¹⁰ Here, the act of the gluttonous singing about their "lips", with "weeping and singing" serves as a depiction of their lamenta-

tion over past sins, with “lips” as a symbol of their gluttony. In this manner, Dante extends the original meaning of the verse in Psalm 50: while the psalmist in this verse affirms an inherent desire to “declare praise” should God “deliver” him, Dante demonstrates how the Psalm may aid even those unable to declare God’s praise, due to their gluttonous habits.

In this way, Dante’s depictions of the singing of the Psalm reconceives the act of singing the Psalm as a radical re-ordering of the physical actions and habits of the penitent, in that the gluttonous are compelled away from a love of food, and instead compelled to occupy their lips with the singing of the Psalm. As noted by Matthew Treherne, the singing of the Psalm involves both a “request that praise might be made possible”, and also a reflection of the soul’s attachment to gluttony.¹¹ The singing of the Psalm in *Purgatorio* is thus shown to re-order the individual’s lack of understanding regarding the will of God, and their very physical actions and habits. Dante therefore presents the singing of the penitential psalm as a thorough means of purging the penitent from sinfulness, in both the dimension of disordered desires and actions.

In addition to its role as a means of purgation and eventual salvation, Dante’s portrayal of Psalm 50 anticipates the hope of redemption that may be achieved through such acts of penance. This reference to redemption coheres and is supported by larger narrative turn towards redemption in other references to the liturgical singing of the Psalms. This change in state is evident in a description of souls in Purgatory with Cato, shortly after Dante’s ascent from Hell:

“*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*,” they were singing all together with one voice, with as much of that psalm as is written thereafter.” (*Purg.* 2.46-8).

Here, in this first reference to psalmody prayers, Dante employs the words of Psalm 113 as a common, united expression of both the liberation from sin, and the anticipation of future blessedness.

Such a reading of Psalm 113 is consistent with the Epistle to the Can- grande, where Dante analyzes the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogi- cal meanings behind the same verse. He notes that "... if from allegory, it means for us our redemption done by Christ; if from the moral sense, it means to us the conversion of the soul from the struggle and misery of sin to the status of grace; if from the anagogical, it means the leave taking of the blessed soul from the slavery of this corruption to the freedom of eternal glory".¹² Throughout the Epistle, it is clear that Dante conceived of liturgical singing as first, a rehearsed reminder to the soul of the his- torical act of redemption through the Cross of Christ; second, a depiction of the change that has been wrought in the very being of the soul, from "misery" into "a state of grace," third, a foreshadow of the future hope of "the freedom of eternal glory".¹³ The reference to a future hope is made evident in the final 2 verses of the psalm: "The dead shall not praise thee, O Lord: nor any of them that go down to hell. But we that live bless the Lord: from this time now and for ever." (Ps 113:25-6). In Dante's delib- erate choice of this Psalm, the souls deliberately assert their status as part of the "living" who may "bless the Lord", as opposed to the dead in hell, and expressing the future hope of eternal praise unto God. Psalm 113 thus constructs a framework by which references to Psalm 50 throughout the *Commedia* may be read as a coherent narrative: expressing abjection, the process of purgation, but also an anticipation and a certain hope of perfection. In doing so, Dante evokes poetry as a means of dramatization, representing the certainty of redemption past, the soul's present progress in the future, alongside the hope of future redemption.

In *Paradiso*, Dante further affirms the certainty of this future redemptive hope through the arc from penitence to final glorification through his reference to *Miserere*. Dante's evocation of *Miserere* occurs in the descrip- tion of the Empyrean, where the pilgrim sees the biblical figures:

Sarah and Rebecca, Judith, and her who was
great-grandmother to the singer who, grieving at
his sin, said: "*Miserere mei*," (*Par.* 32.10-2).

Here, in contrast to the clear naming of Sarah, Rebecca and Judith, Dante employs periphrastic descriptions to allude to the figures of Ruth (“the great grand-mother”) and most significantly, David, who is identified not through his typical offices of king or prophet, but instead as the “singer... grieving his sin, [saying] *Miserere Mei*.” As Theresa Federici notes in her expansive analysis of the significance of David in the *Commedia*, Dante identifies most strongly with David as the “archetypal model penitent”.¹⁴ In this way, Dante’s association within the Paradiso alongside other biblical figures illustrates the future hope of glorification, in spite of the “broken and humbled heart” of the penitent. By casting the singer, grieving his sin, saying “*Miserere Mei*” alongside biblical figures in the midst of “... beauty [giving] gladness to the eyes”, (31.133) Dante redeems the portrayal of brokenness and penitence; in light of the heightened descriptions of the otherworldly glory and beauty in the Empyrean, the emphasis on Ruth’s identity as the “great-grandmother” of the penitent psalmist alerts the reader to the similar process of penitence, purgation and glorification that undergirds the biblical figures presented in full glory within the Empyrean. In this manner, Dante employs the depiction of Ruth and David as symbols and models of the future hope that would be achieved for the penitent.

In placing this final reference to the Psalms within the highly ordered nature of the Empyrean, divided “tier by tier... with the name of each [going] from petal down to petal in the rose”, (32.13-14) Dante challenges the perception of “grieving” for sin as the sudden, spontaneous cry of abjection of the pilgrim. Instead, in light of the Empyrean, it becomes an act ordained and approved in the sight of God. It is imbued with a deep eternal significance. In this manner, Dante’s evocation of *Miserere* illustrates the reality of the hope of glorification through penitence, affirming therefore the efficacy of the psalms and the prayers in bringing about salvation.

To conclude, the occurrences of *Miserere* in the course of the canto are significant markers of the growing redemption and ascension of the soul. Alongside other references to the Psalms, Dante’s references to *Miser-*

ere serve to depict and deepen the biblical portrayal of penitence, illustrating the pilgrim's abjection to God, and the soul's increasing longing for God through the liturgical mode of his time. Finally, Dante affirms and demonstrates the reality of the hope of glorification for the penitent, through such evocations to the Psalms in the *Commedia*. As Theresa Federici argues, the evocation of the Psalms in the *Commedia* compels us to read it as a "theological treatise"¹⁵ where the vividness of theological doctrines and liturgies is demonstrated through the fresh lens of the poetic, illuminating creative possibilities and new paths within the act of faith and prayer. ❀

Kan Ren Jie graduated from Yale-NUS College in the class of 2020. As a Literature major, he is interested in notions of trans-nationalism, examining how global perspectives enrich the study of modernity and modernism. He will be assuming a position as a Global Writing and Speaking Fellow at NYU Shanghai, where he hopes to impart skills of critical thinking and writing to other students, while continuing to write creatively and critically. He remains humbled by the opportunity to study Dante's *Commedia*, viewing his study as an entrance into hallowed conversations with the 'ancients': an exemplification of the deep and varied modes of inquiry promoted by the college community.

1. "Have mercy on me"
2. "Threefold prayer"
3. Clare Costley King'oo, "Introduction," in *Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012) 5.
4. Ibid., 5.
5. Susan Boynton, "Prayer as Liturgical Performance in the Eleventh – and Twelfth – Century Monastic Psalters." *Speculum* 82, no. 4, (2007), 906.
6. John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*. Edited by Rachel Jacoff. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 29. Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 12.
7. Robert Hollander, "Dante's Use of the Fiftieth Psalm (A Note on "Purg." XXX, 84)," in *Dante Studies* 91 (1973), 147. Ibid., 85.
8. Freccero, *Dante: The poetics of Conversion*, 4.
9. "My lips, O Lord"
10. Matthew Treherne, "Liturgical Personhood: Creation, Penitence and Praise in the *Commedia*," in *Dante's Commedia: Theology and Poetry*, ed. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 141.
11. Ibid., 141.
12. Dante, *The Epistle to the Cangrande*. trans. James Marchand. "Dante to Cangrande: English Version", <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html>
13. Ibid.
14. Theresa Federici, "Dante's Davidic Journey: From Sinner to God's Scribe," in *Dante's Commedia: Theology and Poetry*, ed. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 180.
15. Ibid., 206.

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Dead Poetry Rising: Recognition in *La Divina Commedia*¹

Nicholas Lua Swee Yang

IN THE CLASSICAL TRADITION of China, the artistic recognition is *zhi-yin* (知音), to know the music of another.² *Zhiyin* derives from the pre-Qin story of the legendary friends, Yu Boya (俞伯牙) and Zhong Ziqi (钟子期). Their friendship, a perfect communion of two beings, was mediated through art, for Ziqi was the only person who understood Boya's zither-playing. Their story, however, ends in tragedy: when Ziqi died, Boya smashed his zither. He swore never to make music again.

The motif of recognition also appears in *La Divina Commedia* and *zhi-yin*'s valence could very well apply here. For Dante calls attention to the relationship between his poetic voice to those of his literary predecessors at *Commedia*'s scenes of recognition. Statius' recognition of Virgil in *Purgatorio* 21 is one such intertextual moment. Much like *zhiyin*, where art mediates an affective understanding between people; Statius' literary recognition of Virgil as his poetic forebear underlies the poignant human encounter Dante creates between both poets. In Statius' failure to embrace the incorporeal Virgil, a sort of *Zhiyin* emerges. A tragic strain accompanies their meeting, but does not overcome the scene's tender mood. Yet where the *zhiyin* story ends entirely in tragedy, with Boya losing Ziqi forever, Dante's scenes of recognitions do not. In fact, each moment's tragic element co-exists with, but does not overwhelm, a prevailing sense of transcendence. As such, Dante establishes a pattern which will recur in other recognition scenes. In this paper, I will argue that this pattern

demonstrates poet's recognition that, although he can only ever express gratitude to his literary forebears in *Commedia's* textual space and not reality, he can nevertheless deploy their poetic voices within his own to a higher divine purpose. In so doing, he transfigures classical tragedy into Christian comedy.

Statius and Virgil: Literary Recognition and the Failed Embrace

Two powerful senses emerge from Statius and Virgil's meeting: first, a powerful feeling of transcendence, created through the moving portrayal of the profound love. Second, a sense of tragedy through their failed embrace, a strain accentuated by Statius' forthcoming ascent to heaven and Virgil's eventual return to Limbo. He connects both elements through the idea of intertextuality, and it is here that Dante here displays his own poetic lineage. Just as Statius considers Virgil his master, Dante considers them the classical poets who shaped his craft. Read through a meta-poetic lens, this encounter becomes a commentary on poetic lineages. While a poet cannot truly meet his literary forebears, except through their texts; that textual encounter is no less profound. By assimilating their poetry, Dante can empower his own poetic voice to offer his masters a qualified redemption within *Commedia*.

The first part of the Statius recognition scene, when Statius lauds the *Aeneid*, becomes the site where Dante conveys the classical poets' profound influence on his own work. Even before the *Thebaid's* poet realizes he stands in Virgil's presence, he casts his recognition of Virgil's textual influence in profoundly devotional, yet intimate, terms:

The seeds to my ardor were the sparks from
which I took fire, of the divine flame that has
kindled more than a thousand.

of the *Aeneid*, I mean, which was my mama and
was my nurse in writing poetry: without it I did

not make up *a dram of weight*.
(*Purg.* 21.94-9, emphasis added)

By invoking the language of kindling fire, Dante draws out the mysterious way in which Virgil's poetry inspires Statius, a process seemingly beyond easy human comprehension. The image of fire also suggests Statius' own poetic development. He may start as a spark, but his poetic fire grows to rival Virgil's, earning him Dante's poetic tribute, an appearance in *Commedia*. By invoking the elemental and passionate image of fire, Statius suggests that his connection with Virgil is something profoundly complex. To accentuate, images in tension pervades the scene. The end rhyme, as Ronald Martinez observes, *fiamma/mamma/dramma*,³ combines fire's incorporeality with the most intimately concrete image of all, the mother breastfeeding her child. Fire is also juxtaposed with the liquid of milk, expressing Statius' affection in achingly familial terms. The *Aeneid* nourishes Statius' poetry, gives it form such it develops, like a child, from the almost-emptiness that is "a dram of weight." This moving tribute becomes a moment of intertextuality.

Yet the meta-poetic theme of which Dante makes us conscious forces the sad recognition that Statius can only meet Virgil in the space of *Commedia*, the same problem that applies to Dante's own relationship to Statius and Virgil. As long-dead poets, the two classical poets could never have met in reality, a suggestion dramatized in the epic topos of the failed embrace:

Already he was *bending to embrace my teacher's feet*, but he told him: "*Brother, do not, for you are a shade, and a shade is what you see*"
(*Purg.* 21.130-2, emphasis added)

Andrew Hui has already commented on the loaded Italian word for shade used here, *ombra*, which Dante chooses for "moments of intellectual perplexity and uncertainty."⁴ The crucial perplexity here is that, instead of the usual three-fold attempt at an embrace, Statius tries to hug Virgil's

feet (*piedi*). Furthermore, while the *Aeneid*'s Aeneas-Anchises encounter and the *Odyssey*'s Odysseus-Anticleia encounter are between mortals and shades, no party in this embrace is alive. In subverting the usual familial encounter doomed to fail, Dante cues the reader that the scene is a failure in a different way. It is not a real encounter between the poets, for both men are the re-animations of *Commedia*'s poet, shades devoid of mortal substantiality. As third party to this encounter, but also the poet who creates this scene, conscious that it is his own act of representation, Dante too participates in this tragedy.

What looks like a failure at communion, however, is in reality Dante's poetic triumph. For he represents Statius and Virgil's encounter so poignantly that the moment's overall mood is one of transcendence and not tragedy. By staging their encounter in his poetry, Dante conceals within the failed physical embrace a successful literary communion. As Martinez notes, the Italian Dante uses for Virgil's literal feet, *piedi*, evokes the Latin *vestigia*, which refers both to physical feet and metrical feet in poetry.⁵ *Vestigia* is the very word Statius uses in the *Thebaid*'s closing lines to pay tribute to the *Aeneid*:

vive, precor; nec tu divinam *Aeneida* tempta,
sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora.
(Sta. *Theb.* 12.816-7, emphasis added)

Live, I pray; and rival not the divine *Aeneid*,
but ever follow her footsteps from far in adoration.⁶

By invoking Statius' own *topos* of *vestigia* in *Commedia*, Dante transforms the conventional epic *topos* of failure into a site of successful poetic citation. Dante also pays tribute to Statius as a literary influence, and through him, to Virgil. In the words of Erich Auerbach, Dante "for the first time [...] develops all the wealth of possibilities offered by the subject and locale of the *Comedy*" and exercises the full extent of his craft, to create an encounter between "a spiritual father and his pupil."⁷ In short, his imagination makes possible in poetry what cannot be done in reality.

The transcendent power of Dante's poetry minimizes the other moments of darkness in this scene. One tragedy, of course, highlighted by Statius having completed his purgation, is that Virgil remains eternally damned. Statius converts to Christianity through reading Virgil's Fourth *Eclogue*, accentuating his spiritual father's blindness and heightening the reality that the student is saved, but not the teacher.⁸ Teodolinda Barolini considers Statius to be Virgil's foil, for "whereas Statius the epic poet is Vergil's inferior, his disciple, the Statius who became Christian is Vergil's superior, his teacher."⁹ When Virgil narrates the reciprocal love he feels for Statius in *Purgatorio* 22, Dante the poet downplays Limbo's stagnation in favor of a qualified transcendence:

when Virgil began: "*Love, kindled by virtue,
always kindles other love, as long as its flame
appears externally,*

so from the hour when *Juvenal came down into
the Limbo of Hell* among us and revealed to me
your feelings,

my affection toward you has been greater than
any ever felt for a person not seen so that now
these stairways will seem short to me.
(*Purg.* 22.10-21, emphasis added)

Hell and Limbo lurk in the scene's background, reminding the reader Virgil must eventually return to his fate when Dante's journey ends. Yet Juvenal's arrival into that ultimate inertia conveys a love that makes Limbo somewhat more bearable. Statius' love, cast once more in the language of fire, contains a modicum of God's love. It may not be the perfected love of Paradiso, but it constitutes a progression from Francesca in *Inferno* 5, "whose kindling love," which earned her and Paolo the Circle of Lust, "is here made virtuous," transformed *in bono*.¹⁰ The fire-image here, put into Virgil's mouth to express his love for Statius, symmetrically recalls the fire of which Statius spoke a canto ago to express his own devotion to Virgil.

The ineffable complexity portraying their connection is similarly reprised by association. Small wonder then that Dante's Virgil experiences such pleasure on actually meeting Statius, the one who semi-redeems him, so much so that "these stairways," the difficult journey up Mount Purgatory, "will seem short to [him]." As architect of this scene, Dante the poet enables this redemption.

Dante's poetry redeems another problematic moment, the one where Statius' extravagant expression of love for Virgil seems to suggest the renunciation of salvation. After celebrating the *Aeneid*, Statius says,

[...] to have lived back there while Virgil was
alive, I would agree to a sun more than I owe for
my release from exile (*Purg.* 21.100-3).

This hyperbole appears to suggest that Statius' indebtedness to *The Aeneid* lapses into the sin of prodigality, one of the sins for which Statius is punished in *Purgatorio*. Such a claim, per Barolini, is "theologically implausible" for "a soul now freed from purgation and bound for heaven."¹¹ Nevertheless, Statius' wish, as Winthrop Wetherbee argues, speaks to the dangers of Virgil's pagan poetry.¹² If his wish were realized, Statius would "effectively defer spiritual growth in favor of the fullest possible experience of artistic discipleship"; an offer Dante himself would find tempting.¹³ The other moment where prodigality's shadow recurs, however, reveals that Statius, and by extension Dante, has transcended Virgil's existential fate while assimilating his poetry. When Statius rises after the failed embrace, he tells Virgil:

[...] Now you can grasp the
greatness of the love that burns in me toward you,
when *I forget our emptiness,*
treating shades like solid things.
(*Purg.* 21.133-6, emphasis added)

Dante reconfigures what could have been a return to the sin of excessive

love into Statius' spontaneous physical rhetoric, a bodily manifestation of the abundant and semi-divine love he feels for the master he cannot save. Yet he redeems Virgil in a different way, by the "disciple's loving appropriation of the master's power."¹⁴ Statius, still following the master's *vestigia*, incorporates the master in his own poetry, symbolized here by his performance of *The Aeneid's* three-fold embrace. Dante, as pilgrim, participates in the same gestures, but as poet is the source of them, making him just as grateful and transcendently assimilative a poet as Statius – if not more.

Who is Recognized: Beatrice or Virgil?

A similar pattern of qualified transcendence laced with tragedy recurs in Dante's recognition of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 30. Dante the poet could have made this encounter, which constitutes the assurance continuation of the pilgrim's journey to God, a purely beatific moment. Instead, he casts a dangerous, salvation-threatening pall over this meeting, configuring the apprehension of Beatrice in terms of Virgil's disappearance. Once more, perplexity gestures at the meta-poetic underpinnings of this scene. Consequently, what is ostensibly a physical recognition of Beatrice metamorphoses into yet another powerful literary recognition, this time solely of Virgil. Although Virgil as a character must disappear, his poetry, assimilated within Dante's own, will mediate Dante's ascension to the heavens.

The aura of tragedy taints this moment, making it appear that Dante's attachment to Virgil might cause him to forsake his divine mission. The pathos of Dante's agony dominates, pulling the spotlight almost completely from Beatrice even though she is one of the three heavenly ladies who sanctioned his cosmic journey:¹⁵

I turned to the left with the appeal with which a
little boy runs to his mama when he is afraid or
 when he is hurt,

to say to Virgil: "*Less than a dram of blood is left
me that is not trembling: I recognize the signs of
the ancient flame.*"

*But Virgil had left us deprived of himself –
Virgil, most sweet father, Virgil, to whom I gave
myself for my salvation –,*

nor did *everything our ancient mother lost*
suffice to prevent my cheeks, though cleansed with
dew, from turning *dark again* with tears
(*Purg.* 30.43–54, emphasis added)

Dante's yearning for Virgil here, like Statius' earlier yearning, looks damning. Where Statius' sin was prodigality, Dante's might be idolatry. In calling Virgil "sweet father," Dante could be interpreted as putting Virgil in competition with God himself, the Heavenly Father, especially when Dante characterizes his wholehearted devotion to the pagan as an act of seeking "salvation." Such theologically-loaded diction enhances the heterodox possibility. This ominous note develops even further. Dante appears to forget the felicity of Eden, "everything our ancient mother [Eve] lost,"¹⁶ to the extent that he seemingly invalidates his own purgation. His cheeks, although cleansed by Virgil himself of *Inferno's* dark ashes on their arrival in Purgatory, turn "dark again," as if Dante had returned to that hopeless demonic realm.

Dante accentuates the torture of this parting by using Virgil's poetic gestures of tragedy to convey his apparent inability to part from his former master. In so doing, he displays the full extent of Virgil's literary influence. Virgil haunts the above passage, where the rhyme of *mamma/dramma/famma* recalls its earlier occurrence in Statius' own celebration of Virgil's influence. Like Statius, Dante expresses his gratitude to Virgil in softly familial language, a "little boy run[ning] to his mama." Feminizing Virgil ties the three poets even closer together for, as already mentioned, Statius compares the *Aeneid* to a nursing mother. In other words, Virgil's

poetic voice has nurtured both Statius and Dante, and they three share a profound connection. Where earlier only Statius and Virgil are joined in a communion of milk and fire, Dante too now participates in that same poetic communion, one sanctified by love. To demonstrate his parity with Virgil, Dante expresses his lamentation in the classical gestures of Virgil's own poetry. In calling to Virgil thrice, Dante invokes Orpheus' eternal parting from Eurydice in the *Georgics*:

[Orpheus's] voice, that stone-cold tongue, continued to cry out,
 "Eurydice, O poor Eurydice," as its life's blood drained out of it
 And the river banks repeated that "Eurydice", a dolorous refrain.
 (Vir. *Geor.* 4.525-7)

Orpheus' triple cry becomes Dante's, a final citation of the epic topos of everlasting separation, the failed three-fold embrace made verbal. It seems as if Virgil's loss overwhelms Beatrice's appearance.

Dante's other tragic tribute to Virgil occurs when he expresses his desire for Beatrice in terms of the ancient flame. Dante quotes the scene in the *Aeneid* where Dido expresses her "first stirrings of love for Aeneas":¹⁷

[...] adgnosco veteris vestigia flammae. (Vir. *Aen.* 4.23)

I recognize the vestiges of the ancient flame.

By reviving Dido's tragic end in *Commedia*, Dante seemingly colors his vision of Beatrice with notes of despair. This dark element can also be detected in the triple definition of his powerful love, ironically, in the language of deficiency: "*Less* than a dram of blood is *left* / me that is *not* trembling." Like at other moments in *Commedia*, what is alluded to here is "the negative power of pagan poetry," its "extreme fatalism" in "the absence of hope."¹⁸ By summoning up the darkest side of Virgil's poetry, Dante appears to completely abandon the forward path.

On closer examination, however, we realize that Dante transfigures Vir-

gil's tragic poetry into the vehicle for his own continued ascent. Much like Statius spending another year in Purgatory, Dante renouncing his mission is an impossibility, a paradox that forces us to reconsider the recognition scene's valence. Beatrice's subsequent chastisement of Dante not to weep is only the most obvious proof that the journey will go on (*Purg.* 30.55-69). Contained within the "ancient flame" is the promise of hope. The *Aeneid's* Latin conveys a pessimistic looking-back to dead love, *vestigia* alluding to the dying embers of Dido's love for her first husband. Dante recodes this run-down antiquity into the promise of transcendence in his Italian, *i segni de l'antica fiamma* (30.48). As Peter Hawkins argues, Dante transforms Virgil's *vestigia* into his own *segni*, a word which in *Commedia* refers both to the Christian cross, and "the goal of an action."¹⁹ Classical tradition's dark residue becomes a bright positive, evoking the "ontological target" God has chosen for humanity, which Dante realizes through his desire for Beatrice.²⁰

Since the desire Dante recognizes is directed toward his heavenly beloved, it is a love that is hopeful, not damned. *Fiamma* further aids this transcendent sense. Martinez reads it as the "crucial term in the transmission of poetic power," first from Virgil to Statius and now also to Dante.²¹ Moreover, it certainly also alludes to the Pentecost's tongues of fire,²² constituting a sanctification of what Wetherbee rightly considers "the most famous Vergilian echo in the *Commedia*."²³ Dante absorbs Virgil's pagan poetry, but saps its pessimism and redeploys it to divine purposes. His poetic voice, partaking in the Pentecost's spreading of Christianity, becomes an instrument of hope.

Virgil may no longer be physically present, but he persists in his poetry – the limited transcendence Dante grants him. Given the connection of Dante's poetic voice to transcendence, we are forced to reread the tragic disappearance of Virgil as necessity, the means by which Dante's poetic voice can be perfected. Dante must renounce Virgil the character, who embodies classical world's blindness to God's salvation. The clearest way to prove Dante no longer needs Virgil is to demonstrate perfect mastery of Virgil's signature, the tragic mood, and deploying that mood to for-

swear his master. In *Purgatorio* 30.43-54, Dante thus, in Barolini's words, "inscribes his sweet father indelibly into the very syntax that tells us he is gone," making him poetically the most powerfully present where he absolutely cannot be physically present.²⁴ The line where "Virgil had left us deprived of himself," according to Barolini, provides even more proof of this textual latency.²⁵ Syntactically, Virgil is "actor, rather than acted upon."²⁶ Lexically, Virgil "deprives us of his presence" but "does not depart."²⁷ In this sense, Virgil truly has become *vestigia*, not in the tragic pagan sense, but as "textual trace,"²⁸ poetic *ombra* – the final poignant tribute of an eternally grateful student as he ascends to the stars.

Recognising God: A Conclusion

In *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, Jacob Burckhardt considers Dante the herald of the Renaissance.²⁹ According to Burckhardt, Dante is the "first artist in the full sense of the word – the first who consciously cast immortal matter into an immortal form."³⁰ Given that the Renaissance is at heart the rediscovery of the classical past, I wonder if what Burckhardt considers "immortal matter" could be the voices of the classical poets like Statius and Virgil. Redeployed in the "immortal form" of *Commedia*, the poem becomes a vehicle of divine revelation. If we interpret "immortal form," as God himself,³¹ do we see the classical past deployed towards representing this ultimate Ineffability?

Dante may have given Statius this honor, by making what Hui rightly recognizes to be *Commedia's* penultimate simile a reference to the sailing of the Argo:³²

One point alone is greater forgetfulness
to me than twenty-five centuries to the
enterprise that made Neptune marvel at the
shadow of the Argo (*Par.* 33.94-6).

As Martinez and Durling note, the image of Neptune and the Argo is

suggested by *Achilleid* 1.25-76 where Thetis, seeing the ship and foreseeing the eventual Trojan War, begs Neptune to sink it so that Achilles might be saved.³³ Once more, “[t]ragic pagan motifs” are “transfigured into Christian triumph.”³⁴ Yet even here, classical representation is not enough, and does not resolve the perplexity of the moment, perhaps reflective of the sheer complexity of Dante’s craft. The ultimate denouement is the ultimate paradox, for so many questions remain unanswered. How can one point contain, as Hui puts it, “the totality of history”?³⁵ Why is Dante likened to a pagan god, and God himself to a mere shadow of the first work of human *ars*? ❀

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1. It is fitting, I think, that a paper on the recognition of Dante's literary mentors should begin with an expression of thanks to my own intellectual mentors. Recognition has haunted me across the Humanities, from the *pratyaibhijñā* philosophy in Kashmir Śaivism which I studied under Professor Gavin Flood, to the *zhiyin* which I learn about from Valerie Hansen. My thanks go out to them and others, and to Professor Andrew Hui too. Reading Dante and having regular lunches with him was a sheer transcendent pleasure. Thanks are owed also to the other Dantisti I am privileged to have met: Professor Simone Marchesi; Thu Truong, my 学姐, for her ever-incisive comments and conversation; and to my Dante classmates, Kevin Wong in particular for providing a thoughtful response to my paper ideas.
2. This paragraph is based on Eric Henry, "The Motif of Recognition in Early China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47:1 (1987): 9-10.
3. Ronald L. Martinez, "Dante and the Two Canons: Statius in Virgil's Footsteps (*Purgatorio* 21-30)," *Comparative Literature Studies* 32:2 (1995): 165.
4. Andrew Hui, "Dante's Book of Shadows: *Ombra* in the Divine Comedy," *Dante Studies* 134:1 (2016): 195.
5. Martinez, "Dante and the Two Canons," 166-7.
6. English translation slightly modified from Shackleton Bailey's translation. See: *ibid.*, 309.
7. Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2001) 136.
8. Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Dante's Literary Typology," *MLN* 87:1, The Italian Issue (1972): 15-6.
9. Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) 258.
10. Teodolinda Barolini, "*Purgatorio* 21: Friendship".
11. *Ibid.*
12. Winthrop Wetherbee, *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011) 197-201.
13. *Ibid.*, 197.
14. *Ibid.*, 199.

15. Dante, *Inf.* 29.94-117
16. Dante, *Purg.* n.30.52-54.
17. Wetherbee, *The Ancient Flame*, 221.
18. *Ibid.*, 28.
19. Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 140.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Martinez, "Dante and the Two Canons," 168.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Wetherbee, *The Ancient Flame*, 221.
24. Teodolinda Barolini, "Does Dante Hope for Vergil's Salvation?" in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) 157.
25. Teodolinda Barolini, "Purgatorio 30: One's Heart's Desire"
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Martinez, "Dante and the Two Canons," 166.
29. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (New York: Macmillan & Co.; London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1890) 129-30.
30. *Ibid.*, 312.
31. Given God's portrayal as a book in *Paradiso* 33.85-93, such an interpretation might be plausible. See: *Par.* 33.85-93.
32. Hui, "Dante's Book of Shadows," 195.
33. Dante, *Par.* n.33.94-6.
34. *Ibid.*

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The Future Ancient Poet: Anticipating *antico* in the *Commedia*

Kevin Wong

IN *PARADISO* 17, ONE of the most heartfelt moments of the *Commedia*, Dante, through the vessel of his ancestor, Cacciaguida, prophesizes his own painful exile from Florence. Dante the pilgrim responds to this disheartening news with an ardent resolve to convey truthfully his divine journey, so that he will be remembered by future readers:

e s'io al vero son timido amico,
temo di perder viver tra coloro
che questo tempo chiameranno *antico*

and if I am a timid friend to the truth, I fear I will
lose life among those who will call this time
ancient. (*Par.* 17.118-120, emphasis added)

These lines, teeming with Dante's signature audacity, have not eluded the gaze of Dante scholars, and rightfully so. In their respective commentaries, Barolini, Hollander, and Singleton have all focused their attention on two important ideas: first, Dante's bold self-projection of the status of "truth" onto his *Commedia*; and second, his quest for literary fame.¹ Surprisingly little attention, however, has been given to a possible third point of interest, namely, Dante's explicit recognition of the impending "ancient"-ness of his time. This notion of impending *antico* opens up curious and novel avenues for literary criticism: What, exactly, does Dante

mean when he projects this quality of *antico* onto himself? Further, how might this idea be reconcilable with the harsh binary that his *Commedia* otherwise seems to project between the misguided, pagan past and his enlightened, Christian present? Finally, what implications does this have for our broader reading of the *Commedia*?

An obvious and logical place to search for an answer to these questions would be to observe what *else* Dante calls ancient. This paper therefore begins by tracking the use of *antico* throughout the *Commedia* in order to establish its narrative of engagement with the ancient. Focusing on a few key instances, this paper hopes to establish the palpable tension inherent in the *Commedia*'s narrative between Dante's Christianized rebuke of paganism and his admiration for the classical poets. Armed with the results of this lexical analysis, this paper returns to this moment of *Paradiso* 17 and makes a case for reading Dante's anticipation of *antico* as a qualified association with the ancient poets who deeply inspired his work. By this means, Dante presents himself as a *future* ancient poet. I suggest that this self-presentation rests on a lucid understanding of the historic temporality of his *Commedia*, as well as a bold presumption of literary fame.

Dante employs the word *antico* (or one of its variants – "*antica*"; "*antichi*"; "*antiche*", "*l'antico*") 50 times over the course of his *Commedia*. Its usage is captured in the table below:

Generic substitution for 'old' (i.e. inanimate objects, 'Old' Testament)	The human world (as opposed to the divine, often associated with sin, i.e. Florence)	The pagan, classical period	Poetic constructs (characters, myths, tropes, ideas, and symbols from classical poetry)	The classical poets themselves	Total
8	12	6	20	4	50

On a few occasions, *antico* is used to refer generically to something old, such as inanimate objects, descriptions of the environment, or the ‘old’ in the Old Testament. In other moments, *antico* is employed to refer to the world of the living (as opposed to the divine), which Dante then tends to associate with human sin and error. Quite often, this means Florence. On the whole, however, Dante’s most consistent usage of *antico* (60% of the time) has to do with the classical past, which I have subcategorized into references to the historical pagan period, the poetic constructs (characters, myths, tropes, ideas, and symbols) developed in classical poetry, and the classical poets themselves.

While its trend of usage seems to generally support a connection between *antico* and classical poetry, it is of course necessary to examine with greater specificity these moments of the *Commedia*. I have selected choice moments from each of the three subcategories (the pagan past, poetic constructs, and the classical poets) for in-depth analysis. My analysis of these individual instances of *antico* aims to establish the narrative of Dante’s complex engagement with the ancient, against which Dante’s anticipation of *antico* in *Paradiso* 17 can be understood.

Ancient Peoples, Ancient Errors

An apt starting point for this lexical foray is the opening lines of *Paradiso* 8, in the heaven of Venus, where *antico* is tellingly employed twice in rapid succession:

The world used to believe, to its peril, that the
lovely Cyprian radiated mad desire, turning in
the third epicycle,

and therefore those *ancient* peoples in their
ancient errors paid the honor of sacrifice and
votive cry not merely to her,

but they honored Dione and Cupid as well,
the first as her mother, the second as her son,
and they said that he sat on Dido's lap,

and from her from whom I take my beginning
they took the name of the star that woos the
sun, now at his nape, now at his brow. (8.1-12, emphasis added)

Embodied in these opening lines are Dante's harsh criticisms of the pagan worldview, which lies in heavy opposition with Christian theology. Here, the Commandment against false gods finds itself particularly violated by pagan cosmology. Implicit in these lines is a reproach of, first, the perilous pagan belief in Venus (8.1-2) that undoubtedly comprises a false idolatry; second, the construction of desire as an irresistible force (8.2) which can be construed as a hedonistic denial of the Christian virtues of chastity and self-control; and third, pagan polytheism (8.6-9) which is an affront to the singularity of the Christian God. Through the repetition of "ancient", Dante emphasizes both the temporal disjunction from the present and the sheer extent of their "error," reinforcing the apparent binary between misguided, pagan past and his enlightened, Christian present.

In *Dante's Poets*, Barolini gives a reading of *Paradiso* 8 that similarly emphasizes Dante's attempts to point out problematic pagan ideas. She observes "the connection between the 'ancient error' and classical culture: line 9, with its reference to Cupid and Dido, implicates no less a text than the *Aeneid*, in whose fourth book the story of Cupid's ruse and Dido's surrender is told."² Virgil, whose limitations as a pagan poet preclude him from Paradise, has his pagan errors once again implicated in the *Commedia*. The errors raised in these lines are not restricted to the misguided pagan conception of Love and divinity, but as Barolini argues, "canto VIII goes beyond these particulars to the larger error behind them, to wit, the privileging of classical culture—philosophy over revelation."³ Expanding her reading of the scene further, Barolini suggests:

The heaven of Venus in this Christian paradise is thus from the start presented in terms of its radical difference: the difference between a *vocabol* and a *principio*, between a superficial and a profound understanding of love. Second, this conceptual difference is immediately related to poetic practice. There is an implied corrective of classical poetry running throughout this heaven: from Vergil whose Dido is compromised at the outset, to Ovid whose volcanic theories are corrected later on.⁴

In this key moment, we see *antico* being clearly associated, doubly so, with the pagan past, complete with its pagan errors. Indeed, the *Commedia*'s firm stance against the errors of the pagan *antico* is made clear from the very beginning, in Virgil's introduction of himself as one who lived "in the time / of the false and lying gods" (*Inf.* 1.71-72).

Virgil's Ancient Flame

The most common use of *antico* in the *Commedia* is as an accompanying adjective for a poetic construct, whether a character, myth, story, trope, or symbol. Perhaps one of the most iconic and recurring poetic symbols of antiquity, Virgil's ancient flame, likewise features – recurrently – throughout Dante's poem.

The pilgrim's first encounter with the "ancient flame (*la fiamma antica*)" (*Inf.* 26.85) is characterised in amorous terms. In this episode, Dante meets Ulysses and Diomedes, two conjoined spirits embodied in a punishing flame. In her commentary, Barolini observes:

... the pilgrim's self-association with Ulysses is very strong... his desire overwhelms him. He begs Virgilio to allow him to await the arrival of the horned flame, since, as he exclaims, he "bends" towards it [*Inf.* 26.69])... Later in the poem we learn that the bending or inclination of the soul toward an object of desire is love: "*quel piegare è amor*" (that bending is love [*Purg.* 18.26]). There is

no doubt that Dante is communicating his love and fascination for the Greek hero.”⁵

Virgil’s ancient flame has long-held associations as the ultimate symbol of desire. Dante’s love for Ulysses – one, if not *the*, epitomizing figure of Greek classical culture and *dolos* – must therefore be seen as representative of rational curiosity and the thirst for knowledge. As Ulysses recounts his tale, in which his insatiable curiosity led his followers to their deaths, it becomes clear that the *Commedia* treats *this* version of desire, with its erroneous classical undertones, as being in need of rectification – hence Ulysses’ placement deep in hell. The manifestation of the ancient flame in the Ulysses episode serves as an important precursor and foil to its recurrence in *Purgatorio* 30. There, just as Dante meets Beatrice, Virgil, author of the ancient flame, pointedly disappears:

without having more knowledge through the
eyes, because of a hidden power that moved from
her, felt the great force of *ancient* love.

As soon as my sight was struck by that high
power that had transfixed me before I was out of
boyhood,

I turned to the left with the appeal with which a
little boy runs to his mama when he is afraid or
when he is hurt,

to say to Virgil: “Less than a dram of blood is left
me that is not trembling: I recognize the signs of
the *ancient* flame!” (*Purg.* 30.37-48, emphasis added)

Like the opening lines of *Paradiso* 8, *antico* again appears twice in this scene, once again setting up the scene’s corrective tone. Upon seeing Beatrice, Dante’s pilgrim experiences “the great force of ancient love (*d’antico amor senti la gran potenza*)” (30.39), and turns to Virgil, hoping to tell

him: “I recognize the signs of the ancient flame! (*conosco i segni de l’antica fiamma!*)” (30.47–48) In this key moment of ascension, however, the ancient flame of desire takes on inverse implications from both *Inferno* 26 and its original context, the *Aeneid*.

Purgatorio 30 departs from the usage of “ancient flame” in *Inferno* 26 by asserting the pre-eminence of divine love over the rational. The pilgrim’s desire in this scene is not one of philosophical or poetic curiosity – signature tenets of classical culture – but one of revelatory divine love. His reaction to Beatrice is visceral rather than rational – “Less than a dram of blood is left me that is not trembling” (*Purg.* 30.46–47). And where the pilgrim’s “knowledge” (30.37) meets its limits, it is the “hidden power” (30.38) of the divine that transcends and enlightens him.

The parallel to Dido’s reawakening of love in *Aeneid* 4 is once again evoked in this scene, with Virgil playing the comforting role of Anna, and Dante in the role of a love-struck Dido who exclaims: “I recognize the signs of the old flame, of old desire (*agnosco veteris vestigia flammae*)” (Virg. *Aen.* 4.31–2).⁶ Yet, in the *Aeneid*, Dido’s ancient flame bears the consequences of broken vows of faith to Sychaeus and leads to her eventual tragedy. In *Purgatorio* 30, Dante’s ancient flame is a redirection of love to its original and *rightful* object, Beatrice, and is therefore a movement *toward* faith. Virgil, author of the ancient flame, takes his leave and is essentially *replaced* with Beatrice, just as the pagan conceptions of desire – as represented in *Aeneid* 4 (lust) and *Inferno* 26 (rational philosophy) – are replaced with a purified, *divine* sort of desire.

In *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets*, Wetherbee tracks the *topos* of ancient flame and comes to a similar conclusion that the *Commedia* invokes the “pathos and fantasy [of romance]... only to exorcise them.”⁷ Wetherbee hints at Dante’s underlying sympathy for classical culture, however, describing the *Commedia* as “an imagining of the particularity and otherness of their worldview that depends on seeing the world as nearly as possible through their eyes.” The result: poetic genius; “a breadth of vision that transcends both [Dante’s] own particularity and that of the

ancient poet.”⁸

In these moments, the *l'antica fiamma*, a hallmark of classical poetry, reasserts its status as the ultimate symbol of desire – a symbolism that survives through its translation from classical epic into the *Commedia*. Yet, this desire, much like Dante’s repentant sinners, has undergone a purgation and has had its meaning rectified to fit the Christian paradigm. The *Commedia*’s rectification narrative fits neatly into Ernst Robert Curtius’ broader view on literary history. In *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Curtius proposes that the European world is based “not upon a reception of Antiquity nor upon a severance from it, but upon a thorough and at the same time conscious coalescence with it.”⁹ Indeed, new literary paradigms do not develop through a process of complete rejection and substitution of its predecessor; they develop through a gradual process of debate, selection, and modification of past elements. In the *Commedia*, we may perhaps observe this “coalescence”, as described by Curtius, taking place through Dante’s appropriation of the classical *topos* of ancient flame into the very fabric of his *Dolce Stil Novo*, the sweet new style, a literary movement of which Dante was a major forerunner. The *Dolce Stil Novo*’s emphasis on *Amore* and the human form is epitomized in the *Commedia*, which aims to resolve the binary between divine and erotic love by depicting Beatrice as the common vehicle for both.

Ovid’s Ancient Falsehoods

Virgil’s ancient flame is far from the only poetic construct associated with *antico*. Dante does something quite unique, however, with Ovidian poetry. Consistently throughout all three canticles, Dante transposes entire myths from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* into his *Commedia*, while seemingly making a point to insert the label *antico* at some juncture in the allusion. These myths are then allegorized to convey some rule of Christian morality. For a brief character example, Virgil points out to the pilgrim in the circle of impersonators “the ancient soul [*l’anima antica*] of / wicked Myrrha, who became, beyond right love, her / father’s lover.” (*Inf.* 30.37-

9).¹⁰ Similarly, entire episodes get associated with *antico*; Observing the punishment of falsifiers and alchemists, the pilgrim draws a recollective comparison to the plague of Aegina:

I do not believe it was a greater sadness to see
in Aegina the whole people sick, when the air
was so full of malice

that the animals, down to the little worm, all fell –
and then the ancient people, according to what the
poets firmly believe. (29.58-63)¹¹

On one level, the *Commedia*'s intertext with Ovidian poetry can be read as attempt to interweave and reconcile ancient myth within the framework of Christian morality. Ovid's classical *exempla* appear to function as a similitude for Christian morality; tools employed by Dante in his role as a poet to convey and allegorize the ineffable and often abstract rules of Christian morality. Such a positive reading would seem to propose classical myth as an entirely appropriate medium for, as Kevin Brownlee puts it, "articulat[ing] Christian truth."¹²

Yet, this ostensibly uncontentious use of classical exempla is complicated, quite ironically, by Dante's constant assertions of their truth. In recounting this story of Aegina as though it actually happened, Dante toys with the boundary between historical truth and mythological fiction. Given that Dante does something similar in *Paradiso* 17 when he asserts the "truth" of his *Commedia* (*Par.* 17.118), his manipulation of truth and fiction is an important puzzle that we must make sense of. By combining two seemingly incompatible strategies – the Christianizing of classical exempla, and the assertion of classical myth as historical truth – Dante creates a literary aberration. What exactly is he attempting to accomplish? Read together, Hollander and Barolini perfectly deconstruct Dante's complex play with truth and fiction.

In his commentary, Hollander articulately calls Dante out on his poetic strategies in this Aegina episode:

In verse 63 Dante takes mere poetic fictiveness to task. In *Convivio* IV.xxvii.17 he had referred to this story as a *favola* [fable]). His 'real' sinners may resemble the plague-victims in Ovid's fanciful tale; unlike them, however, they are not present in a fable, but in a truthful narrative. Here Dante's insistence on the veracity of what he relates is so challenging that we can see the wink in his eye. We know that Ovid's tale... is literally untrue. And surely we have similar reservations about the truthfulness of Dante's. We are led ineluctably to realize two things: (1) Dante is a fabulator, like Ovid, not a 'historian'; (2) it is nonetheless necessary to his plan to insist that he is not a 'mere poet,' but one who has been given an experience of what is real and true.¹³

In her *Undivine Comedy*, Barolini takes this even further by suggesting a poetic motivation for Dante's play with fictionality. She argues that Dante "consistently formulates the difference between his poetry and that of his predecessors in terms of truth versus falsehood: he secures the credibility of his text by constructing situations designed to reveal the incredibility of his precursors' texts."¹⁴ It is clear then, that Dante's treatment of Ovidian myth cannot be taken at face-value as *exempla* entirely appropriate to convey Christian teaching. Instead, we must continue to be sensitive to the Dantean undercurrent of criticism and correction of classical poetry.

The question remains: Where does *antico* fit into this discussion of truth and fiction? As observed, Dante consistently makes it a point to brand Ovid's myths with a bright scarlet 'A' for *antico*. I suggest that, much like what he does in *Paradiso* 8, Dante employs *antico* as a marker of disassociation; a means of distancing himself from the errors and falsities of his predecessors' poetry; a signal that otherwise makes *explicit* to his readers that the tale being recounted is not an original Dantean invention, but an erroneous vestige of classical poetry that his *Commedia* is attempting to correct.

The Ancient Poets' Union

This consistent narrative of correction runs into a slight complication, however, when we consider Dante's sympathetic depiction of the classical poets. Arguably, the *Commedia's* most striking use of *antico* lies in its references to the poets themselves. While this happens only 4 out of the 50 times *antico* appears, this might be readily attributable to the relative scarcity of poets' appearances in the *Commedia*. Rather, it is important to point out the sheer consistency with which "*antico*" is employed in the few encounters with the classical poets. In *Inferno* 10, the pilgrim refers to Virgil as "the ancient poet (l'*antico poeta*)" (*Inf.* 10.121-2). In *Purgatorio* 21, upon revealing Virgil to Statius, the pilgrim refers to Statius as an "ancient spirit (*antico spirto*)" (*Purg.* 21.122). And perhaps most explicit connection between *antico* and the classical poets is made in *Purgatorio* 22, when Statius asks about the whereabouts of his fellow poets. Here, following in the tradition of ancient epic, it is *antico* that commences an entire catalogue of past poets and dramatists:

"[T]ell me where our ancient Terence is, Caecilius
and Plautus and Varro, if you know: tell me if they
are damned, and to which district."

"They and Persius, and I, and many others,"
replied my leader, "are with that Greek to whom
the Muses gave more milk than ever to any other,

in the first circle of the blind prison; often times
we speak about the mountain that forever holds
our nurses.

Euripides is with us and Antiphon, Simonides,
Agathon, and many other Greeks who once
adorned their brows with laurel. (22.97-108)

The catalogue depicts a vibrant community of Greek and Roman poets, beginning with “our ancient Terence” (*Terrenzio nostro antico*). The affectionate relational term, “our (*nostro*)”, establishes a camaraderie and sense of community between the classical poets. While Dante indubitably perceives his own Christianized ascension over the other poets, one would be hard-pressed to refute his affection for and desire to be part of the classical *literati*. In Limbo, he, quite literally, grants himself membership into the union of ancient poets (*Inf.* 4.97-102). One cannot but admire Dante’s audacity in his self-induction into the circle of greats; a bold act of inscribing one’s self into literary history.

Dante scholars have similarly observed the apparent wistfulness with which Dante depicts his poetic *communitas*. Referring to this moment in Limbo, Brownlee notices the Dantean undercurrent of self-identification with the classical poets, suggesting that “[t]o this absolute difference between Dante and the classical poets in terms of Christian faith is contrasted the shared poetic identity to which Dante-author aspires, as the “*bella scola*” of the classical poets honor Dante-protagonist by including him among their number.”¹⁵

In *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, Albert Russell Ascoli seems to hint at the *Commedia*’s status as a glorious piece of fan-fiction:

Dante tacitly bridges the temporal, epistemological and ontological abyss that separated him and all modern, vernacular poets from the *auctoritas* of the ancients... This fundamental strategy, presented in the guise of a divinely conferred experience, rather than as a set of representational choices, is what allows him to imagine a community of poets from different times and places entering directly into timeless conversation.¹⁶

Therefore, despite Dante’s perceived Christianized triumph over pagan belief, despite his poetic successorship over his rival poets, one cannot but notice the wistfulness inherent in the *Commedia*’s depiction of the classical poets. I suggest that Dante cautiously self-identifies with, and to some

degree, sees the community of classical poets as an ideal worth aspiring to. Nonetheless, he remains all too aware that his pagan predecessors lack the paradigmatic Christian enlightenment of his time, and therefore cannot transcend their position in Limbo. How might Dante attempt to square this sympathy and wistfulness for the *antico* of poetic community with the Christian ideas of justice? The *Commedia* seems to present several ways in which Dante *constructs* ‘salvation’ for his pagan poets.

One way in which Dante redeems his ancient poets is in his construction of Limbo as, essentially, an infernal paradise. Though permeated by sighs (*Inf.* 4.26), Limbo is free of torture, and is filled with the great minds of the past who spend eternity together, “among so much wisdom” (4.102). This somewhat positive reading of Limbo finds agreement in Barolini, who, in her commentary, observes that “Dante in *Inferno* 4 conjures a humanistic vision of Limbo, anomalous in the history of this Catholic idea. He imagines Limbo as a place that tries to bring some measure of justice to the great pagans denied baptism and denied knowledge of Christianity.”¹⁷ Weighing Christian justice against his respect for the classical poets, Dante effectively constructs for his respected poets a place that is indeed hell, but a hell that simply is not all that bad.

A second form of redemption takes the form of actual salvation. In *Paradiso* 19, Dante philosophically contends with the struggle of the virtuous pagan and the apparent injustice in their exclusion from grace. In *Paradiso* 20, the pilgrim comes across the apparent anomaly of saved pagans – Trajan and, most notably, Rhipeus:

[Rhipeus], because of grace that flows from so
deep a fountain that never creature’s eye pierced
to its first welling,

devoted all his love down there to righteousness,
wherefore, from grace to grace, God
opened his eyes to our future redemption,

and he believed in it, and suffered no longer
the stench of paganism, but reproached those
perverted peoples for it. (*Para.* 20.118-26)

In this scene, Dante, on one hand, reinforces the status of paganism as erroneous and backward by referring pejoratively to “the stench of paganism” and the “perverted peoples”. On the other, he postulates, through Rhipeus’ salvation, an apparent timelessness of virtue; that even pagans may be good Christians. Rhipeus, as a fictional character written into existence by Virgil, inevitably evokes his author, whose absence is rendered conspicuous by Rhipeus’ very presence. This apparent paradox embodies Dante’s dilemma; his desire to grant his poets salvation weighed against the larger understanding of their limitations within his theological paradigm. Driven by a wistfulness for poetic *communitas*, we see Dante’s various attempts to construct salvation for his beloved ancient poets; to square their goodness and find a place for it within the Christian cosmos.

Anticipating *antico*

Having examined the various uses of *antico* throughout the *Commedia*, we have, hopefully, by this point started to piece together the complex narrative surrounding Dante’s engagement with the ancient. In its references to the pagan past, *antico* is associated with the errors of pagan thought. Through its application to the constructs of classical poetry, we observe Dante’s attempts at rectifying the *antico* through the Christianized repurposing of Virgilian symbols and the exposing of Ovidian falsities. A complication in this denunciation of the ancient takes place, however, when *antico* is applied rather affectionately to the classical poets. While the *Commedia* makes exceedingly clear Christianity’s pre-eminence over pagan belief, Dante’s nuanced depictions and even redemption of pagans reveal both a deep sympathy and wistfulness for the poetic community of the ancient past.

On the basis of this reading, it is perhaps time to return to Dante's anticipation of *antico* in *Paradiso* 17 – the aberration that sparked this lexical foray:

and if I am a timid friend to the truth, I fear I will
lose life among those who will call this time
ancient. (*Para.* 17.118-20)

In the earlier section on Ovidian falsehoods, we have discussed at some necessary length Dante's assertions of his *Commedia's* "truth." This theme, however, pervades the very fabric and entirety of the *Commedia*, and lies beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, extensive scholarly ink has been spilt on the issue. My reading of *Paradiso* 17.118-120 will therefore centre on the related concepts of temporality and literary fame.

I suggest that Dante's anticipation of *antico* reveals, first and foremost, a projection of temporality onto his *Commedia*, and by implication, onto his own status as a poet. Though "call" might suggest an entirely nominal process of antiquation, this is hardly the case. The episode, read against the *Commedia* as a whole, exposes a lucid understanding that time will inevitably erode the binary between past and present; that he will, in due time, *become* an ancient (though perhaps not pagan) poet. Through these poignant lines, Dante both engages and embraces the complexities of the ancient-modern dichotomy. On one hand, his designation of *antico* suggests a belief that such a dichotomy exists. On the other, his play with temporality reveals an understanding that 'ancient' and 'modern' are not at all closed categories, but categories that shift and expand with both time and literary developments. To Dante, the process of antiquation is precisely the shift from the 'modern' into the 'ancient', and he understands that even his *Commedia*, however great, is not immune to the force of time.

Ascoli defines this self-awareness of one's place in literary history precisely as a typifying trait of the modern author, arguing that "the ensemble of works known as 'Dante' is a symptom, a case – a particular product of and

participant in ongoing historical processes – neither an origin nor an end in itself.”¹⁸ He argues that the *Commedia*’s temporality is emblematic of a larger literary shift toward this form of modern authorship; this “emergence of the modern ‘author-God’” whose textual autonomy extends even to the previously untouchable domain of time.¹⁹ Ironically, one might consider, in his designation of the temporal adjective ‘modern’, Ascoli engages in the very same ‘modern’, Dantean act of historicizing authorship.

Even the *Commedia*’s rhyme scheme – Dante’s *terza rima* – may be read with this temporality in mind. The *terza rima* is, at its core, built on an astute sensitivity to time: a complex interplay between the framing ideas of the past, the transient present, and the inevitable future. Following the scheme of ABA, BCB, CDC, Dante’s anticipation of *antico* can be read against the notion that the classical past (A) frames his present (B). Yet, time must pass, and his present (B) will inevitably be transformed into *antico* and go on to frame the works of future generations (C). The *terza rima* itself *embodies* the historicity, futurity, and perpetuity inherent in any literary history.

My reading of the *terza rima* finds possible support in Barolini, who, in analysing Beatrice’s clarifications of Dante’s *dubbi* in *Paradiso* 4, suggests that “the rhyme scheme that Dante invented, *terza rima*, features backward glances interwoven into forward motion.”²⁰ In his seminal work, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, John Freccero similarly construes the *terza rima*’s complex temporality, favourably quoting Augustine’s *Confessions*: “[D]ivided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have already recited, the other looking forward to the part which I have still to recite. But my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past.”²¹

In fact, I propose that the *entire* episode of *Paradiso* 17 completely *exudes* these twin ideas of temporality and continuity: it is premised on the very plot of Dante speaking to his *ancestor*, Cacciaguida, a figure from Dante’s *history*, about the *future* – about “those who will call this time ancient.” It

is, *precisely* as Barolini puts it, a “backward glance interwoven into forward motion.”²² An appreciation of temporality and literary history is therefore entirely central to understanding Dante’s anticipation of “*antico*.”

Dante’s status as a future ancient poet, however, remains contingent on one further but crucial detail – namely, that he first succeeds in his quest for literary fame. Observe the massive presumption implicit in *Paradiso* 17.118-120: Dante takes *for a given* that there will even *exist* “those who will call this time ancient (*coloro che questo tempo chiameranno antico*)” (*Par.* 17.119); that he *will* have future readers of his *Commedia*, who may or may not decide to call his time *anything*, let alone *antico* (17.120). Looking to the examples of Virgil, Homer, and the other great minds who populate the literary hall of fame, Dante aspires to one day achieve the status of “*l’antica poeta*” (*Inf.* 10.121-2). But for *anything* to attain the status of “ancient”, it, by definition, must first weather the test of time. Dante’s process of antiquation, as it were, appears not to capture the entirety of human culture to be represented as pieces of antiquity – only the pieces that have proven significant enough to go down in *recorded* history. For Dante to anticipate *antico* is to therefore *presume* the significance of his work, as well as his attainment of literary fame. It is, in essence, a bold, confident assertion of his literary prowess.

Given the established associations of *antico* with the poetic *communitas*, I further propose that Dante’s quest for literary fame must be understood against his respect for the classical poets. His wistful longing to become one of them, to join the *bella scola*, requires that he first prove his worth by attaining the necessary qualifications – that of eternal ‘life’ through words (*Inf.* 15.85-7). Literary fame, in turn, provides a possible motivation for his sympathetic treatment of the ancient poets. For he, too, will one day (2019, perhaps?) be considered ancient for having authored in a time that has now shifted into the seemingly inaccessible past. His sympathy for the classical poets thus rests on an awareness that time will erode the distinctions that otherwise separate him from his predecessors.

It then comes as no surprise that, every now and then, the fragments of another poet's work can be detected in Dante's. In the *Commedia*, this happens *a lot*. The *Commedia* serves as the ultimate *exemplum* for conjuring past poets. Through his sympathetic depiction of the pagan poets, his attempts at redeeming them, and the sheer 'air-time' that he gives them through intertext, allusion, and even their insertion as characters into the narrative of the *Commedia*, Dante does his predecessors a solid favour. He perpetuates their ideas, retells their stories, and even rectifies their poetry to stay current with his Christian times. Nonetheless, one might consider this poetic relationship as being driven by reciprocity. Just as Dante conjures for the readers of his *Commedia* the memory of the classical poets, thereby perpetuating *their* literary fame, his predecessors lend him the necessary inspiration and poetic material for him to achieve *his*. ❀

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1. Teodolinda Barolini, "Paradiso 17: Back to the Future"; Robert and Jean Hollander, *Paradiso* (New York, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 2007) n.17.112-120,118; Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1975) n.17.118-20.
2. Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984) 61.
3. Ibid., 75.
4. Ibid., 61.
5. Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 26: The Quest"
6. The Latin text of the *Aeneid* is taken from Williams (2002).
7. Winthrop Wetherbee, *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) 4.
8. Ibid., 22.
9. Robert Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2013) 19.
10. Ovid, *Met.* 10.298-502
11. Ovid, *Met.* 7.523-600
12. Kevin Brownlee, "Dante and the classical poets," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 142.
13. Robert and Jean Hollander, *Inferno* (New York, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 2007) n.29.58-66.
14. Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992) 267.
15. Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical poets," 144.
16. Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 313-6.
17. Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 4: The Cultural Other"
18. Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, ix.
19. Ibid., 329.
20. Teodolinda Barolini, "Paradiso 4: Violence Versus Platonic Venom"

21. John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986) 270.
22. Teodolinda Barolini, "Paradiso 4: Violence Versus Platonic Venom"

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Dante's Tale of Two Cities: Medieval Politics of Envy In *Purgatorio* 13-14

Brandon Lim

UPON ARRIVAL IN THE second terrace of Purgatory, marked by the sin of envy, Dante bears witnesses to a barrage of voices that repeat, *Vinum non habent* (*Purg.* 13.28-9)¹ and “I am Orestes” (13.33). The mixture of the biblical allusion to John 2:1, which is Christ’s first miracle turning water into wine and representative of his establishment of marriage as a sacrament, with the classical allusion to the tale of Orestes and his friend Pylades each claiming to be the former before the tyrant of Tauris to save each other, gestures towards different expressions of sacrificial love.² Dante’s questions about these voices is answered by Virgil accordingly, “This circle whips the guilt of envy, and therefore the cords of the whip are braided of love.” (13.37-9). Imbedded in Virgil’s response is the claim that the counterpoint to envy is *caritas*.³ However, in the rest of canti 13 and 14, Dante introduces the souls of the penitents suffering from envy as still tied to their historical and political lineage back in the world of medieval Italy. I argue that within these canti, Dante defines envy not only as a moral and spiritual deficiency in character, but a passion gone awry which is highly implicated in the fracturing of familial bonds as well as the decline of family lineages within late medieval Italy. The penitent souls who speak to Dante in these two canti therefore represent a vital stance of disaffection towards their cities and hometowns which fuels their envy and disbars them temporarily from entry to the heavenly city. Dante arguably operates within an Augustinian framework of the division between the two cities, the earthly city based upon the love of

self versus the city of God which sees contempt for the self as a means of living out the journey towards the heavenly city, by suggesting that the medieval Italian polities in his time are built upon the foundation of Cain's sin of envy. Eventually, these cities are bound to fail or decline as secular polities.⁴

At the outset, before moving onto a close study of canti 13-14 as examples of Dante's view of envy as a passion deeply implicated in the historical and political families of his days and their decline, we need to know the various associations underlying envy as it was understood in the Middle Ages. Envy, one of the Seven Deadly Sins in Catholic theology, is the core value informing Dante's theology in canti 13 and 14, mainly in its connection to seeing and an ensuing desire for a false good that leads the soul away from God.

To further understand Dante's depiction of the effects of envy, the medieval patristic tradition offers us an insight into the beginnings of envy within Catholic classifications of the seven deadly sins. Prior to the fourth century, although there was no notable codification of sins including envy under a system, early Church Fathers did not "deny envy's potential for harming others: indeed, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and others attribute the fall of Lucifer as well as his subsequent machinations against mankind to his envy of humanity for being created in God's image, or of the salvation won for them by Christ".⁵ After all, as indicated in the patristic reverence for the Bible as the core text of the Christian faith, the Bible is rife with examples of "discord" attributable to "anger or hatred that has its roots in envy: Cain, Esau, the brothers of Joseph, and Saul are envious before they are murderous".⁶ Fourth century ascetic theologian Evagrius Pontus' classification of sins however labelled the sins under eight generic categories which exclude envy: "gluttony, fornication, avarice, sadness, anger (sometimes reversed, anger-sadness), acedia, vain-glory, and pride".⁷ Pope Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job* studies sins differently under seven generic categories, and is hence one of the earliest medieval patristic works responsible for including envy within this classification in the Western Latin tradition, datable to the late sixth century.⁸

His discussion of the relationship between God, Job his faithful follower, and Satan-Lucifer the adversary to God alludes to envy as the basis for this tense relationship. As Gregory the Great puts it:

Nor would He give him up to perish in the temptation, against whom, before the temptation was sent, those firebrands of envy were kindled in the tempter's mind from God's own commendations. But the old adversary, when he fails to discover any evil of which he might accuse us, seeks to turn our very good points into evil, and being beaten upon works, looks through our words for a subject of accusation; and when he finds not in our words either ground of accusation, he strives to blacken the purpose of the heart, as though our good deeds did not come of a good mind, and ought not on that account to be reckoned good in the eyes of the Judge. (Greg. *Mor.* 2.5.13-4)

Gregory the Great attributes the source of such Biblical discord to envy, in which through envy of mankind, Satan seeks to disinherit mankind of God's favor and his salvation in Christ. Satan is depicted as the arch-envious of humanity par excellence. In the words of Bridget K. Balint, "the most threatening envy, that of the devil, is ultimately futile. The arch-envious has lost the ultimate good, the salvation bestowed upon humanity, and can never again possess it, nor take it from mankind."⁹

Therefore, according to Peter Kalkavage, envy is not just "sorrow at another's good" or "*ressentiment*, the settled condition of resentment" which "finds expression in the phrase: 'It's not fair.'"¹⁰ Envy is also:

joy at another's misfortune. This is *Schadenfreude*, a word that has passed into English usage. The Italian word for envy, *invidia*, is cognate with the verb *vedere*, to see. It is derived from the Latin verb *invidere*, "to look askance at, to cast an evil eye upon." Envy, in other words, is, like lust, a disease of the eyes. Its opposite consists in charity, kindness, and mercy.¹¹

As we have seen in the etymological development of envy as a sin and vice, envy is tied to the visual act of looking upon others. The sin of envy is one particular temper “out of which particular misdeeds grow”.¹²

Canti 13 and 14’s theological and moral-political exposition on the connection between looking upon someone with envy and its moral repercussions in terms of punishment and penance is embodied in the very image of the penitents who sit on the second terrace of Purgatory with their eyes sewn shut in penance for their sins when alive. This form of penance alludes to 1 John 2: 15-16, where the Christian is admonished to “love not the world, neither the things that are in the world” and “for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world”. In the light of the fate of the penitent souls along the terrace of envy, this is an important biblical allusion which reflects the role that seeing plays in provoking envy and also subsequently the desire to sin. As further captured in Matthew 5:29, “and if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.” Through these biblical allusions, we can infer that Dante takes an almost literalist view of the damning effects of seeing upon one’s moral condition. As Dante describes concerning the punishment of the penitent souls for envy:

as the sun does not reach the blind, so to
the shades there of whom I speak now the light of
heaven does not grant itself:

for each had his eyelids pierced and sewn by an
iron wire, as we do to a wild sparrowhawk because
it will not be still. (*Purg.* 13.67-72).

Barolini has claimed the pilgrim’s movements along each terrace of purgatory reflect a mode of thinking that continues from and modifies the mode of *contrapasso* first established in *Inferno*, in the following structure which includes “examples of the virtue that corresponds to the vice being

purged (of which the first is always taken from the life of Mary), encounters with souls, examples of the vice being purged, the pardon executed by the angel and the recitation of a Beatitude upon departure.”¹³ The punishment of the penitents for their envy is therefore meant to lead them from blindness to subsequent personal, moral and historical-political insight.

A look into the fractured nature of the Italian city-states of Dante's time offers us a contextual perspective into the poet's depictions of the effects of envy upon the historical personages he encounters as well as the competition between their cities and states. The Italy of Dante's time was marked by what Lauro Martines has called “the rise of local government”,¹⁴ characterized by the emergence of communes governed by “blocs of leading families”.¹⁵ Alongside the relative weakness of the Holy Roman empire's hold over the various states, this emergence of communal authority in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries of Dante's Italy was not however unchallenged in its power, largely due to “the emerging *popolo*,” what Martines defines as new groups that challenge the power of these family oligarchies.¹⁶ These conflicts between the families ruling the communes of the cities and their opposing groups continued to play out within the context(s) of canti 13 and 14, as we will see later.

Dante's encounters of Sapia in *Purgatorio* 13 marks his depiction of the divisive effects of envy in both its personal, moral and historical contexts, and exposes the subsequent failures bound within the destiny of the earthly city in late medieval Italy. Dante's question about the national identity of the penitent souls, “if there is a soul here among you who is Italian” (*Purg.* 13.91-2), yields a response from Sapia, who hailed from the influential Sienese family of the Salvani. Sapia draws attention to her status as a “citizen of one true city”, heaven, and corrects Dante to stress her temporary status in the earthly city as one “who lived in Italy as a pilgrim” (13.94-6). However, Peter S. Hawkins has highlighted the irony, that “she continues nonetheless to bear the imprint of the *civitas terrena*” despite her claims of citizenship in heaven.¹⁷ Her admission that “I was Sienese” (13.106) reinforces this lingering attachment towards the earthly city she hailed from. Sapia's ambivalent and highly critical posi-

tion towards her fellow Sienese is however rooted in her envy, which she describes as rejoicing “at others’ harm much more than at [her] own good luck” (13.110-1). This is especially depicted in her sense of *schadenfreude* at witnessing the routing and killing of Sienese Ghibellines by Florentine Guelphs, when she describes the historical battle at the field outside Colle Val d’Elsa in 1269:

My fellow-citizens were joined with their
enemies in the field at Colle, and I prayed God to
do what he then willed to do.

They were routed there and turned in the bitter
steps of flight; and seeing them hunted down, I
took joy from it greater than all other joys,

so that I turned my bold face upwards, shouting
to God: ‘Now I fear you no more!’ as the blackbird
did for a little sunshine. (*Purg.* 13.115-23)

Sapia’s reaction of *schadenfreude*, rooted in her envy, is a curious case here, as historically, it is known that her nephew, Provenzan Salvani, was involved in the battle and died as a result of it, with his head being decapitated and paraded on a pike.¹⁸ Critics have not arrived at a consensus as to whether there were personal or political motivations underlying her envy and antagonism towards Provenzan Salvani and her fellow Sienese, especially her immense *schadenfreude* on witnessing their deaths and defeat. Durling suggests that she was exiled from Siena,¹⁹ while Diana Glenn has highlighted the increasing political pressure on Sapia and her husband Ghinibaldo di Saracino to side with the pro-papal Guelph cause against the Holy Roman Emperor.²⁰ Furthermore, Glenn has highlighted the historical fact that Provenzan had nominated his brother in lieu of Ghinibaldo for the role of *podesta* (chief magistrate), and this passing over of her husband could have been construed as a cause for umbrage.²¹ Notwithstanding the ambiguity surrounding her political affiliation, her confession of *schadenfreude* at witnessing the battle of Colle Val d’Elsa

and the defeat of the Sieneſe Ghibellines and her nephew highlights her ſtatus as an ariſtocratic woman diſpoſſeſſed from her hometown of Siena and the diſruptive nature of her envy towards her townspeople, by placing her antagoniſtically againſt her city of origin and townspeople.²² Sapia's wiſſeſs to this battle outside Colle Val d'Eſſa hiſtorically occurs nine years after an important battle, the Battle of Montaperti, in 1260 when a coalition of forces headed by the Florentines and their Tuſcan allies including Colle Val d'Eſſa marched on Siena, a Ghibelline ſtronghold, but this Battle of Montaperti effectively led to the embarrassing defeat of the Guelph Florentines and immense caſualties on their ſide.²³ The battle outside Colle Val d'Eſſa echoes the Battle of Montaperti, nicknamed the "hill of death",²⁴ which Sapia was hiſtorically aware of as a Sieneſe, but marks a reversal in the political ſituation of Siena with the defeat of its forces in battle. As the figurative return of the blackbird in ſpring indicates, the blackbird mocks the other birds and potentially mimics or outdoes their other tunes.²⁵ It represents Sapia's affront to God via her envy. In the words of Albert Wingell, there is a ſuggeſtion within Sapia's account of the battle that:

the cities of this world are the arena for the practice of charity in preparation for the world to come. Their true end is frustrated by political factionalism, party hatred, commercial factionalism, and material competition.²⁶

As an additional running commentary on envy as an emotion based on competitive inſtincts and jealousy towards others, and its implications within the larger context of the medieval Italian communities of Dante's time, eſpecially his native Tuſcany, Sapia's final entreaty to Dante the pilgrim highlights the diſviſive effects of envy that persists even after the individual's death. As ſhe pleads:

[...] reſtore my good
fame among my relatives.

You will ſee them among that vain people who

place their hopes in Talamone and will lose more
hope in it than in seeking the Diana. (*Purg.* 13.149-53)

Sapia's entreaty is highly ironic in the double bind that it evokes here. While she attempts to ask the poet to repair via proxy the divisive effects of her envy which has alienated her from her townspeople and hence to restore her good name, she oddly criticises her fellow Siennese for the failures of two civic projects undertaken by them, the purchase of the port city of Talamone in order to gain a naval advantage over the rival cities of Genoa and Venice in trade and shipping, and also the Siennese's attempts to locate water in an underground stream known as the Diana.²⁷ Her political barb against her people is further accentuated by her insult of them as "vain people" (*gente vana*). Sapia is still very much characterised as an individual whose emotional and political affiliation are still tied to the earthly city and polity which she originates from despite her attempts at moral reparation. Dante therefore uses Sapia as a literary mouthpiece to criticize Siena for its moral failings via her very sin of envy, and gestures subsequently towards the imminent decline of the medieval earthly polity that Siena embodies.

Dante's encounter with Sapia bridges the subsequent encounter with Guido del Duca and Rinieri di Calboli on the same terrace of envy in canto 14, for while canto 13 depicts the divisive effects of envy via Sapia on a personal and familial level, canto 14 magnifies it on a political stage to suggest that envy, embodied in the rivalries between different noble families and their communes, poisons and potentially puts to an end various family genealogies. It is noteworthy that this encounter of Dante's pairs the Ghibelline, Guido del Duca, from Romagna (died around 1250) with the Guelph Rinieri di Calboli, another Romagnole who died defending Forlì against Scarpetta Ordelaffi and the Ghibellines in 1296. The loquaciousness of Guido del Duca is contrasted with the relative reticence of Rinieri di Calboli, the "other soul" who listens mostly to Dante and Guido's exchange (*Purg.* 14.70).²⁸ Guido's envy is exemplified in his self-introduction, when he claims that:

My blood was so afire with envy that, if I saw a
man becoming glad, you would have seen me turn
livid. (*Purg.* 14.82-4)

The word “blood” (*sangue* in Italian, which also refers to *sanguine*, one of the four humours) is not only a physiological reference on Guido’s part, but as Massimo Verdicchio suggests, the reference may also refer to “his children, who are contaminated with envy through his envious blood”.²⁹ More importantly, as a Romagnole, Guido’s loquaciousness of speech is uncanny in his joys at foreseeing the imminent destruction of the Tuscans, and it further highlights his envy (in the sense of *schadenfreude*) as applied to the Tuscans. His prophetic description of the Tuscan region’s destruction visually follows the topographical movement of the river Arno “as it flows through the valley “from its source...until its end point””,³⁰ but also carries moralising overtones in his condemnations of the Tuscans’ decline. In the words of Guido del Duca, the river Arno is not just a physical and geographical entity, but symbolizes in its movement the passage of virtue as it is rejected by various cities and peoples in Tuscany:

virtue is avoided as an enemy by everyone as if it
were a snake, whether through bad influences on
the place or because of ill custom that goads them. (*Purg.* 14.37-9)

Guido’s subsequent descent into a list of various beasts associates the “dogs becoming wolves” (14.50-51) with the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict between Florence and Arezzo, and also the foxes, “so full of fraud” (14.53), with the people of Pisa.³¹ Guido however tops off this list as a climax with the ultimate introduction of the nephew of Rinieri di Calboli, Fulcieri di Calboli, known as a tyrant insofar as he:

sells their flesh while it is still living; then he
kills them like old cattle; he deprives many of life
and himself of praise. (*Purg.* 14.61-3)

The original Italian phrase describing the victims of Fulcieri’s violence as “wolves” turned “old cattle”, *antica belva* (translated literally as “antique

beasts”), suggests that Fulcieri is a tyrant of tyrants. As a moral invective rooted in Guido’s resentment towards the Calboli family line, Guido’s use of the bestial imagery to categorise the moral and spiritual failings of Tuscans serves as a mouthpiece for Dante’s criticism of the failings of the earthly cities here. While the reason for these peoples’ avoidance of virtue is not clear according to Guido, their decline into vice and sin is hedged in and informed by geography and the customs of a city.

As a further development of the key theme of family trees (genealogy), Guido del Duca’s transition to an extensive lament over the demise of certain illustrious family lines in late medieval Emilia-Romagna reinforces the imminent corruptions brought about by envy and its stifling of these family lines. Guido’s transition from criticising Tuscany’s moral failings to what Barolini has called an “elegaic” plaint about the presence of families in Emilia-Romagna “in which *cortesía* [courtesy] and *onorore* [honour] no longer reign” is demonstrated here by a vegetal metaphor which represents the death of good manners³² within these families.³³ As Guido states, in reference to Rinieri’s family line:

Within those bounds it is so full of poisonous
thickets that it is too late now for cultivation to root
them out. (*Purg.* 14.94-6)

Singleton uses the figure-of-speech of “neglected fields that have been allowed to grow up in bush and become wild again” to describe the metaphor of the poisonous thickets.³⁴ However, this is also an allusion to the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:7, in which the seeds “fell upon thorns” and were choked by the thorns that sprung up. This vegetal metaphor of family lines thus represents the degree to which envy takes root in these medieval Italian families and corrupts them from top down. The use of the word, “bounds” (*termini* to describe ending points or limits), is ironic as it does not only refer to the geographical boundaries demarcating the region of medieval Romagna between the “Po and the mountain and the sea and the Reno” (*Purg.* 14.92-93), but also suggests the lack of restraints imposed by good moral manners.

This incipient moral corruption by envy is however not limited only to Rinieri's Calboli family line, but extends itself towards other families native to medieval Romagna much like the vegetal metaphor of the plant in decay. From verses 97 to 123, Guido catalogues a list of seventeen illustrious family names. As a case in point, in his beginning lament, "Where is the good Lizio, and Arrigo Mainardi? Piero Traversaro and Guido di Carpegna" (14.97-8), he refers again to the metaphor of bestial metamorphosis among the Romagnoles that he first used to define the people of Tuscany.³⁵ In the interrogative, he switches back to the use of the vegetal metaphor again:³⁶

When in Bologna will a Fabbro take root again?
when in Faenza a Bernardino di Fosco, noble
shoot born of humble grass? (*Purg.* 14.100-2)

This part of Guido's speech implies the barrenness of these Romagnole families due to the loss of their most distinguished members who possessed the qualities of honour and dignity, being subsequently succeeded by corrupt descendants who have declined into the level of bestiality. In the last part of his lament about the loss of family honor, Guido further inveighs against a list of six other family names, by suggesting two different claims. Firstly, as he claims, some family names such as Bertinoro, Castrocaro, and Conio, which still remain with heirs should not do so despite their conscious choice, as these lineages are already stained and poisoned. His words of criticism such as "Bagnacavallo does well...Castrocaro does ill... Conio worse" (14.115-6) echo each other as comparatives to suggest that tyranny and evil grow in these families like viruses in their wake.³⁷ Secondly, some other families such as the Pagani and Fantolini are ironically blessed in the absence of heirs, because as in the case of Fantolini, "no one can be expected who could darken it by his degeneration" (14.122-3). There is the lingering sense in this latter criticism that infamy in the family tree cannot be fully removed, and by implication, envy has become an inextricable part of the moral and socio-political fabric of these families. Dante's use of Guido to criticise these Romagnole

family lineages regardless of their political affiliations moves beyond a parochial indictment of Dante's native Tuscany to include a more expansive judgement of the moral failings of Tuscany's next closest state. These families of Romagna are therefore cut off regardless of their political affiliations due to the endemic envy that seeps into their lineages.

In the light of *Purgatorio* 13 and 14, we therefore witness a movement from the personal (private and affective) to the public sphere (social and political) which is managed through these two Cantos' ruminations on the (im)moral nature of envy. Envy is not only a passion and form of resentment that divides individuals within their families, embodied within the person of Sapia in canto 13. Envy also extends toward the bigger family unit as a more insidious political force and driving factor in its inevitable decline, represented in the historical persons of Guido del Duca and Rinieri di Calboli and the various other families surrounding them in late medieval Emilia-Romagna. Furthermore, envy is not only a sense of rivalry between different individuals, but also, characterized by rivalries between different Italian cities and states, especially between Florence and Siena in Dante's native Tuscany, and between Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, its nearest state neighbour. To return to the Augustinian model of the two cities, the earthly and the heavenly cities, these two canti therefore highlight the nature of the earthly city as rooted in the destructive passion of envy. This envy is not only manifest in the personal disaffections of individuals while alive, but also, their greater disaffections towards the political order that is localized within their own cities and states, thus hinting at the impermanence of these earthly cities. ❀

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1. "They have no wine"
2. Durling and Martinez says that the biblical allusion to the transformation of water to wine further represents the movement from Old Testament prophecies to New Testament, fulfilment and from "insipidity" to "sapidity" (*Purg.* n.13.28-30). This also bridges the subsequent introduction of the character of Sapia in this Canto.
3. "Christian Love"
4. According to Augustine of Hippo in book 15 of the *City of God*, the distinction between the earthly city and the heavenly city is symbolised in the story of Cain's fratricide of Abel, and his subsequent founding of a city named after his son Enoch. This contrast is further highlighted in Augustine's claim that "Abel, being a sojourner, built none" unlike Cain.
5. Bridget K. Balint, "Envy in the Intellectual Discourse of the High Middle Ages," in *The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals*, ed. Richard Newhauser (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 44.
6. *Ibid.*, 54.
7. Robert E. Sinkewicz. *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) xxvi.
8. Adam Shannon. "The Seven Deadly Sins: History," *Seven Deadly Sins*. Shannon highlights that Gregory the Great has made the following modifications to the list of deadly sins by "folding vainglory into pride, acedia onto sadness, and adding envy."
9. Balint, "Envy in the Intellectual Discourse," 45.
10. Peter Kalkavage, "Dante's Global Vision: Seeing & Being Seen in the "Divine Comedy"," *The Imaginary Conservative*.
11. *Ibid.*
12. John Livingston Lowes, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," 275. Lowes has identified a series of understandings of envy in a few 14th-century Middle English texts including Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, *Mirour de L'Omme*, *Confessio Amantis*, *Ayenbite of Inwyte*, and *Jacob's Well*. These various texts define envy as a "sorrow for others' joy" and "joy for others' grief" (246), which in turn leads to other deplorable actions and misdeeds such as "detraction" (245), "dissimulation" (or deception) (245), "false [semblance]" (246).
13. Teodolinda Barolini, "*Purgatorio* 13: Eyes Sewn Shut"

14. Lauro Martines, "Political Conflict in the Italian City States," 69.
15. Ibid., 71.
16. Ibid., 75.
17. Peter S. Hawkins, "Divide and Conquer: Augustine in the *Divine Comedy*," 475.
18. Robert and Jean Hollander, *Purgatorio* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 2003) n.13.112-23.
19. Dante, *Purg.* n.13.106-29
20. Diana Glenn, *Dante's Reforming Mission and Women in the Comedy* (Leicester: Troubadour Publishing, 2008) 78.
21. Ibid., 78. Hollander, by contrast, suggests that Sapia is Ghibelline, and that "her motivation is personal, not political". (Hollander, n.13.112-23)
22. Kalkavage has a similar point about Sapia in claiming that Sapia's envy, captured through a "twisted political situation," shows "how envy pits city against city, party against party, in the madness of invidious one-upmanship. Envy destroys natural unity. It rips families apart and even causes family members to rejoice in the death of their own flesh and blood." (Kalkavage, "Dante's Global Vision")
23. Marco Picone-Chiodo, "Battle of Montaperti: 13th Century Violence on the Italian 'Hill of Death'"
24. Ibid.
25. Dante, *Purg.* n.13.122-3
26. Albert Wingell, "Canto XIII: Among the Envious," in *Lectura Dantis: Purgatorio*, ed. Allen Mendelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008) 138-9.
27. Dante, *Purg.* n.13.151-4
28. Guido del Duca is the son of Giovanni degli Onesti of the Duchi, and he was a judge in Faenza (1195) and Rimini (1199), and lived in both Bertinoro (1202-1218) and Ravenna. (*Purg.* n.14.81)
29. Massimo Verdicchio, "Canto XIV: The Rhetoric of Envy," in *Lectura Dantis: Purgatorio*, ed. Allen Mendelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008) 148.
30. Ibid., 144.
31. Dante, *Purg.* n.14.52-4
32. I am using "manners" not to mean being polite, but to refer to customs and morals within the context of the Middle Ages.
33. Teodolinda Barolini. "Purgatorio 14: Valley of the Beasts"
34. Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) n.14.95.
35. Mark Musa, *The Portable Dante* (London: Penguin, 2003) 326. It is noteworthy that the first two in his initial plaint were contemporaries of Rinieri di Calboli and of noble lineage in Romagna, while the latter two were from influential families in medieval Ravenna.

36. Ibid., 236. The former, Piero, hailed from a distinguished family in Ravenna, while Guido di Carpegna was of humble origins but gained recognition from the nobility by merits.
37. Ibid., 327. Dante mentions families from both Guelph and Ghibelline factions to make a point about how this moral corruption by envy cuts across party lines. As Mark Musa notes, the Malvicini family governed the town of Bagnacavallo and was a Ghibelline family. The Pagani family was a noble Ghibelline family of Faenza and Imola, and the “demon” referred to was Maghinardo Pagano da Susinana, another tyrant, who ruled Faenza in 1290, Forli in 1291, and Imola in 1296 and died in 1302 (328). Ugolini de’ Fantolini was a Guelph and also podesta of Faenza in 1253 (328).

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Dante and Narcissus: Controlling a Shameful Gaze

Huang Kangsheng, Carson

IN DANTE'S *DIVINA COMMEDIA*, Dante is directly compared to Narcissus in *Purgatorio* 30 and *Paradiso* 3. The former of these two instances evokes Narcissus through periphrasis, while the latter calls Narcissus out by name. In contrast, however, in *Inferno* 30, Narcissus' name is evoked as periphrasis for water by Master Adam and Sinon, two characters Dante the pilgrim encounters in the tenth *bolgia*, and Dante is not explicitly compared to Narcissus (*Inf.* 30.127-30). While this instance initially seems to be a fleeting allusion, Dante the poet uses this moment to signal that Dante the pilgrim possesses the gaze of Narcissus. Drawing from Shoaf's argument that Dante struggles with the permanency of signs and meanings,¹ as we journey through the *Commedia*, the gaze adopts new meanings pilgrim undergoes his own transformation. I argue that by tracing the allusions to Narcissus, we trace the pilgrim's growth towards his newfound desire: the pursuit of truth.

I begin the essay with a summary of the myth of Narcissus from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Thereafter, I will explain the significance of the first allusion in *Inferno* 30, where I suggest that the pilgrim's act of gazing is associated with the idea of shame. Then, I look at *Purgatorio* 30, where I argue that the pilgrim internalises the shame which he first associates with the gaze. Finally, I show that the pilgrim's gaze in *Paradiso* 3 once associated with shame is no longer shameful when performed in pursuit of truth.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* deals with the concept of physical transformations as a gloss for the probing inquiry into the nature of human identity. Within the story of Narcissus is the question of human identity and recognition; the ability of recognising the self, and the potential danger of obsession that comes from this self-recognition. Through the story of Narcissus, Ovid provides a threshold for self-recognition.² Tiresias' prophecy centres around the word *nosco*, carrying the implication of recognition; that Narcissus' longevity is conditional on him not knowing/recognising himself. Narcissus' tale warns of the dangers of self-obsession, as a result of self-recognition, and seems to pervert the maxim of the Delphic oracle to 'know thyself'. Narcissus is also featured staring into a spring (*fons*),³ which Dante repeats in his own Narcissian episodes. The symbol of the spring, or water, more generally, as a site of reflection is paramount, especially in the latter allusions to Narcissus in the *Commedia*. Ovid most notably puts Narcissus' eyes (*spectat...sua lumina*) first in the descriptive list of features,⁴ yet again highlighting the idea of the gaze. In knowing or recognising himself through the gaze, Narcissus then falls in love with a hope without a body (*spem sine corpore*),⁵ eventually wasting away. Most significantly, Ovid's Narcissus knows himself only through the gaze. As Shoaf argues, "the pathos of narcissism, or self-knowledge that so far from liberating rather only binds."⁶ Shoaf suggests that the story of Narcissus, thus, is a warning on the limitations of the human mind to comprehend the self; beyond a certain point, self-knowledge becomes entrapment. Dante takes several things from Ovid: the action of the gaze, the spring into which Narcissus gazes, the eyes, and the object of love.

As mentioned in my introduction, Dante first evokes Narcissus by name near the end of *Inferno* 30, in the *bolgia* of falsifiers where impersonators, counterfeiters, and liars are punished. I argue that the poet first associates the gaze with the idea of shame because of the pilgrim's inability to accurately represent his desire. In this canto, the poet, not the pilgrim, forces readers to associate the gaze with the idea of shame. This meaning, attributed to the gaze, is one that changes as we and the pilgrim progress through the *Commedia*. The canto's emphasis on visibility and recognition

comes from the opening extended epic simile of Ovidian allusions to Athamas and Hecuba, which talk about the cities of Thebes and Troy.⁷ Dante employs visual verbs *veggendo* and *vide* which draws attention to the idea of visual recognition or misrecognition, and the problems it causes: death or madness. This gestures to Ovid's Narcissus, driven mad and wasting away as a result of his recognition, just as Tiresias prophesises. Dante pulls together three Ovidian characters to anticipate the eventual recognition in *Paradiso* 3.

Interestingly, however, Narcissus is not discussed among the impersonators, or falsifiers of image. This is indeed curious, if we consider what he fell in love with, his reflection, to be a false image of himself. Instead, the two other falsifiers, the counterfeiter Master Adam and the liar Sinon of Troy, are the ones who evoke his name in their conversation. In the physical and verbal punches Adam and Sinon throw at each other, Adam draws attention to the similar thirst they both suffer and alludes to the spring: "to lick the mirror of Narcissus [he] would not need to be invited with so many words" (*Inf* 30.128). The periphrastic allusion serves no purpose to highlight the myth of Narcissus; neither recognition nor self-obsession are perceived to be problems for the two falsifiers for their falsehoods is external, i.e. they lie to others, which has nothing to do with introspection or internal recognition. Narcissus' evocation seems to be a cast-away thought Dante included to fit the multiple Ovidian references he has already made in this canto. Considering that Dante himself is not the person to call Narcissus' name, we must ask: what is Narcissus' function here?

Further along in the canto, Virgil rebukes Dante for this moment of pleasure and voyeurism. While Dante "was all intent to listen", Virgil chastises "Now keep looking, for I am not far from quarrelling with you!" (30.130-2). This contrast of senses is interesting: the pilgrim's inner monologue focuses on his intention to hear while Virgil's rebuke opens with a critique at his gaze. Virgil's emphasis on the visual rather than the aural suggests an emphasis on erroneous sight. Dante is affected by the rebuke from Virgil: "When I heard him speak to me so angrily, I turned

toward him with such shame (*vergogna*) that it still dizzies me in memory" (30.133-5). To have an intangible instance of memory cause a physical effect of dizziness in the poet's retrospection highlights the impact which Dante the pilgrim received from this scolding. Dante feels shameful, but at this point it is unclear what he is ashamed of. I hypothesise that Dante's shame arises because he does not know why he is gazing; there is no intent to his gaze. To better understand this moment, we look to the next Narcissian allusion.

In *Purgatorio* 30, Dante is once again chastised, this time by Beatrice, which causes him to feel shame. When Beatrice finally appears to Dante and Virgil, as they continue in the Earthly Paradise, Dante's guide for the last 63 canti is abruptly absented. At this moment of deep loss, Beatrice proves to be no comfort to Dante. Her first words chastise and challenge Dante, demanding that he "must weep to another sword" (*Purg.* 30.49). Durling and Martinez notes that this is "the sword of Beatrice's reproaches" (n30.57). The first simile compares Beatrice to an 'admiral' who though distanced and veiled is "regal and haughty in bearing... [and] speaks but holds in reserve the hotter speech" (30.70-72). Beatrice's rather aggressive chastise of Dante leads to the Narcissian moment where Dante's "eyes fell down to the clear spring" (30.76) just as Narcissus "lies down ... by the spring" (Ovid *Met.* 3.410-5).⁸ Unlike *Inferno* 30, Narcissus' appearance is neither random nor periphrastic, Dante the poet recalls his own actions as a pilgrim and chooses this particular image as he grapples with the loss of a pseudo-parent while being chastised by his love. Beatrice's chastise is perhaps not unwarranted. At the moment of her appearance, Dante's action suggests a regression. Where in *Inferno* there is repeated motif of right turns, Dante in *Purgatorio*, at the disappearance of Virgil, "turned to the left" (*Purg.* 30.43). Shoaf highlights that "the corrupt image and the movement leftward emphasise a regression, a reversion."⁹ What Shoaf is suggesting is that Dante's progress in this instance was reversed or regressed. Dante further emphasises this regression by recalling that "[his] cheeks, though cleansed with dew, [turned] dark again with tears" (*Purg.* 30.53-4). As Durling and Martinez note, this alludes to *Purgatorio* 1 where Virgil washes the darkness of *Inferno* from Dante's

face.¹⁰ Shoaf offers that this regression marks the temporality of Virgil's ability.¹¹ Beatrice's seemingly unwarranted chastise now gains meaning. Beatrice is chastising Dante for his regression, for moving a step back in his journey forward. The Narcissian moment in *Inferno* 30, imbued with the pilgrim's shame, is intentionally recalled in *Purgatorio* 30.

Dante turns because he is reminded of that previous Narcissian moment with Virgil and his inability to curb his desire to gaze as he gazes into his reflection. With Beatrice's rebuke, he is reminded of his past erroneous gaze. Dante then turns as he is ashamed of the regression and almost repeats that mistake for which Virgil chastised. Concurrently, he is reminded of Virgil's promise "that I be always at your side, if it happens again that Fortune find you where people are in such a squabble: for to wish to hear that is a base desire" (*Inf.* 30.145-8), a promise that Virgil can no longer fulfil. Virgil promises to aid Dante through his 'base desires' as he guides him. With his disappearance, Dante now must take it upon himself to check his own impulses. Shoaf highlights how "Dante's shame, 'vergogna,' further proves his self-consciousness of narcissism and consequent repudiation of it, or refusal to continue speculating."¹² Dante's shame from *Inferno* 30 appears again here in *Purgatorio*. This recurrence is now a recognition of past shame which "weighed down [his] brow" (*Purg.* 30.78). And through the recognition of shame, we can read this aversion of gaze as Dante's additional recognition of his desire and his willingness to curb it.

In light of the shame Dante acknowledges in *Purgatorio*, we can now return to the moment in *Inferno* where Narcissus first appears. Dante's feeling of shame at that first evocation of Narcissus has now been transformed and internalised. Shoaf further suggests that "Adam and Sinon together form Dante's disfigured figure of Narcissus" and explains how their repartee in "[insisting] identity ... reflects the other. Each is a Narcissus; together they are Narcissus talking to himself."¹³ If Master Adam and Sinon are, indeed, Narcissus, then the person who perceives it, i.e. Dante, could be inferred to be Narcissus as well, for who else in the story is more obsessed with Narcissus than Narcissus himself. Ovidian Narcis-

sus' intense obsessive gaze at his reflection is here paralleled as Dante's intent and desire to gaze at the argument. Furthermore, in Virgil's reorientation of the argument from aural to visual, the poet instructs readers to focus on the gaze itself, over the intention to listen. Now that we understand the Narcissian reference in retrospect, we realise that, at the end of *Inferno* 30, Dante achieves a recognition: that the 'disfigured' Narcissus is Dante himself.

The poet's evocation of Narcissus in *Purgatorio* 30 and his transformation of the allusion is a moment where Dante the poet changes the significance he first gave to Narcissus. The sign originally imbued with his shame transforms into an acceptance, evolution, and awareness of his gaze and, by extension, desire. Dante's aversion signals the awareness of his own regression which was caused both by his recollection of the previous Narcissian moment and the rebuke from Beatrice. At this point, though, we remain unclear as to why Dante truly feels ashamed of his gaze. Even as Dante undergoes this self-reflective moment, the journey of the *Commedia* is about to bring him through another major transformation, passing through the river Lethe.

In *Paradiso* 3,¹⁴ Narcissus is alluded to in an extended simile. As Brownlee notes, *Paradiso* 3 "present the *Commedia's* second (and final) over reference to Narcissus".¹⁵ Structurally, this is an almost exact mirrored position of Narcissus' first evocation within the *Commedia*. So, in *Inferno* 30, 30 canti and 120 lines into the *Commedia*, Narcissus is called by name, in *Paradiso* 3, 30 canti and 120 lines from the end of the *Commedia*, the last overt reference is made to Narcissus. Dante periphrastically describes a pool of water and the reflection that we can see within it, thereafter he said that he "fell into the error contrary to the one that kindled love between the man and the fountain" (*Par.* 3.16-8). Dante transforms Narcissus in this final allusion in several ways. First, Dante retains his action of turning, drawn out in periphrasis. The error Narcissus committed was not to look away, Dante's error, contrary to Narcissus', is that he did turn away. While in both *Inferno* 30 and *Purgatorio* 30 Dante turns because of something he did wrong, Dante's action of turning in *Paradiso* is the

error itself. Washed of his sin in Lethe, Dante perhaps no longer needs to concern himself with the earthly errors he has committed such as obsession. As a result, Dante the poet structurally reverses the problem in Narcissian moments pre-Lethe. "So I saw many faces eager to speak ... as soon as I perceived them, thinking them to be mirrored images, I turned his eyes to see whose they might be" (3.16-21). Dante does not want to see 'mirrored images' he wants to perceive the beings themselves thus he turns. It is important to note how the pilgrim's reaction to reflection has changed. Where his own image caused him to 'recoil' in *Purgatorio*, his awareness of the falsity of reflection and his pursuit of truth now governs his actions. Dante's gaze or desire is directed toward truth hence he is not afraid to look at the images and perceives the reflection for what it truly is, just an image. Furthermore, Dante looks to the mirrored images rather than at himself. The object of his gaze is towards the true faces that he sees reflected, not even at his own reflection.

The pursuit of truth, though within Dante's grasp, is still something which he has to strive towards. Beatrice reproaches that Dante has a "childish notion, since it does not yet trust its footing upon the truth" (3.26-7). Hollander notes that this moment is Beatrice's "rebuke of her pupil, whose actions mirror those of untutored humankind, unable to read the very facts of human relations – e.g., who is standing where; who is reflected, who is not."¹⁶ While Beatrice's chastise in *Purgatorio* creates the Narcissian moment, now she educates him on the error proceeding from the mis-recognition of the significance of the images. Beatrice also mentions "these are true substances that you see" (3.29), a direct reference to Ovid's Narcissus who "loves an unsubstantial hope (*spem sine corpore amat*)" (Ovid, *Met.* 3.417). The pilgrim's pursuit of truth is characterised as antithetical to Narcissus' desire: 'true substances' against the 'unsubstantial hope'. This marks another transformation of the allusion; in doing so, the inversion shows the progress of the pilgrim by intentionally differentiating Narcissus' desire from the pilgrim's.

So where is the shame which Dante initially employed Narcissus to sig-

nify? Already transformed through his aversion of the gaze in *Purgatorio*, Dante leaves the shame behind as he passes through the Lethe; something which, through the text or as a result of the text, Dante the poet suggests is an earthly obsession. Dante in *Paradiso* no longer has shame because, unlike the first two instances of the allusion, Dante gazes for a specific reason: to pursue truth. Beatrice encourages Dante's empirical epistemology, turning the metaphor on its head. Just as she reproaches Dante's notion for not having firm 'footing upon the truth', she then encourages him to "speak with them and hear and believe, for the true Light that fulfils (the substances) does not let their feet twist away from itself" (*Par.* 3.31-3). Dante the poet, speaking through Beatrice, tells of his own progress in coping with his desire. The pilgrim in *Purgatorio* who made the first step in internalising and controlling his desire by turning away from his image is now entrusted to deal with his desire and is spurred on by his guide. Dante himself acknowledges the desire as he admits in a simile that he was "almost like one hampered by too much desire" (3.35-6). What changed from the base desire of listening and gazing in *Inferno* is the pilgrim himself; the transformed Dante/Narcissus no longer worries about obsession because he is aware of and can curb his desires. The promise that Virgil made, Dante keeps and performs for himself.

In this way, the mirrored references to Narcissus from *Inferno* 30 to *Paradiso* 3 shows a reflection of Dante himself, one that the pilgrim is happy to see and not turn away from, but at the same time not over-indulge in. This is further confirmed by the shade who Beatrice assures is a figure of authority who answers, "our charity does not lock its door to a just desire" (3.43-4). Dante's desire is now 'just' and right because it is directed in the pursuit of truth. It is here that we understand why the pilgrim was ashamed of his gaze in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, because it was not grounded in the pursuit of truth. Through this final allusion to Narcissus, Dante manages to show his readers just how much he has evolved from the first evocation of Narcissus in his ability to control his desire. Furthermore, he transforms and legitimises his desire two-fold: through Beatrice's encouragement and the shade's authority.

Narcissus' three appearances therefore helps to trace Dante's evolution with regards to shame and desire. As Dante first ascribes shame to Narcissus in *Inferno* 30, he then internalises this change and learns from it, correcting his desirous gaze when he realises his regression in *Purgatorio* 30. Finally, as he encounters 'mirrored images', reflections once more in *Paradiso* 3, he is conscientious enough to recognise the reflection as mere images, seek the truth, and control his desire in the pursuit of the same truth. As Dante finally reveals a 'just desire' in this final allusion, i.e. the pursuit of truth, we better understand the shame that was present in his previous two allusions. The back and forth motion present in this essay demonstrate that to understand the allusions, one must necessarily move back and forth between them as each subsequent allusion encountered informs the previous. Dante's three allusions to Narcissus thus show an evolution of desirous gaze from shameful to a pursuit of truth. Dante carefully sets up a mutable image and ascribes to it new and evolved meanings to trace his own growth through his *Commedia*. What Dante seeks to teach his readers is perhaps to be wary on our own pursuits of truth. Consequently, Dante attempts to tell us not to be disheartened but to be, like him, a transformed Narcissus, to learn from the mistake and shame of obsessive desirous gaze and wrongful pursuit and put ourselves back on the straight path. Just as Narcissus looks down into the *fons*, so the transformed Dante gazes up into the *stelle*. Through this corrected and controlled gaze directed at the pursuit of truth, Dante is finally ready to behold once again the stars. ❀

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1. Richard A. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word* (Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1983). In Shoaf's reading of the falsifiers in *Inferno*, he hypothesises that "[the poet], the maker of images, always struggles with the indeterminacy of signs... he must not be tempted by the illusion of permanent identity between the sign and the meaning." (32) Dante is not, indeed, tempted by the 'illusion of permanent identity', even as he continuously alludes to texts which precede his *Commedia*. Dante, through the *Commedia*, gives these signs new meaning.
2. When asked whether this child would live to reach well-ripened age, the seer replied: "If he ne'er know himself." (*si se non noverit*) ... For Narcissus had reached his sixteenth year and might seem either boy or man... but in that slender form was pride so cold that no youth, no maiden touched his heart ... At last one of these scorned youth, lifting up his hands to heaven, prayed "So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves!" ... There was a clear pool (*fons*) with silvery bright water ... Here, the youth ... lies down ... and while he drinks he is smitten (*correptus*) by the sight of the beautiful form he sees. He loves an unsubstantial hope (*spem sine corpore amat*) and thinks that substance which is only shadow. He looks in speechless wonder at himself and hangs there motionless in the same expression ... Prone on the ground, he gazes at his eyes, twin stars, (*spectat humi positus geminum, sua lumina, sidus*) and his locks, worthy of Bacchus, worthy of Apollo; on his smooth cheeks, his ivory neck, the glorious beauty of his face, the blush mingled with snowy white: all things, in short, he admires for which he is himself admired. (*Ov. Met.* 3.344-424)
3. Ovid, *Met.* 3.407
4. Ovid, *Met.* 3.420
5. Ovid, *Met.* 3.417
6. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word*, 28.
7. The epic simile discusses the idea of madness induced into two characters, Athamas, caused by Juno's vengeance against Semele, and Hecuba, caused by her perception of her dead children. Both these Ovidian allusions contend with the idea of recognition. Athamas, driven mad by Juno, "seeing his wife walking with his two sons ... he cried ... 'that I may catch the lioness and her cubs'" (*Inf.* 30.4-8). Hecuba, on the other hand, "after she saw Polyxena dead, and, grieving, had perceived her Polydorus

- on the shore/ of the sea, [went] mad" (30.16-20).
8. My association of this moment as a Narcissian allusion comes from Kevin Brownlee. "Dante and Narcissus (Purg. XXX. 76-99)," *Dante Studies*, no. 96 (1978). Brownlee is perhaps the first scholar to propose that these lines in *Purgatorio* represent Narcissus transformed. Brownlee's paper argues three points: that this signifies Ovid's increased importance in the *Commedia*, that this is one in a larger sequence of Narcissian references and that the use of Narcissus as a poetic trope suggest the importance of pagan poetry in the Christian Aesthetic of the *Commedia*.
 9. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word*, 52-3.
 10. Dante, *Purg.* n30.52-4
 11. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word*, 56.
 12. *Ibid.*, 50.
 13. *Ibid.*, 42.
 14. *Paradiso* 30 does indeed contain a distant allusion to Narcissus, as the story in its deconstructed form. The mirror of Narcissus are the mirrors which Dante's eyes become. The pool is a river of light in which Dante must wash his eyes to make them mirrors. The action of Narcissus embracing himself is Dante dipping his head into the river. See also Dante, *Par.* n30.85-7.
 15. Brownlee, "Dante and Narcissus," 205.
 16. Robert and Jean Hollander, *Paradiso* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 2007). n.3.19-24.

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Infernal Ineffability: Dead Poetry in Dante's *Inferno*

Genevieve Ding Yarou

FROM FIERY DISCORDANCE AT its gate, Dante's Hell curiously freezes in static silence at its icy pit. In *Inferno* 34, as the pilgrim descends towards the deep abyss of the universe and the core of absolute wickedness in a journey of negative transcendence, he is met with a despairing sight of stillness and silence. Lucifer, the light bearer who was once the most beautiful and divine of the angels, is stifled of speech in a cannibalistic act of perversion against the holy communion; freezing wind of deathly stasis emanates from his stirring wings and paralyses him to the breast in the ice of his own creation. Before the frozen figure of nullity, the pilgrim is petrified and professes his ineffability. By renouncing the ability of his character to describe what he sees, Dante's poetic expression of inexpression denounces his poetic authority to linguistic representation and demolishes language, rhetoric, and hermeneutics in *Inferno*. His rhetorical paradox of ineffability is at once meta-poetic and anti-poetic. In *Inferno*, poetry is fraudulent and treacherous as it promises textual reincarnation and immortality to the eternally condemned through linguistic constructions and interpretations. The problematic nature of poetry in *Inferno* is revisited by Dante in *Purgatorio*, in which the pilgrim proclaims "but here let dead poetry rise up again" (*Purg.* 1.7). Dante's invocation to resurrect poetry in *Purgatorio* implies the death of poetry in *Inferno*. In effect, he retrospectively expels the artistic *mimesis* of poetry from the realm of Hell. But what was Dante's creation in *Inferno* if not poetry?

This paper focuses on the ineffability of the pilgrim and the eternal silence of Lucifer to examine Dante's genre of 'dead poetry' in *Inferno*. It begins with an analysis of the chaos and incoherence of the mutable mortal language, fragmented from the fall of Babel, to convey the fault and fallibility of poetry in its *mimesis* of the truth through the medium of language. Then, it presents the ineffability *topos*—expression through the negation of language—as an alternative medium of representation to indict the absolute nullity of Hell. By reworking the mythology of Medusa's petrifying power that Dante evokes in *Inferno* 9, this paper shows that the pilgrim's profession of ineffability at the sight of Lucifer collapses his silence of speech and stasis of motion into a single moment of petrification that catalyses his conversion towards divine light. On a meta-poetic level, Dante's rhetoric of ineffability is a strategy of narrative interruption that invites the reader to share in the pilgrim's experience of petrification and intellectual transcendence, so as to interrogate the allegorical teaching beneath his rhetorical dexterity and poetic artistry.

Immediately after entering the gates of Hell, Dante the pilgrim is aurally assaulted by the harsh discordance of its unhappy inhabitants:

There, sighs, weeping, loud wailing resounded
through the starless air, for which at the outset I shed
tears.

Strange languages, horrible tongues, words of
pain, accents of anger, voices loud and hoarse, and
sounds of blows with them,

made a *tumult* that turns forever in that air
darkened without time, like the sand when a
whirlwind blows. (*Inf.* 3.22-30, emphasis added)

In the *De vulgari eloquentia*, in reference to the Tower of Babel in *Genesis* 11, Dante notes the punitive mutation of the Pure language of God into dispersed fragments because of man's *hubris*.¹ In *Inferno*, Dante referenc-

es the hermeneutics of mortal language's 'original sin' to aurally create the chaotic dissonance of hell. By linking the tainted nature of man's language ("strange languages" and "horrible tongues") to utterance of suffering ("words of pain" and "accents of anger"), Dante portrays Hell to be a place of confused speech—a "tumult" that contains no meaning in its expression. Its aural cacophony is chaotic and incoherent in expression. However, despite its inexpressibility, the 'infernal language' is unceasing in its expression, and "turns forever in that air/ darkened without time". Existing in a space of eternal damnation, the infernal language is condemned to a circular striving of failed expression. The formal logic of language inscribes a temporal sequence between the expression of a signifier and the perception of the signified.² But in a place that eclipses time, language in *Inferno* can claim no intention of expression or interpretation. Therefore, right from the gates of Hell, Dante conveys to the reader the fault and fallibility of human language in its profession—and *mimesis*—of the truth.

In *Inferno*, even when spoken, language remains ineffable because it offers no meaning; it is incapable of being a vessel of truth and can offer no retrospective transcendence or salvation for those condemned to its silence. Ineffability, the claim to expression by the negation of expression, becomes the mode of infernal poetry to indict the absolute nullity of Hell.³ Therefore, at the bottommost depth of hell, in the face of Lucifer, Dante utters the ineffability of his horror, which can only be conveyed through the negation of language—silence:

How then I became frozen and feeble, do not ask,
reader, for I do not write it, and all speech would be insufficient.

I did not die and I did not remain alive: think
now for yourself, if you have wit at all, what I
became, deprived of both. (*Inf.* 34.22-7)

Here, Dante's apostrophe to the reader autobiographically portrays himself as petrified from perceiving Lucifer. He imagines his horror displac-

ing him from temporal existence, neither dead nor alive, frozen in a liminal state of non-motion and pure becoming.⁴ In *Inferno*, the cessation of movement parallels the cessation of speech, emphasizing the relationship between petrification and ineffability.⁵ The pilgrim, while on a temporal journey of spiritual awakening, freezes narrative time to capture a moment of petrification and conversion. This interruption could be interpreted as an inversion of the averted threat of petrification by Medusa in *Inferno* 9, reconfigured and actualized in the form of Lucifer. In *Inferno* 9, Virgil instructs Dante to:

Turn around and keep your eyes closed; for if the
Gorgon appears and you should see her, there would
never be any going back up. (*Inf.* 9.55-7)

and even preventively shields the pilgrim's covered eyes with his hands:

So spoke my master; and he himself turned me,
and he did not stop with my hands, but closed me up
with his own. (*Inf.* 9.58-60)

Central to the figure of Medusa in classical allegory is her disillusioning charm that blinds one to her petrifying power, implying a crisis of interpretation from verisimilitude.⁶ Virgil's shielding of Dante's eyes is a metaphorical acknowledgment of the potential entrapment of his senses that would impede his intellectual progress. Freccero interprets the Medusa episode as a Christian allegory for a conversion experience, "a turning away from the false light of temporal things seen with the eyes of the body".⁷ Therefore, Medusa and her furies represent a negative conversion away from the truth. It is Virgil's concealment of Dante's ocular gaze that saves him from the eternal entrapment of the gorgon's gaze and advances him on the pilgrimage of knowledge. Dante's escape from Medusa could be read as a triumph of the metaphysical over the physical. His apostrophe to the reader immediately following his narrowly averted petrification reveals a retrospective reflection on the verisimilitude of representation, which calls for allegorical interpretation:

O you who have sound intellects, gaze on the
Teaching that is hidden beneath the veil of the strange
verses. (*Inf.* 9.61-3)

With his eyes still veiled by Virgil's hands, Dante ironically halts the narrative and beckons the reader to unveil their eyes to the Christian allegorical message beneath the pagan mythology of the Medusa. Dante's mention of veiled "teaching" portrays this narrative episode of close petrification as an allegorical space of intellectual transcendence. As such, he compels the readers to exercise their interpretative volition and not let their mind be paralysed by the formalistic structure of the narrative.

The relationship between the intellect and will is prominently noted in the first canto of the *Commedia*: "I took my way again along that deserted slope, so that my halted foot was always the lower" (*Inf.* 1.28-30). Here, Dante Christianises the Aristotelian notion of the right foot as the intellect, which is held back by the naturally fixed left foot that represents the deficiency of the will, to programmatically define his path of ascension to *Paradiso* as spurred by the intellect but "halted" by the weakness of the will.⁸ Dante's apostrophe, therefore, teaches the reader to meditate on his *commedia* by redirecting the will towards God, so as to not impede the ascent of the intellect towards transcendence. Indeed, Virgil's role as Dante's spiritual guide is to refine his volition towards God. Viewed in this light, the figure of Medusa symbolizes the paralysis of ascension towards salvation if one loses the light of divine conversion.

While in *Inferno* 9, Vigil deliberately obstructs the pilgrim's vision at the sight of Medusa to prevent his petrification, in *Inferno* 34, in a reversal of direction from descent to ascent, Virgil guides Dante's interpretative gaze towards Lucifer, leaving the pilgrim petrified:

"*Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni* toward us;
therefore look ahead," said my master, "to see if you discern him."
(*Inf.* 34.1-3)

Virgil's language reveals an interpretative sequence between the ocular and mental gaze. Virgil beckons the pilgrim to "look ahead" and focus his ocular gaze to the mental task of "discern(ing)" the nature of Lucifer, conveying the importance of ocular vision to the hermeneutic process of interpretation. Returning to Dante's apostrophe of ineffability in *Inferno* 34 as a state of petrification, his address to the reader to conceive his existential state, "think now for yourself, if you have any wit at all, of what I became" (34.25-26), is one that retrospectively affirms and proves his state of becoming. The temporal cessation of Dante the beholder, transfixed in the moment of terror, is sequentially inverted in his judgment of Lucifer: "He was as beautiful then as now he is ugly" (34.33). In his state of petrification, Dante perceives the negative hermeneutic conversion of Lucifer from divine light to infernal darkness. His equation of the past beauty of Lucifer to his present ugliness re-inscribes a temporal sequence of Lucifer's fall from Grace to be in the eternal present. Even petrified—"frozen and feeble" (34.22)—Dante is able to identify the allegorical, *contrapasso* logic of Lucifer's physical appearance as a negative conversion from Divine light.⁹ In fulfillment of his apostrophe, he has "gazed" upon the "teaching" of God beneath the "veil" of Lucifer's grotesquery. In essence, petrification from the negation of divinity presents the potential of positive conversion to divine light. Dante's "frozen and feeble" state of petrification from his gaze of Lucifer is, therefore, a sublime inversion of the Medusa threat of intellectual blindness, which catalyses a conversion towards divine truth that is symbolic of his spiritual ascension.

It is significant that the depth of Hell that Lucifer inhabits is similarly petrified in silence. From chaotic dissonance at its gate, Hell curiously freezes in silence as it becomes more blasphemous. The metaphorical "whirlwind" (9.30) at the gate of Hell that churns the "tumult" (9.28) of the sinner's torment in its gyre materializes here as the three winds from the fanning of Lucifer's wings (34.50) that freezes all things in deathly stillness (34.12). Interestingly, Lucifer is silenced in an eternal act of cannibalism, a perversion of Holy Communion. The cannibalism he perpetuates on Judas, Cassius, and Brutus deprives him of speech, symbolic of his depravation from God's Word, who, having become flesh in the form

of Christ, offered his blood and body as nourishment to the faithful. Instead, Lucifer, antagonistic to God's Word, feeds on Judas, traitor of the Word made flesh. Since all words derive from God, the creator of speech, language has no license to speech or expression in *Inferno* when it is separated from God's Word.

Therefore, in the last canto of *Inferno*, the formalistic structure of silence is the written word's only possibility to inscribe Lucifer's condition. Just as Lucifer is sundered from the divine, removed from God's Word, and condemned from the use of word, which is God's creation, so the signifier is at a remove from the signified. The negation of the signifier means there is no possibility for transcribing the signified; Dante the scribe is rendered silent too and can only profess ineffability. To be faithful to the textual *mimesis* of God's creation in his pursuit of truth, Dante has to be faithful to the Word, whether it describes the infernal or heavenly realms. But God has deprived Lucifer of the Word and of words, so any attempt to conceive Lucifer through words is a degradation of God's creation, and a *hubristic* attempt at articulating the Creator's ineffability. To reconcile the poetic license of Dante and the creative license of God, silence as a rhetorical strategy becomes the most effective manner to render Lucifer's eternal existence in *Inferno*.

In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality*, Erich Auerbach explains *contrapasso* as "an intensified image of the essence of (the sinners') being, fixed for all eternity in gigantic dimensions...God has given each soul a specific eternal situation in that He has never destroyed an individual form but on the contrary has fixed it in his eternal judgment".¹⁰ The silence of Lucifer is then the petrification of his sin; he is essentialized as the negative of his betrayal and eternally transfixed away from the light of god. In expression of the symmetrical justice of *contrapasso*, *Inferno* ends with the transgressors of God's Word condemned to the eternal depravation of words, relegated to the infinitude of silence. While for the pilgrim, the ineffable perception of the negative regressions of petrification allows for his spiritual conversion to the sublime infinitude of God, within the logic of *Inferno*, the petrification of sinners in eternal suffering is the *con-*

trapasso or justice of hell; conversions in the form of the sinners' punitive metamorphosis only serves to emphasize their petrification.

But literature and poetry aspire towards transcendence in its interpretative medium and promise of textual immortality. Dante the poet seems to be aware of the potential of his replication of God's creation of *Inferno* to be a literary fraud that threatens the petrification of sinners through a re-interpretative representation. Therefore, while writing is in theory an instrument of stability that reproduces one's existence into permanence, in *Inferno*, Dante uses the motif of writing in his poetic program as an emblem of turmoil and transience. *Inferno* 24 begins with a meta-poetic contemplation of the ephemerality of the frost's *mimesis* of the snow:

the frost copies the image of
her white sister, but her pens retain its temper only
briefly. (*Inf.* 24.4-6)

Dante anthropomorphises the frost as a poet who futilely attempts to inscribe the snow in writing. Yet the textual representation of the snow soon fades away without etching. Allegorically, Dante is implying the inferior and hubristic *mimesis* of man's artistry to God's creation. The frost, a weaker force of nature imitates the snow it derives its existence from, thus producing an effect that deceptively appears substantial but is in fact ephemeral. In the same canto, Vanni Fucci's *contrapasso* results in his instantaneous obliteration to ashes, only to be restored and obliterated again. The instability of writing contained within the image of the frost is linked to the dissolution of identity in Fucci's metamorphic *contrapasso* of petrification:

Neither *O* nor *I* has ever been writer so fast as he
caught fire and burned and was all consumed
falling, to ashes. (*Inf.* 24.100-2)

Fucci's existential identity is essentialised to a state of perpetual disintegration that occurs faster than the writing of '*io*'—the word 'I'. Here,

Dante emphasises writing and poetry as one of the means to establish one's identity and confer eternity upon oneself. But this act of poetic self-creation steals from the creative license of God, who alone confers existential identity and immortality.

In fact, language is tainted not just from the *hubris* of man during the fall of the Tower of Bebel but is inscribed in man's original sin, right from Eve's beguilement by the serpent's deceptive discourse in the Garden.¹¹ Allegorically, this means that sin is manifest in language and is realized as self-interpretation in speech. The vulnerability of Dante's poetic project to impertinence means that his poetry and language, if used true to the nature of God and His creation of the justice of *Inferno* would have to essentialize and petrify the sin of the blasphemous, instead of giving them a chance of reinterpretation through his writing. So far from being emblematic of eternal immortality, writing is made to serve as an emblem of the ephemeral and condemned in the realm of hell. Consequently, Dante's poetic strategy of metamorphosis in *Inferno* does not symbolize a process of transcendence or Christian conversion but emphasizes the state of blasphemous petrification. In other words, the petrification essential to *contrapasso* is made obvious and condensed through the metamorphic process of conversion. Infernal language, or "dead poetry" (*Purg.* 1.7), has to remain petrified in the realm of hell, in a state of unchanging damnation, with no hope of reincarnation.

Dante, therefore, subverts poetry in *Inferno* to denounce its ambition towards textual transcendence. Dante's address to the audience in *Inferno* 9 to "gaze on the/ Teaching that is hidden beneath the veil of the strange verses" (*Inf.* 9.61-3, emphasis added) therefore warns the reader not to think of language in the usual way of transcendence or reinterpretation in *Inferno*, but rather understand the Biblical hermeneutics of each strange *contrapasso* that is petrified and essentialized through his writing. Dante's apostrophe hence provides a pedagogic model for the intellectual meditation of the reader towards God. To vocalize the ineffable, Dante relies on the reader to utilize their imaginative gaze and perceive the ineffable. In *Inferno*, Dante's linguistic strategy of petrification essentializes *contra-*

passo for the reader to grasp the sin against God, so that the reader, like the pilgrim, could meditate on the negative petrification and inversely perceive the ineffable divinity of God. In essence, petrification's potential for Christian conversion stems in its state of linguistic suspension that allows the reader to direct his mental gaze towards theological light.

If the dead poetry of *Inferno* is characterized by an eternal silence that penetrates and pierces through the Dionysian chaos at Hell's gate, the ineffability of silence is the medium of justice and the liturgy of God's creation of Hell. The inscription on the Gate of Hell proclaims the lack of authorial license in Hell beside that of God's: "Before me were no things created/ except eternal ones, and I endure eternal" (*Inf.* 3.7-8)". The mutable mortal language, fragmented since the fall of Babel, cannot create meaning through linguistical interpretation in hell, as all hope was barricaded at its gate ("Abandon every hope, you who enter", 3.9). But poetry challenges the *logos* of Hell by offering hope in the form of textual reincarnation and immortality. While *contrapasso* traps the sinner in an eternity of essentialised petrification, Dante's poetry offers a chance of reinterpretation, threatening the eternal damnation Hell defines. Therefore, Dante informs the reader through his apostrophe that any form of rhetorical dexterity or artistry perceived in *Inferno* should be interrogated by the reader with caution, to unveil the meaning behind the speech, as the true poetic representation of *Inferno* is silent and meditative. ❀

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1. Dante, *De Vulg.* 1.6.4ff.
2. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Duckworth, 1983) 67.
3. Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition" (2018) 28.
4. *Ibid.*, 26.
5. Rowan Williams, "33 and 34. Ice, Fire and Holy Water" (2017) 9. According to Williams, "speech is tied up with motion: the lack of one accompanies the lack of the other. Hell is thus silent as well as frozen; and the ultimate silence and frozenness have to do with the primordial sin, the betrayal of the truth and in particular of pledged loyalty, truth in the sense of 'troth'".
6. John Freccero, "Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit." (1986) According to Freccero, to ancient writers, Medusa represented excessive fascination that petrified men.
7. *Ibid.*, 123.
8. John Freccero, "Dante's Firm Foot and the Journey without a Guide." (1986) According to Freccero, Dante moves forward with his right foot, representing his intellect, supported by his left foot, representing his will.
9. Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 34: Satanic Physics and the Point of Transition" (2018) 15.
10. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis; the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013) 192.
11. William Franke, "Dante's Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Prophetic Voice and Vision in the Malebolge (*Inferno* XVIII–XXIII)." (2012) 113.

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Dante's Mystical Rose: Cosmic Geometry, Vision, and Transcendence in the *Divine Comedy*

Faris Joraimi

Every rose that spreads its fragrance in the outward world
That rose speaks of the mystery of the Whole.
Rumi, *Masnawi* 1:2022

Then, out in the garden, the talk was of roses. Abu al-Hasan (having never seen them) said there were no roses like those which bedeck the villas of Andalusia. Faraj was not to be suborned by flattery; he observed that the learned Ibn Qutaybah had described a superb variety of *perpetual* rose which grows in the gardens of Hindustan and whose petals, of a deep crimson red, exhibit characters reading *There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet*.
Jorge Luis-Borges, *Averroës' Search*

Hafez, whom can we tell of this strange state?
We are nightingales silent in the season of the Rose.
Hafez, *Divan* – Ghazal 376

DANTE'S FINAL STATION BEFORE his apprehension of the Divine Mind is the spectacle of the heavenly Rose, whose architectonic model alludes to the structure of the cosmos. Its dimensions, at once infinite but yet diagrammatically legible, reflects an ordered cosmos whose geometric magnitude reflects closeness to Divine Intellect. As an approximation of the ineffable vision, the Rose is the *Commedia's* culminating motif in a chain of vegetal loci that each correspond to the soul's proximity to Divine grace.

From an architectonic perspective, Dante's rose reflects the structural model of the universe. It is in "circular shape" (*Par.* 30.104) and has "more than a thousand tiers" (30.113-114), suggesting an enormous cosmic amphitheatre of concentric rings. This mirrors the concentricity of the cosmos runs through all three *cantiche*. Dante's Hell is built as a cone of sequential rings narrowing downward. Circularity is written into the pilgrim's journey as his path traces successive circumferences making up the relief of the landscape; descending into Hell, he "enter[s], into the first circle / girding the abyss" (*Inf.* 4.23-4). The Mount of Purgatory is likewise a conical succession of ringed terraces. It is, however, characterised by circular dimensions not just vertically but also laterally, with its terrace's slopes being defined by angles at times "haughtier than a line from mid- / quadrant to center" (*Purg.* 4. 41-42). The heavenly firmament is likewise round, with its edges constituting the "first circle" (1.14-5): the far horizon still perceptible to his vision. Paradise itself is a realm of "the holy spheres" (*Par.* 2.127). Indeed, all of Heaven is a system of interlocking circles, which Dante mechanises as an immense clock with intermeshed gears in motion. The circle of the saints is "like a clock that calls us [...] / Whose one part pulls and the other pushes" (10.142-4). By analogising "that glorious wheel turning" (10.145) as a dial, Dante mechanises the Heavens as a vast automaton in motion, operated by its master-clockmaker, God, the Unmoved Mover.

Dante indicates how "those carols, differently dancing, allowed / me to judge their richness, being fast and slow" (24.16-7); Durling and Martinez argue that these varying degrees of speeds correspond to varying

degrees of beatitude.¹ Just as the individual wheels of this clock indicate their souls' worthiness, so do the different rounded petals of the Rose point to their occupants' rank in grace. The seating position assigned to the souls therein indicate their closeness to God. Eve, "who opened and inflicted" the wound of original sin, sits at Mary's feet (32.4-6). Next comes "Rachel with Beatrice", seated "below her, in the third tier of seats" (32.7-9), before "Sarah and Rebecca, Judith" and Ruth "following each other down tier by tier" or "petal down to petal" (32.10-15). At the lowest levels sit the unbaptised children, "souls that have no merit of their own" (32.42). Yet despite Dante's ability to situate each of these souls within an assigned 'position', the Rose itself is limitless. Being closest to God, it makes sense for the Rose to be a sphere of such unfathomable greatness that it escapes the human capacity for measurement. Dante describes it as being "so / great that its circumference would be far too / large a belt for the sun" (30.103-5). In this sense, it is diametrically opposed to the locus of Satan, trapped as he is within a suffocating "hole in the rock" (*Inf.* 34.85). Indeed, Satan's hole is the culmination of ever-narrowing circles, with each smaller ring more terrible than the one before. The second circle of Hell "encloses a smaller space, but so much / more suffering that it goads the souls to shriek" (5.2-3). Dante thus positively correlates dimensional magnitude with closeness to the Divine Intellect. In contrast, Virgil reminds Dante that Hell is "the place where [he] / will see the grieving peoples who have lost the / good of the intellect" (3.17-8).

Circular spaces are Dante's geometric tools for signifying Divine grace. Satan, farthest from the Divine Mind and the locus of error and evil, is situated in a circle accorded the smallest geometric dimensions. Conversely, the first circle of Hell, Limbo is a spacious "meadow of fresh green" (4.111), where the heroic pagans and those "who honor knowledge and art" (4.73) dwell. Unlike Satan's suffocating hole, the enlightened pagans, by virtuous merit and intellect, are granted the privilege of occupying "a place open, bright, and high" (4.115-6). Here we see a glimpse of three elements that signify divinity: expanse, light, and elevation, which find fullest expression in the Paradiso. There, God's highest realm is also a dimension resplendent with "living Light" (*Par.* 13.55), and the Rose,

which is not only of incalculable expanse, but is also an apparition of light “made of a ray / reflected from the highest part of the first *mobile*” (30.106-7). Thus, the perfection of Dante’s human intellect to receive the Divine experience is also spoken of in dimensional terms, as “[his] mind” was “made larger than itself” (23.43-4).

We can identify four vegetal ‘waystations’ of the journey, beginning with the Dark Wood of Error, followed by Limbo, the Garden of Eden, and finally the celestial Rose. Each stage takes the form of a vegetal landscape, their qualities – such as luminosity, location and natural abundance (signifying life and thus, motion) – exteriorise the internal condition of the soul therein.

The Dark Wood, the first stop, defies description, indeed even any sense of clear description, as Dante cries “how hard it is to say what that wood / was” (*Inf.* 1.4-5). The Dark Wood stands before the beginning of the pilgrim’s journey proper, and so does not reflect this commensurate relationship between geometry and proximity to Divine Intellect. While Satan’s hole is furthest from the latter, he is still subject to the Divine laws of geometry, indeed imprisoned by it. The Dark Wood, however, is the realm of the soul before redemption, before its recognition of Divine reckoning. At this stage, reasoning of all kinds – which ultimately flow outward from God (the First Intellect) – are not legible to the soul. Even linear precision, the “straight way” was “lost” (1.2), and only distantly could he glimpse “the rays” from the cosmos that “leads us straight on every path” (1.17-8). Celestial illumination and geometric orientation thus signify the Divine in concert. The intellectual confusion imposed by the Dark Wood is evident in Dante’s rhetorical incoherence. “Full of / sleep” (1.10-1), his muddled thoughts are reflected in the confusion of his imagery, being on a terrestrial domain but adopting the “lake / of my heart” (1.19-20) and being “out / of the deep onto the shore” (1.22-3) as metaphors for his emotional tumult. In this undirected, chaotic motion that leads nowhere, the Dark Wood contains potentiality but also paralysis.

Meanwhile, the Rose is antipodal to the Dark Wood. The Rose is like-

wise seemingly characterised by a multiplicity of imagery, being variously referred to as a “great flower” (*Par.* 31.10), a “city” (30.130) but also a “garden” (32.38). The Rose is each of these things but all of them at once. And whilst the Wood is known first and foremost to be “dark” (*Inf.* 1.2), the Rose is a sublime spectacle of pure light. Dante’s first allusion to it, in *Paradiso* 30, is as “a light up there” (*Par.* 30.100). It is of course, a reflected light; for God alone is the “eternal Light” (33.124) radiating itself, rather than a secondary emanation from a primary illuminating principle. Nevertheless, the Rose is still a necessary light that enables the pilgrim-soul to apprehend the Divine; it is the light that “makes the / Creator visible” (30.100-1).

From the Dark Wood, Dante crosses into the realm of the dead and arrives at the next vegetal waystation, Limbo. Both it and Eden lie in between the two extremes of the Wood and the Rose. While the former is dark, and the latter made of luminosity itself, Limbo is a place *on which* light shines: it is “bright” (*Inf.* 4.116). Unlike the Wood, which is devoid of mention that anything grows there, Limbo evokes the idyllic *locus amoenus* that served as a setting in the works of some its residents. The “bright green grass” (4.118) and “lovely little stream” (4.108) evoke the pastoral Elysium from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, with its “shady groves, [...] pillowed banks and meadows washed with brooks” (Virg. *Aen.* 6.637-892). The “philosophical company” (*Inf.* 4.132) reposed on the meadow similarly recalls the rural setting of Plato’s *Phaedrus*.² Unlike the Dark Wood, Limbo is animated by chatter and a living natural landscape, signifying both a cultivated intellect and a cultivated soul.

This is the realm of the soul awakened from its confused slumber; it is elevated by reason and humanistic virtue, though still prior to its Christian moral reckoning. Limbo, the first circle of Hell, finds an inverse equivalent in the highest circle of Purgatory, the Garden of Eden. Hell’s funnel-shaped structure is inversely mirrored in the purgatorial Mount. In the latter, increasingly narrow terraces are easier to scale; purgation sheds the burdens of one’s earthly sins, as compared to Hell where narrower circles entail greater terrors than the preceding circle. Virgil informs

Dante that “this mountain is such that it is / always more difficult at the bottom, at the beginning; / and the further up one goes, the less it gives pain” (*Purg.* 4.88-90). Eden, like Limbo, is also a vision of an idealised arcadia. However, beyond rolling fields and streams, its natural abundance is enhanced, a veritable earthly garden of delights befitting its position as a spiritual upgrade from Limbo. Whereas Limbo’s pastoral landscape is sparse, reflecting the ordered rationality of human thought, Eden luxuriates with sensuous beauty. Virgil’s parting words bid Dante “see the sun that shines”, and behold “the grasses, the flowers and the bushes” (27.133-4). Whereas Limbo represents the pinnacle of human Reason, Eden is where human Reason finds its boundaries, and must be perfected by a refinement of one’s senses. It is here that Virgil leaves Dante, after having brought him there “with wit and with art” (27.130). In the path to Divine grace, human wit and art alone are insufficient; visceral engagement with one’s senses serves as preparation for the sensorial immediacy of transcendence Dante will experience in his ascent Heavenward. Eden presents a range of heightened sensorial experiences, from the olfactory pleasures of the “ground that breathed fragrance from every side” (28.5-6), to the “sweet breeze” light to the touch as “a gentle wind” (28.8-9). Nor were wanting birds satisfying Dante’s aural capacities, “singing among the leaves” (28.17).

For a moment, in the Empyrean, Dante still sees everything in the form of a splendid garden in earthly terms, with the river’s “banks painted with / spring blossoming” (*Par.* 30.62-3). Even then, the unfolding of the Rose before him is itself the consequence of his sensorial powers’ elevation through visually partaking in the “light in the form of a river” (30.61). Dante must ultimately see the Rose, for it “makes the / Creator visible” (30.100-1). Yet after his “eyelids drank from” the river, he is awakened to a new metaphysical order of reality that escapes his prior senses’ capacities. The transformation of the Heavenly garden into the celestial Rose marks another stage in the perfection of Dante’s soul to receive God. At this stage, Dante departure from sense-perception to metaphysical apprehension, as “the flowers and sparks changed into / greater festivity, and I saw made manifest both / the courts of Heaven” (30.94-6).

This refinement and intensification of the senses is also a perfection of the intellect; indeed, the sequence of these landscapes points to the soul's journey to the source of all thought itself. While the Dark Wood is the realm of ignorance and obfuscation, and Limbo bears the clarity of knowledge systematised by human effort, Eden is the realm of primeval knowledge. Here lies the "tree" of knowledge, "so sweet to taste" (32.44). Eden being where Adam first named all things in Creation (Genesis 2:19-20), is the birthplace of human language, the fundamental basis of reasoning. This distillation from ignorance to human reason, then highest Intellect is completed in the vision of the Rose, which occurs in a dimension of "pure light: / intellectual light, full of love" (*Par.* 30.39-40). Hence, the Rose also stands for a mode of perception transcending the distinction between Reason and Faith, or between the powers of the human intellect and belief confirmed by direct sensorial experience. Reason is only perfected by Divine grace. If human intellect follows language, Dante believes the limits of language are also the limits of the soul's transcendence, as he posits that "to signify transhumanising *per verba* is / impossible" (1.70-1). Knowledge of God thus cannot be attained by human intellect; human intellectual potential must be elevated by "grace", which "reserves the experience" of the Divine to the worthy (1.72). The Rose is constituted by the twin halves of Divine experience, Love and Intellect.

As an image believed to have been appropriated from the *Roman de la Rose*, Dante is repurposing a symbol of amorous passion from chivalric literature. This is consistent with Dante's sacralisation of the profane, and his canonisation of the vernacular: as in, for instance, using the Tuscan language to compose his lofty verses. But it is also a "white rose" (31.1), alluding possibly to the symbol of the Virgin Mary. She herself is directly metaphorised as "the rose in which the Divine Word / was made flesh" (23.73-4). The Rose vernacularises symbolism articulating Divine Love. But God, the First Intellect, is as much an animating principle of Love that escapes human reason as it is the ultimate source from which all thought emanates. The Divine is "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (*Par.* 33.145) but also that which "solely knows [it]self" (33.125). It is Love through Intellect, it is "known by [it]self, and know-

ing, love[s] and smile[s]" (33.125-6). Thus, the Rose also reflects a Divine rationality.

As discussed earlier, the Rose mirrors an ordered cosmos where souls are hierarchically ranked and "allotted" by merits (31.69). It is dissected in diagrammatical terms by Saint Bernard, who points out "the degree that strikes the midpoint of the two divisions" to refer to the boundary under which unbaptised babes' souls are seated. The Rose is also governed by an inherent Divine logic, for "no effect of / chance can have a place" (32.52-3) there, as "eternal law establishes whatever [Dante] see[s]" (32.55). This "eternal law" that orders the cosmos can be considered a kind of Divine reason. Even the construction of Hell, with all its chaos and tumult was by this cosmic "law" and reason. Its portal proclaims, "Justice urged my high artificer; / my maker was Divine Authority, / the highest Wisdom, and the Primal Love" (*Inf.* 3.4-6). Just like the rest of the cosmos, the Rose is a vision encountered at an intersection between Divine Love and Divine Intellect.

Dante's optical immersion in the celestial stream of light builds on earlier river imagery that mark his soul's intellectual edification by seeing. In Limbo, he "passes over" a "lovely little stream" to enter a "noble castle" of seven walls and "seven gates" (4.106-10). Entry to this edifice symbolising earthly knowledge poses no challenge to Dante,³ well-trained in the classical tradition. He crosses it as if it were "solid ground" (4.109). The Lethe in Eden is where Dante surpasses the sages of Limbo. Having witnessed the trials of Hell and purgation, Dante is no longer just of unsurpassed intellectual achievement but also qualified by spiritual instruction. It is only after partaking in "the sweet drink" (*Purg.* 33.137) of the Lethe is Dante wiped clean of all moral blemish, rendering him "pure and made ready to rise" (33.145). But it is the river of light that refines the one sensory faculty standing between him and theophany – sight.

Seeing is knowing. Beatrice bids Dante "probe with [his] mind, following [his] eyes" (*Par.* 21.16), underscoring the importance of sight – in its varying levels – to intellectual reception and understanding. Sight is the

means through which that signified by language is rendered truly palpable and comprehensible. When Dante is first spoken to by Beatrice, he remarks how although his “brain has now been signed” by her “as wax is marked by the seal”, her “speech” still “fl[ies] / so far above [his] sight” (*Purg.* 33.79-83). The *Comedy*’s recurring ineffability *topos* emphasises Dante’s admission to his words’ limit in conveying the immediacy of what he – alone, ultimately, between poet and “Reader” – *saw*.

Thus, while every vegetal waystation prior to the Rose involved a perfection of his human intellect and various sensuous faculties, the river of light dealt exclusively with an elevation of his sight. Indeed, it was enhancement to a higher order of seeing, “reserved” for souls worthier than those who must “let the comparison” of simile and allegory “suffice” (*Par.* 1.70-2).

In the Rose, Dante is told to “fly with [his] eyes through this garden, for / seeing it will further strengthen your gaze to rise / into the divine light” (31.97-9). It is evident, in comparison to Virgil’s instruction for Dante to “see” the earthly beauty of Eden (*Purg.* 27.133-4), that here Dante’s sight is being honed to prepare him for his theophany. Vision readies the soul for God, and it is thus important that the Rose is also constituted by an internal self-gaze. It is “the two / gazes of the faith” – that is, the souls from before Christ occupying one half of the Rose and the souls from after Christ filling the other – that “will equally fill this garden” (*Par.* 32.37-8). Their ardent yearning for the Divine is finally fulfilled in the unfolding of God before their eyes, and it is the attainment of the capacity to do so that closes the gap.

The power of human sight cannot withstand the incandescence of heavenly bodies, much less that of the Divine itself. Beatrice warns Dante that he “would become like Semele when she turned to ashes” (21.5-6) if she smiled. It is only after his “mind” was “made larger” is he deemed “strong enough to endure [her] smile”, and then asked by Beatrice, “open your eyes and see what I am” (23.43-8). Sight is thus not just perfected to withstand the force of Divine light, but also the force of sublime truths

that such light contains. Hence, the “two gazes” of the Rose reflect the temporal unity of the soul’s presence in God. Belief “in Christ to come” (32.23-4) exemplifies the ardour of sight unfulfilled, while those with “their faces turned toward Christ already come” (32.26-7) symbolise the moment by which vision and understanding of the Divine is attained. Both of these are however encapsulated within “God’s high foresight” (32.37) which, being timeless, sees before and through the soul’s apotheosis.

Dante “fulfilled all [his] seeing” in the sublime “eternal Light” of the Divine Mind that he “probe[d] with [his] eyes” (33.83-4). This is what the Rose ultimately *contains*, so to speak. It encloses the Divine Mind in degrees of intellectual light. The multi-folial veiling of the Divine Mind suggests God’s envelopment in multiple layers of reality, just as Dante enwraps divine truth in layers of allegorical signification.

The Rose is arguably Dante’s ultimate symbolic device, simultaneously signifying many things all at once. It unifies in one grand motif multiple conflicting themes; it is the “city” (30.130), the “hillside” (30.109), a provincial “garden” (32.38), and imperial “Rome and its lofty works” (31.34); these images dissolve the dichotomies between the urban and the rural, the provincial and the imperial as well as between peripheral and central. This spatial dislocation parallels the dislocation of the Divine itself from any fixed locus or ‘centre’.

The Rose is both the erotic rose of courtly romance as it is the saintly rose of the Virgin Mary. This is Dante’s means of encapsulating the many paradoxes of the Heavenly Kingdom, which inherently confounds human understanding. Even as Dante’s “sight was growing stronger” as he gazed into the Divine Mind (33.112) his faculties of thought and language collapsed, exclaiming “how short is speech and how hoarse to my / thought” (33.121-2). The sheer indefinability of the Rose prefigures the Divine Mind’s indefinability.

In many ways, this celestial Rose resembles the rose forming the object

of the hero's quest in de Lorris' *Roman*. According to Suzanne Akbari, "the final goal of the quest, what is contained within the innermost box – namely, the object of desire itself, represented by the rose – remains unattained and unattainable, eternally just beyond the lover's grasp in Guillaume's tantalisingly incomplete poem".⁴ Dante, however, surpasses this. Not only did he transform the rose from a symbolic object of earthly passion to a transcendental projection of Divine Love; the elusive love it once represented is finally attained. Dante reaches "the goal of all desires" (33.46), but the futility of Dante's poetic grasp is what fulfils it. It is precisely because Dante acknowledges the absolute failure of his "high imagining" (33.142) that he can truly claim to have seen the sublime mystery enclosed by the Rose. Dante ultimately believes he "fulfilled all [his] seeing there!" (33.84). Indeed, one may argue his vision is complete *because* of its poetic insufficiency; one can only claim to have witnessed the Divine if one also acknowledges its ultimate ineffability – all attempt at linguistic signification reduces its immensity.

Of all the vegetal landscapes that Dante uses to signify milestones in the soul's journey, the Rose transcends its own category, for it defies notions of a proscribed 'place', just as the soul transcends its human faculties. The Rose – being in the Empyrean – lies outside spatio-temporal laws, unlike the Dark Wood, Limbo, and Eden. It fulfils its ultimate function precisely by subverting the conventions that delineated those preceding topographic motifs. It does not occupy a proscribed space nor any moment in time. It is not quite a locus within the Empyrean, but rather a means by which Dante experiences the Empyrean; as a Heaven of intellectual light, Dante can only experience it as a bundle of visual cognitions. Christian Moevs argues that Dante's Empyrean permeates and contains the material universe but is itself nowhere, being "absolutely immaterial and uncreated".⁵ Saint Benedict tells Dante that "the last sphere" is "not in space and turns on no pole" (22.67).

This thus situates the Rose within another theological paradox: Dante sees it *within* the Empyrean, but it is not quite a material object or space inside it. If the Empyrean is a vast eternal dimension of pure Intellect, the

Rose is but an abstraction. It renders that which the Empyrean ‘contains’ discernible to Dante by pinning down souls and angels into an ordered holographic vision that he can grasp. As the Rose is also woven into the luminous aether of the Empyrean, it is also, technically, ‘uncreated’. But the Rose is still “reflected” (Par. 30.107); and it is also *moved*.

Moevs argues that “by Aristotelian doctrine, all motion derives from desire or incompleteness; all motion is the actualizing or fulfillment of potentiality. The Unmoved Mover does not move because it alone is pure actuality; as the object of the desire that causes all motion, it must be eternal, without parts, and without magnitude.”⁶ The Rose still expresses this motion-as-potentiality, as it “rises by degrees and expands and breathes forth” (Par. 30.125), but still is in the Empyrean “where God governs without / intermediary” (Par. 30.122-3). It is thus simultaneously moved by the Unmoved Mover, but indivisibly part of the Divine essence. The Rose is as paradoxical as its symbolic patron, the “Virgin mother, daughter of [her] Son” (Par. 33.1) as it is the “Maker [that made] / himself his own creature” (Par. 33.5-6).

Embedded in multiple disruptions of these binary relationships, the Rose is the highest expression of God-in-Creation. The individuation of the flower taking the place of the garden suggests the union of the particular with the universal. Only through such a paradoxical vision can the barrier between a created mortal soul and the uncreated Divine be diminished, thus allowing for the created soul’s sight to penetrate into and perceive the Divine Mind. The Divine Mind is itself not fixed in any locus; it “enwheres itself” (Par. 33.138) where it wills. In this case, it manifested itself to Dante when the latter was worthy, that is, when his powers of sight – and therefore knowing – were sufficiently capable of penetrating such higher levels of reality. ❀

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1. Dante, *Par.* n.24.13-8
2. Philip Hardie, "Locus amoenus"
3. Dante, *Inf.* n.4.106
4. Suzanne C. Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 48.
5. Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 21.
6. Ibid., 22-3.

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Giri, God, and Geometry: On Divine Circularity in *Paradiso* 33

Lu Yi

WHEN DANTE TURNS HIS eyes to the Light of God, he is faced with the insurmountable challenge of portraying the ineffable. While his geometric description appears innocuous at first glance, his decision connects the arts of mathematics and poetry. The fact that the pilgrim is able to penetrate beyond the indescribable brightness at all and provide even a verbal approximation of the essence of God serves not only as a contemplation on the nature of the Divine, but also a statement on mathematics as a vehicle of poetic expression. Begin, firstly, by assessing the most probable mathematical interpretations of Dante's final vision of God, which illustrates the extent to which geometry is capable of extending the complex theological subject of the Trinity. Because an exploration into the *tre giri* demands an investigation of *una contenenza*, we must explore the metaphysical implications of the circle as a representation of divine infinity. Just as how the *Commedia* is built from the precise patterning of the *terza rima*, Dante's usage of geometry reveals the integration of theology and math, made possible by the fundamental function of mathematics as a mimetic science.

By using the figure of the three circles to convey the Trinity, Dante suggests that the pilgrim cannot conceive of the Divine Essence without a metaphor to make sense of his experience. As such, to understand what function the metaphor serves, it is necessary to understand *what* is being represented:

Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza
De l'alto lume parvermi tre *giri*
Di tre colori e d'*una contenenza*,
E l'un da l'altro come iri da iri
Parea riflesso, e l' terzo parea foco
Che quince e quindi igualmente si spiri.

In the profound and clear Subsistence of the
deep Light I saw three *circles*, of three colors and
of one *circumference*,
and one seemed reflected by the other like a
rainbow by a rainbow, and the third seemed
fire breathing equally from both.
(*Par.* 33.115-20, emphasis added).

The circles are accepted, with little contention, by commentators as corresponding to the Trinity. Both George Poulet and Robert Durling explain how traditionally *l'un* is attributed to the Father and *l'autre* to the Son in their respective commentaries.¹ As procreation necessarily creates a 'reflection' of one's image in the form of one's offspring, "if God begets an image of Himself, who is the Son, the love that has made Him create this image of Himself, returns it to Him identical."² This reciprocity of love between Father and Son becomes *l'terzo*, constituting the Holy Ghost.³

Reaching an accord on what geometric figure is represented, however, is more challenging. Durling's translation of *giri* as "circle" contain both connotations of *cerchio* (a circle, a sphere, or anything round) as well as other round figures and solids. But as Saiber and Mbirika notes, they could be "disks, spheres/balls, or even tori, cylinders, spirals, ellipsoids, or other round things."⁴ Furthermore, Singleton contends that *giro* can also refer to "circling," which correspond to the *circulization* Dante identifies in *Par.* 33.127.⁵ Each shape, its relative relationship to other components of the figure, and its relative movement in relation to its own axis and the axis of the figure as a whole can contain significant theological implications. In analyzing possible arrangement of the objects, we will consider

two main figure categories: rings and circles. Because a perfect circle has no beginning or end, where each point of the circumference being identical to every other, the circle has historically been used to demonstrate how God is both knower and knowledge of God.⁶ Ellipsoids, spirals, and cylinders will not be considered because they are less “circular” than circles, rings, and spheres. Given the scope of this essay, solids created by rotating a planar figure around a singular axis (such as tori or spheres) will also be omitted.⁷

Ring-like *giri* are often used historically to represent the principle of the Trinity: *trinitas unitate* and *unitas trinitate*. Of the various permutations, two particular representations of the Trinity are the likely inspirations for Dante. For an interlocked configuration, Dante may have been familiar with the *Liber figurarum*, attributed to Joachim of Flore.⁸ The *Liber figurarum* featured what Saiber and Mbirika define as a (3,3)-torus link, where each ring is connected exactly once with every other ring using a basic linkage called a *Hopf* link.⁹ Because there exists three Hopf links in a (3,3)-torus link, the removal of one ring necessarily destroys two Hopf links, leaving only a pair of interlocked rings. As such, Saiber and Mbirika express concern that the (3,3)-torus link lacks the “one-in-all” and “all-in-one” property,¹⁰ though they also acknowledge the impossibility of removing one part of the Trinity.¹¹

Considering the image presented by Dante, the possible nonexistence of one aspect of the Trinity logically results in the disappearance of the Trinity as a whole. Since the Father and Son are “reflected by [each] other,” then the nonexistence of the Father would provide the Son nothing to reflect and vice versa (*Par.* 33.118). As such, there exists nothing to breathe the fire forming the third *giro* without *l’un* and *l’altro*. Similarly, the nonexistence of the love that proceeds from the Father and Son implies the nonexistence of both Father and Son. The strength of the (3,3)-torus link as a representation of the theological relationship of the Trinity is that it illuminates how each facet of the Trinity is necessarily defined in relation to each other, which subsequently constitute the whole.

Another possible configuration of rings studied by Saiber and Mbirika

alongside the (3,3)-torus link is the Borromean rings. Borromean rings are classified as the simplest form of Brunnian links, which are defined as an inter-*woven* link such that the removal of any constituent leaves every other ring unconnected. Whereas Hopf links can be interpreted to represent the interconnectedness of the Holy Persons by definition, the Brunnian link may be better suited to encompass the *Trinitas Unitate* and *Unitatis Trinitate* principle of the Trinity.¹² The “one-in-three” principle implies that “that one could not be severed or removed without at the same time severing all the three,” which is emblemized by the Borromean rings.¹³ Conversely, the “three-in-one” principle can easily be illustrated by lifting one of the rings, which would result in all three rings being lifted off as guaranteed by the central Brunnian link.¹⁴ While useful in representing the shared relationships of the Holy Persons as well as the Trinity to God, the metaphoric qualities of both the Brunnian and Hopf links are severely limited by the fact that the three rings are distinct constituents of the whole figure, unlike the indivisibility of God.

If Dante intended for the *giri* to be planar circles, then we will assess two main subcategories of circular arrangement: non-overlapping configurations and overlapping configurations. Arrangements falling into the first subcategory, such as horizontal alignment, vertical alignment or triangulation, imply a certain internal hierarchy between the Holy Persons. Though Saiber and Mbirika express concern about a hierarchical representation of the co-equal and co-substantial Holy Persons, the derivation of one Holy Person from another implies an order of operations that could be misinterpreted as hierarchical. In doctrinal theology, the Father generates the second Holy Person, namely the Son, and that the existence of both Father and Son allows for the manifestation of their mutual love into the Third Person, the Holy Spirit. The concept that one Holy Person proceeds from another is evident in Dante’s own description of the three circles. As such, though a vertical line or triangular arrangement might read more as top-down hierarchy, a horizontal configuration might better illustrate the origination of the Holy Persons as logical consequences of each other. The *Liber figurarum*, for example, presents a (3,3)-torus link horizontally. Furthermore, a triangular arrangement allows for discussion

of movement within the figure. A rotating triangulation of circles avoids distinction of hierarchy and expresses the co-equality but also distinctness of the Holy Persons. Unfortunately, the main drawback of triangulation is its incapability of representing co-substantiality.

Hence, we turn our focus to overlapping configurations, of which there are concentric circles and co-substantial circles. Though Durling translates the phrase *d'una contenenza* as “of one circumference,” this can refer to either three circles with the same circumference length or three circles “occupying the same space”.¹⁵ Co-substantial circles would be able to capture the unity and wholeness of God. The Oneness of God is evident when Dante gazes into the Eternal Light, finding “in its depths... bound with love in one volume, what through the universe becomes unsewn quires” (*Par.* 33.85-7). Yet the representation of co-substantiality fails to account for the distinctiveness of each Holy Person. If the circles are co-substantial, then a singular circumference would be used to represent the union of three distinct circles. This configuration, however, would not allow Dante to distinguish the three *giri* as “of three colors” (*Par.* 33.117). Even if we suppose that the circles are translucent, the pilgrim would have been hard-pressed to identify unique characteristics belonging to each Holy Person. On the other hand, concentric circles would allow a viewer to observe qualities found in each unique layer. Though concentric circles cannot not share one circumference (as they would require different radii lengths), Romano Amerio suggests an ingenious workaround where he adjusts the width of each concentric circle such that all three share the same area.¹⁶ Thus, each concentric layer would then “[occupy] the same space” as the other two.¹⁷ While concentricity may not be able to illustrate the *Trinitas Unitate* and *Unitats Trinitate* principles as well as Brunnian or Hopf links, it adequately reflects the Oneness of God while preserving the Holy Persons as disparate.

Thus far, we have demonstrated how an in-depth understanding of circular figures and objects can be used to approach a complex theological subject on the Trinity. Though none of these orientations are strictly Cartesian, with perfect Borromean Rings being a three-dimensional impossibility,

the relative geometric relationship between shapes and objects serve a poetic function of elucidating the extent to which divinity is obscured to Dante. The relationship between these figures, illustrates the difficulty of human discourse in capturing the entirety of God. This then allows us to return to the central characteristic of *circularity*—or, simply, *circles*. Earlier in this paper, we used the supposed “perfection” of the circle in comparison to other standard figures to filter out non-perfect circular figures. Since the perfection of the Trinity is the same perfection of God, the same circularity used for representing the Trinity can also be used to represent the Oneness of God. Historically, the metaphysical qualities of circles is utilized in the famous definition of God: “God is a sphere of which the center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere”.¹⁸ The phrase first occurs in *The Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers*, a twelfth-century manuscript that precedes the *Commedia*. Shortly thereafter, it became a medieval commonplace. The definition given by *The Book of Philosophers* disregards physical limitations of geometric figures and creates an impossible figure that, through scrutiny and study, might provide some insight into the infinitude of God.

What does it mean for God to have a circumference nowhere?¹⁹ A common understanding of figures is found in Def. 14 of Euclid’s *Elements*, which states that figures are defined as that which is contained by a boundary—in the case for a circle, the boundary would be the circumference. For a circle to have a “circumference nowhere” is to be entirely unbounded and, thus, limitless. Such a circle would be the closest geometric approximation to the *spatial* immensity of the Divine Essence. This, however, fails to account for other possible conceptions of infinity. To illustrate mathematically: there are infinitely many numbers on a number line, but there are also infinite real numbers in the interval [0,1].²⁰ This switch from immense exteriority to immense interiority is also found in the metamorphosis of Dante’s gaze into God, which moves away from the invisible circumference of brightness and vastness into the “profound and clear Subsistence of the deep Light”—the substance of the divine (*Par.* 33.115). In the words of Poulet, this phenomenon describes a “conjunction of the immense infinite with the infinitely small”

where “the totality of His Being is present in whatsoever fraction of time or space one may, arbitrarily, distinguish in Him”.²¹ Thus, an infinite God can be understood simultaneously using two different illustrations: as a circle with an inconceivably limitless circumference, and as a circle where the circumference coincides with the center. Within the point of absolute minimum (the center point, which, by Euclid’s first definition, has no “part”), the totality of God must also exist.

Furthermore, the circle as a metaphor for spatial immensity can easily be transposed to temporal immensity due to what Poulet claims is a celebrated definition of eternity: “Eternity is a perfect and simultaneous possession of a limitless existence”.²² Just as the maximum must exist within the minimum for space, so the vastest possible duration of time must also be contained within the smallest possible instance. Where the center of the circle is considered as a fixed instance of time, the limitless circumference represents vastest possible circle of duration, which will be the maximum possible distance away from the center.²³ It is also possible to conceive of the center of the circle as eternity, and each point on the circumference as an instant in time. Drawing upon the writings of Aquinas and Auriol, Poulet explains how the eternal center can be connected to every unique point on the circumference, whereas no two points of the circumference are able to coexist at the same time due to the nature of a temporal instance.²⁴ Hence, eternity becomes a point in which “the past and future converge and unite in the consciousness of God”.²⁵

We have now seen how the limitations and subsequent relationships between mathematical components can be reconstituted in interpreting God in a more profoundly theological and philosophical manner. This is due to the fundamentally representational quality of mathematics in referring to abstract entities.²⁶ This connection between mathematics and abstraction is strongly evident in Plato’s writing, which Ronald Herzman and Gary Towsley suggest Dante may have been exposed to during the Middle Ages, specifically Plato’s *Timaeus*. Plato’s strong advocacy for mathematical education stems from the assumption that studying mathematics would be a gateway for learners to contemplate the Forms. The

study of geometry and counting compels the youth to “make an investigation, setting in motion the intelligence within it, and to ask what the one itself is,” as opposed to merely using the numerical concept of “one” during trade and transaction without contemplating its form (Pla. *Tim.* 524e-525a).

The close association between mathematics and abstraction is also evident in the fundamental principles of geometry. Take, for example, the first definition of Euclid’s *Elements*: a point is that which has no part. By defining a point by its characteristics, Euclid is in no way proving the definite existence of a point. Dante likely adopted the Aristotelean doctrine of hylomorphism in explicating the existence of an aerial soul, such that existence implies the existence of both form (the eternal underlying qualities of a thing) and matter (the physical existence taking up space).²⁷ Since that which has no part has no length or width—in contrast with a line (Def. 2) defined as a breadthless length—a point cannot have any matter. Hence, a point is merely a mathematical representation of that which does not exist but bears the property of having no part; in other words, a point is an approximate of an entity that not physical, but instead abstract.

Language, the fundamental building block of poetry, faces very much the same challenge of describing the indescribable. Certain schools of ontology, represented by philosophers such as Eli Hirsch and Donald Davidson, suggest that questions of what exists is determined purely by what language is used and how—the study of being is necessarily predicated upon yet simultaneously limited by language. This is most evident when Dante is faced with the task of trying to express, poetically and linguistically, the immensity of God. Because size is always relative instead of absolute, Dante description of his experience with God’s divine vastness necessitates comparison: “the light up there that makes the Creator visible... spreads itself out in circular shape so great that its circumference would be far too large a belt for the sun” (*Par.* 30.100-5). As such, Dante’s use of mathematics of geometric figures is a form of language. Furthermore, not only is Dante’s mathematical *content* poetic, but his *terza rima*

structure also lends itself to geometric representations and subsequent literary analysis. Dante's unique rhyme scheme is illustrated by John Freccero as overlapping triangles, where "any complete appearance of a rhyme... incorporates at the same time a recall to the past and a promise of the future that seem to meet in the now of the central rhyme".²⁸ This allows Freccero to draw a parallel between the poem's rhyme scheme with the pilgrim's consistent forward journey through the perspective of a recollecting narrator.

Yet we must also note that, though mathematical representations are likely the closest approximation of the ineffable Divine, Dante himself admits to the sheer inadequacy of human learning when exposed to the eternal Light:

Like a geometer who is all intent to square
the circle and cannot find, for all his thought, the
principle he needs:

such was I at that miraculous sight;
[...]
But my own feathers were not sufficient for that.
(*Par.* 33.133-9)

The ancient problem of "squaring the circle" challenges geometers to construct a square with an area equal to that of a given circle.²⁹ This is analogous to the challenge that Dante faces in *Par.* 33 in trying to describe the indescribable. Just as the geometer tries to bring "the infinite circle and the finite square into a commensurable relationship with each other," Dante tries to construct, using the limitations of human language, an image of the eternal and infinite God.³⁰

The intersection between mathematics and literature often stops at the observation that poetry contains patterns that often can be represented using numbers or variables (eg. syllabi, rhyme scheme). Mathematics, at its core, is a language that represents a specific subset of abstract concepts,

and Dante's usage of it draws upon the rich historical proximity between geometry and theology. As such, the usage of mathematics in texts and mathematical proofs as a piece of text can be interrogated akin to literature for its philosophical implications and aesthetics. ❀

Lu Yi is a strong proponent of the value of studying mathematics in the humanities. Inspired by her project on divine mathematical imagery in Dante, Lu Yi graduated from Yale-NUS College in 2020 with a major in Literature and a minor in MCS. She wrote her capstone on modernist anxiety in 19th century non-Euclidean geometry and literature. She will be pursuing an MBA at the Yale School of Management on a Dean's Scholarship.

1. Georges Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967) xi. See also Dante. *Par.* n.33.115-20.
2. Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, xi.
3. *Ibid.*, xi.
4. Arielle Saiber and Aba Mbirika, "The Three Giri of *Paradiso* XXXIII," 240.
5. Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975) n.33.116-7.
6. John S. Carroll, *In Patria: an exposition of Dante's Paradiso* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911) n.33.142-5.
7. Saiber and Mbirika discuss three-dimensional figures with circular cross-sections briefly.
8. Dante, *Par.* n.33.115-23. See also Saiber and Mbirika, "The Three Giri of *Paradiso* XXXIII," 250.
9. Saiber and Mbirika, "The Three Giri of *Paradiso* XXXIII," 267.
10. Since their paper is quite descriptive, aiming more towards exploring interdisciplinary possibilities between knot theory and Dante studies than drawing conclusions from interpreting Dante mathematically, Saiber and Mbirika do not expound on this claim or analyze the *Liber figurarum* further.
11. Saiber and Mbirika, "The Three Giri of *Paradiso* XXXIII," 267.
12. *Ibid.*, 266. One fascinating topological truth is that Borromean rings containing three perfectly circular rings cannot exist within a three-dimensional plane. To even approach God as the perfect Brunnian link already requires extradimensional analysis.
13. Carroll, *In Patria*, n.33.115-23.
14. Saiber and Mbirika, "The Three Giri of *Paradiso* XXXIII," 266.
15. *Ibid.*, 258.
16. *Ibid.*, 258.
17. *Ibid.*, 258.
18. Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, xi.
19. For a deeper analysis of the first half of the famous definition, see Poulet's introduction to *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*. The circumference is a property unique to circular figures, whereas the center is concerned with the position of the figure in terms of location.

20. In fact, the set of all possible subsets of the natural number set has the same cardinality as the set of real numbers from $[0,1]$. Another way to describe this relationship would be to observe that, for every possible natural number that exists there also exists a real number between $[0,1]$, and vice versa. Increasing largeness is closely associated with infinite smallness.
21. Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, xx, xii.
22. Ibid., xii.
23. Ibid., xii-xiii.
24. Ibid., xiii-xiv.
25. Ibid., xiv.
26. This paper makes no claims regarding the existence of abstract mathematical entities, as that would necessarily warrant a discussion into existence of God. For this reason, this paper circumvents the anti-Platonic leanings of modern mathematical philosophy that heavily dispute the existence of Platonic forms.
27. In his essay "From Plurality to (Near) Unicity of Forms," Gragnolati explains how hylomorphism becomes the basis from which Dante's theological contemporaries, namely Aquinas and Bonaventure, argue the principle of unicity and plurality (194). Though his paper is more concerned with elucidating the embryological treatise Dante places in the mouth of Statius in *Purgatorio* 25, Gragnolati sufficiently establishes hylomorphism as a player within medieval theological dialogue.
28. John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997) 262.
29. Ronald B. Herzman and Gary W. Towsley, "Squaring the Circle: 'Paradiso' 33 and the Poetics of Geometry," 98. This is proven to be an impossible task sometime during the 1800's. A brief sketch of the proof goes as follows. We hypothesize that there exists a square that can be constructed with the same area as a circle. This implies that, for a circle with radius=1, the square has a side length $\sqrt{\pi}$. Both π and $\sqrt{\pi}$ are transcendental and *not* algebraic, and a line that is transcendental cannot be constructed. This contradicts our initial hypothesis, so we conclude that there does not exist such a square. For a more detailed analysis on the definition of mathematical construction, see Herzman and Towsley.
30. Ibid., 112-3.

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