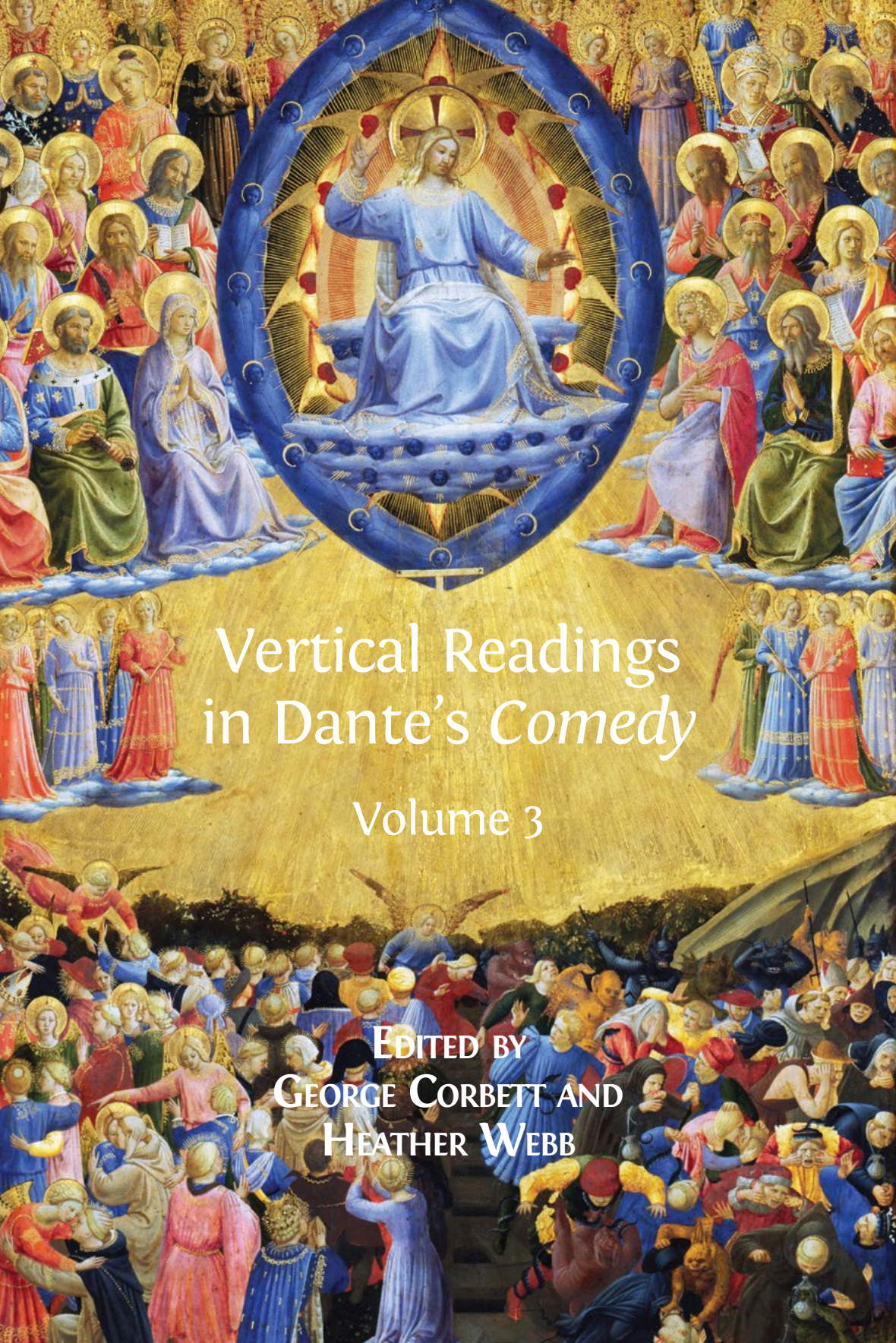

# Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*

## Volume 3

Edited by
George Corbett and
Heather Webb

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# Contents

# 23. Our Bodies, Our Selves: Crucified, Famished, and Nourished

*Peter S. Hawkins*

When I first learned about the Cambridge Vertical Reading project, I felt a sense both of recognition and trepidation. First, the recognition. In 1980, the American *Dante Studies* published my initial foray into literary criticism, 'Virtuosity and Virtue: Poetic Self-Recognition in the *Commedia*'.[1] In it I looked at cantos xxiv–xxvi in all three *cantiche* as forming a programme of reflection on poetry- and poet-making. I focused on the canto Twenty-Sixes and traced what seemed to me a poem-long move from Ulysses, to Guido Guinizzelli and Arnaut Daniel, to Adam. In my fervour I believed I had found a pilgrim's progress of sorts — a growth in understanding of what it means *sub specie aeternitatis* to be a maker of language. Not everyone at *Dante Studies* agreed. One dyspeptic reader found the argument 'preposterous', a 'Procrustean bed'; the journal editor, however, was more tolerant of the essay, which I now see (thanks to this Cambridge series) as a vertical reading *avant la lettre*. At the time I wrote it, however, I had no idea that I was up to anything theoretical; I was simply following a hunch, dazzled as I was (and am) by the *Commedia*'s coherence.

Rereading the essay thirty-five years later, it strikes me as overly schematic in its predictable march onward and upward from Hell to Heaven, from virtuosity to virtue. Nonetheless, the poet's evolving meditation on language in this trio of cantos remains compelling to me.

1 Peter S. Hawkins, 'Virtuosity and Virtue: Poetic Self-Reflection in the *Commedia*', *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 98 (1980), 1–18.

 http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0119.02

When decades later I put together *Dante's Testaments*, I only included 'Poetic Self-Recognition in the *Commedia*' in my bibliography.[2] Nonetheless, looking backward, I take it as a sign, so to speak, that vertical reading need not involve a trespass. Indeed, it may give us clues as to how Dante, like Adam, 'used and shaped' (*Par*., xxvi. 114) his linguistic material so that his impossibly complex poem could, like something organic, *grow* from dark wood to heavenly rose.

In his *Conversation about Dante*, Osip Mandelstam famously likened the *Commedia* to a body governed by the 'incessant craving for the creation of form'; for him it was a work less plotted and pieced than 'guided by instinct'. To conceive how Dante might have imagined 'this form of thirteen thousand facets, so monstrous in its exactitude', Mandelstam asks his readers to compare the poet to a colony of bees, all of them endowed with a 'brilliant isometric instinct […] constantly keeping their eye on the whole': 'Their cooperation expands and grows more complicated as they participate in the process of forming the combs, by means of which space virtually emerges out of itself'.[3] Verticality, therefore, may very well take us into the mind of the maker to reveal the deep structure of the hive as well as the honey packing its combs; it may keep in sight the burgeoning organic form of the whole amid the 'monstrous exactitude' of the parts.

And yet (here comes my trepidation), there is always the threat in Dante studies of what my doubtful reviewer called the 'Procrustean bed', finding not what is there but what you are determined to make appear. The vertical reading enterprise, with its expectation of as yet undetected patterns within the poem — enigma codes to be cracked — can fall into this trap. Easily so, given that so much in the *Commedia* is, in fact, carefully ordered (like the Creator's handiwork the poet was imitating) in 'measure, weight, and number' (Wisdom 11:21). We all know the pleasure, nay the *jouissance* of this text. We routinely enjoy observing (as I will here) the *Commedia*'s symmetries, its significant rhyme schemes and recurring privileged words, its continuous revisiting of the poet's past works as well as earlier moments in the poem, its intertextual networks — what Mandelstam called its currents, flows and metamorphoses.[4] The *Commedia* has been likened to

2 Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 352.

3 Osip Mandelstam, 'Conversation about Dante', trans. by Jane Gray Harris and Constance Link, in *The Poets' Dante: Twentieth-Century Reflections*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 40–93, 54–55.

4 Mandelstam, in *The Poets' Dante*, p. 54.

an echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. Nonetheless, there are open windows in the hall of mirrors, and a life-giving breeze that blows through it. The poem is not airtight. There are provocative inconsistencies, subversions of order, exceptions to rules, precise measurements that play with exactitude. And none of these moments may necessarily fall into a numbered sequence.

Commentators have always found reasons why this or that in the poem should be precisely so, but Dante himself works under no such burden of explanation. He shifts gears when he wants to, repeatedly catches us off guard, stages moments of wonder within the text when we are forced to exclaim with Ser Brunetto Latini, 'Qual maraviglia!' (*Inf.*, xv. 24) or ask with the poet himself, 'Chi crederebbe?' (*Par.*, xx. 67).[5] We mount to Paradise along a well-marked path, to be sure, but climb nonetheless 'by the stairway of surprise'.[6]

In my vertical reading of the canto Twenty-Threes, therefore, I want to give both predictability *and* surprise their due. As a case in point, recall the extraordinarily complex simile that ends *Paradiso* x, given such beautiful readings by John Freccero and Christian Moevs.[7] A luminous ring of circling theologians is likened first to maidens dancing in a round, and then to monastics rising at the dawn office to the call of a mechanical clock. Its inner works — whirling wheels, springs, and balances — perform as needed, with precision. Yet, as we learn in the simile, the mechanical 'works' utterly transcend the coils of rhythm and number; they call to erotic love as well as to prayer. So too the poem. It is evidently constructed of coordinated parts but is also much more than an assemblage. Mandelstam likens it to a body that 'emerges out of itself' into organic form. Its orderly tick-tock resounds with *dolcezza*, even as

5 All citations of the *Commedia*, unless otherwise noted, are from Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980–1984).

6 The suggestive phrase 'stairway of surprise' comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Merlin', in *Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, MA: Phillips, Sampson & Co., 1846):

'Pass in, pass in', the angels say,
'Into the upper doors,
Nor count compartments of the floors,
But mount to paradise
By the stairway of surprise'.

7 John Freccero, 'The Dance of the Stars. *Paradiso X*', in *Dante, The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 221–44; Christian Moevs, 'Miraculous Syllogisms: Clocks, Faith and Reason in *Paradiso* 10 and 24', *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 117 (1999), 59–84.

> l'una parte e l'altra tira e urge,
> tin tin sonando con sì dolce nota
> che il ben disposto spirto d'amor turge.
> (*Par*., x. 142–44, Durling and Martinez)
>
> [one part pulls and the other pushes sounding *tin tin* with so sweet a note that a well-disposed spirit swells with love.]

The rhyme scheme of these verses makes the corporality of the timepiece unmistakably erotic: *surge*, *urge*, *turge.* There is such delectable telling of time in eternity 'dove gioir s'insempra' (l. 148), where the unending drive of desire 'rejoicing forevers itself' among the blessed.

My title, 'Our Bodies, Our Selves' is not meant to suggest that each of the canto Twenty-Threes is particularly 'about' the body, but rather that physicality *per se* — the pilgrim's 'vera carne', the figurations of the shades, and the Word made flesh — are not only a recurring interest but even a preoccupation in these parallel texts. I have no idea if Dante planned it this way *ab initio* in some imagined blueprint of his poetic afterlife. I only know that upon reading these cantos vertically — after more than thirty years of treating them as totally independent of one another — I have found a remarkable sequence at play: bodies crucified, bodies wasting away, and bodies richly nourished.

'Our Bodies, Our Selves' also suggests the different worlds of discourse I draw upon as a critic. One world is sacred, theological, and liturgical — in this instance drawn not from Dante's Latin Mass but from my own Anglican imaginary. I am referring to a sentence that first appears in the Communion Service of Thomas Cranmer's 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, which reads, 'And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee'.[8] This unity of soul and flesh together constituting 'ourselves' — a 'lively' unity guaranteed by the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come (to recall the Apostles' Creed) — is Christian doctrinal commonplace; it is also imaginative bedrock for Dante. Indeed, we learn of it throughout the *Commedia*: in Hell from Virgil (*Inf*., vi. 94–99) and Pier della Vigna (*Inf*., xiii. 94–118); in Purgatory from Statius (*Purg*., xxv. 31–108) — who supplements the infernal accounts with his 'eternal view' ('veduta etterna', l. 31) — and finally from Solomon in the Heaven of the Sun, who speaks

8 'The Holy Eucharist', p. 336 in *The (Online) Book of Common Prayer*, http://www.bcponline.org/HE/he1.html

of the deep longing of the blessed both for their own dead bodies and for those of their beloveds:

> […] per le mamme,
> per li padre, e per li altri che fuor cari
> anzi che fosser sempiterne fiamme. (*Par.*, xiv. 64–66)
>
> [for their mamas, for their fathers, and for others who were dear before they became eternal flames.]

The *embodied* soul, in other words, is the only way that Dante can imagine ourselves. But if my title links me to theological tradition, it also evokes the secular time and place of someone who intellectually came of age in the 1970s. I am referring in particular to feminist and queer reading practices that influence what I have come to notice in any text. *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, is the title of a formative publication in 1973 that grew out of the Boston women's movement and then quickly became required reading for American women who wanted to take charge of their own health and pleasure — to reclaim their bodies and selves. Although the book itself had no direct impact on me, feminist ways of thinking and reading did, primarily through their emphasis not only on the presence (or absence) of women in any given text, but more generally on the representation of human physicality. I do not think it a coincidence that so many medievalists who have stressed the body in their scholarship — Rachel Jacoff (whose study of the body in the *Commedia* is also titled, 'Our Bodies, Ourselves'), Caroline Bynum, Nancy Vickers, Margaret Miles, Heather Webb, Christiana Purdy Moudarres — are women.[9]

9 Rachel Jacoff, 'Our Bodies, Our Selves: The Body in the *Commedia*', in *Sparks and Seeds. Medieval Literature and its Afterlife: Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, ed. by Dana Stewart and Alison Cornish, Binghamton Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 119–38; Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 1200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1989); Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). To this roster I would add the commentary of Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez; Gary Cestaro, *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); Manuele Gragnolati, in both *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) and *Amor che move: linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013); and *Dante and the Human Body*, ed. by John C. Barnes and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), esp. Vittorio Montemaggi, '"La Rosa che il verbo divino carne si fece": Human Bodies and Truth in the Poetic Narrative of the *Commedia*', pp. 159–94.

This interest in the literary representation of the body has sensitized me to the presence of what I might otherwise have missed in the canto Twenty-Threes. Let me start with the pilgrim, who is unique in the afterlife by virtue of being in his flesh, 'questa vera carne' (*Purg*., xxiii. 123); or, as he tells the astonished hypocrites, 'son col corpo ch'i ho sempre avuto' [I am here with the body I have always had] (*Inf*., xxiii. 96). Because of his living flesh Dante's hair curls up when he is terrified (*Inf*., xxiii. 19–20); his throat throbs when he speaks (*Inf*., xxiii. 88); his solidity 'veils the sun' (*Purg*., xxiii. 114); and his gait is slow or quick depending on the company he keeps.

The shades he encounters have their aerial bodies variously disposed. The arch-hypocrites are nailed to the ground, writhing, their beards ruffled with their agonized sighs (*Inf*., xxiii. 112–13). Among the penitent gluttons we note taut skin dried out with scabs, faces barely more than skulls, and eye sockets that seem like rings that have lost their gemstones: 'chi nel viso de li uomini legge *omo* / ben avria quivi conosciuta l'emme' [those who read *omo* on the human face would have recognized the *M* there clearly] (*Purg*., xxiii. 32–33). In addition to the bodies we observe in *bolgia* or terrace there are those we hear about, either from the poet or from the shades. In *Purgatorio* xxiii, for instance, there is Mary, a starving mother in ancient Jerusalem, who turned cannibal and who 'nel figlio diè di becco' [plunged her beak into her son] (ll. 28–30); there is a bloodied Christ on the cross who cries out '*Eli*' in paradoxical joy (l. 75); and there are 'le sfacciate donne fiorentine / l'andar mostrando con le poppe il petto [the brazen ladies of Florence [who] flaunt their nipples with their breasts] (ll. 101–02, Hollander), about whom Forese Donati vents his misogynistic spleen.

Also present off-stage, so to speak, is Forese's faithful widow Nella, celebrated lovingly in *Purgatorio* xxiii but the object of derision in the *tenzone* Dante once exchanged with his erstwhile friend.[10] In the first of those six sonnets Forese's 'malfatata / moglie' [poor, ill-fated wife] (l. 1) is conjured as unflatteringly as possible. She is wracked by a cough, gripped by cold ('infredatta'; l. 5), frozen in bed because of her husband's sexual inattention. In his poetic response Forese gave back as good as he received. Now in Purgatory Dante confesses to his old friend the heavy memory of 'qual fosti meco e qual io teco fui' [what you have been with me and I with you] (l. 116).

10 For Dante's dispute with Forese, see 'Dispute with Forese Donati — I', in *Dante: Lyric Poems: New Translation*, trans. by Joseph Tusiani, http://www.italianstudies.org/poetry/cn13.htm

Bodies are largely invisible in *Paradiso* xxiii with the exception of Dante and Beatrice, the one in his *vera carne*, the other encountered in her resurrection body. Otherwise luminosity is all. Christ's risen and ascended flesh, his 'lucente Sustanza' (l. 32), is a sun too bright for Dante to behold (ll. 32–33). Mary, also assumed bodily into Heaven and later identified as having 'la faccia che a Cristo / più si somiglia' [the face that most resembles Christ] (*Par*., xxxii. 85–86), can be glimpsed (*Par*., xxiii. 91) but not quite seen (ll. 118–19). She can be made present, however, by repeated naming: twice by title, 'Donna del ciel' [Lady of Heaven] (l. 106) and 'Regina coeli' [Queen of Heaven] (l. 128); three times as 'Maria' [Mary] (ll. 111, 126, 137) — 'the name', the poet says, 'I ever invoke / both morning and evening' ('Il nome […] ch'io sempre invoco / e mane e sera'; ll. 88–89) — and by resort to multiple traditional metaphors: she is a 'rosa' [rose] (l. 73), a 'bel fior' [lovely flower] (l. 88), a 'viva stella' [living star] (l. 92), 'il bel zaffiro / del quale il Ciel più chiaro s'inzaffira' [the beautiful sapphire with which the brightest Heaven is ensapphired] (ll. 101–02), and a 'coronata fiamma' [crowned flame] (l. 119).

Although we never see the bodily forms of the blessed who fill the ranks of the Church Triumphant in *Paradiso* xxiii, we are nonetheless asked to imagine them alternately as male 'armies' ('schiere', l. 19; 'turbe', l. 82) and 'good plowmen' ('buone bobolce', 132); as a 'bel giardino / che sotto i raggi di Cristo s'infiora' [lovely garden blooming under the rays of Christ] (ll. 71–72) and as 'gigli / al cui odor si prese il buon cammino' [lilies whose perfume won people to the good path] (ll. 74–75); and, most touchingly, as infants satisfied at the breast (ll. 121–26). Last but not least, there is an unnamed angel who descends to the Fixed Stars as a flame, but who, in the poet's kaleidoscope of metaphor, becomes a ring that seems first a crown (l. 95), then a revolving garland (l. 96), and finally a circulating melody (l. 109). As a figure of 'angelico amore' (l. 103), his acts of fervid devotion to the Virgin evoke the Marian liturgical celebrations that no doubt inform Dante's composition of the scene: first the Annunciation, when ''l verbo divino / carne si fece' [the Word of God became flesh] (ll. 73–74), then the Assumption, and finally Mary's Coronation in Heaven at the hands of 'l'alto Filio / di Dio e di Maria' [the high Son of God and Mary] (ll. 136–37).

Amid this explosion of metaphor — in a realm where materiality is vividly imagined but almost entirely absent — it is important to recognize the specifically *maternal* relationship that brackets *Paradiso* xxiii and gives it its distinctive emotional quality. The canto opens with Beatrice likened to

a mother bird perched on her nest after a nightlong vigil over her brood (ll. 1–12).[11] She is up just before daybreak, ready to feed the 'longed for faces' of her beloved fledglings 'as she awaits with warm affection, / steadfastly watching for the dawn to break' ('con ardente affetto il sole aspetta, / fiso guardando pur che l'alba nasca', ll. 8–9). With the word *alba* in play, critics have referenced the literary dawn song, a genre that typically laments the moment when lovers are forced to leave their illicit bedroom 'nest' at daybreak.[12] Here, however, the erotic register becomes filial and maternal, regret turns into joy, and the morning light — John Donne's detested 'busie old foole, unruly Sunne'[13] — is eagerly awaited and even longed for (ll. 7–9).

From this maternal beginning the canto moves toward a vision of Mary as mother and nurse. Just when the Blessed Virgin rises to the Empyrean following closely upon the ascension of her Son, the blessed, who are totally enamoured of her, are likened collectively to an infant, a 'fantolino' envisioned at the precise moment *after* he has nursed his fill. We have license to imagine cheeks messy with milk, eyes fluttering closed and him only a hair's breadth away from sleep — a child who raises his arms in wordless love to the *mamma* who has just given suck:

> E come fantolin che 'nver ' la mamma
> tende le braccia, poi che 'l latte prese,
> per l'animo che 'nfin di fuor s'infiamma;
> ciascun di quei candori in sù si stese
> con la sua cima, sì che l'alto affetto
> ch'elli avieno a Maria mi fu palese. (*Par*., xxiii. 121–26)
>
> [And like an infant who, when it has taken its milk, extends its arms out to its mother, its feeling kindling into outward flame, each of those blessed splendours stretched its peak upward, so that the deep affection each possessed for Mary was made plain to me.]

11 See Rachel Jacoff, '*Paradiso* 23: Circular Melody', in *California Lectura Dantis: 'Paradiso'*, ed. by Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, forthcoming): 'The canto reveals the poet to be making one of his fundamental moves: he "maternalizes" Beatrice to neutralize the erotic dimension of his love for her, and then eroticizes the maternal to restore the affective component so important to the poem's texture. Beatrice is like the attentive nurturing mother bird, but the bird is described in language which retains the lexicon of stilnovistic love lyric'.

12 In their commentary on *Paradiso* xxiii. 1–15, Durling and Martinez refer to a sacred version of the *alba*. See also their notes on *Par*., ix. 9.37–42.

13 John Donne, 'The Sunne Rising', in *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century, Donne to Butler*, ed. by Herbert J. C. Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1921); Bartleby.com, http://www.bartleby.com/105/3.html

*La mamma… s'infiamma*: *Paradiso* xxiii is all about the 'kindling' of kind, as mother love bursts into flame, an infant in arms is nurtured at the breast, and deep mutuality brightens the Heaven. The effect is spectacular; it is also what one might expect from a poet whose journey to Paradise is constructed around female mediation, a full circle that begins in the Empyrean at the behest of 'tre donne benedette' (*Inf*., ii. 124) and also ends there with the intercession of the 'Vergine madre' (*Par*., xxxiii. 1).

In this canto, therefore, the poet gives us a foretaste of Paradise as a realm of blissful maternal nurture and female abundance ('ubertà', l. 130). It celebrates not only Beatrice and Mary, but also (in the poet's lengthy address to the reader, in ll. 49–69) Polyhymnia and her sisters (ll. 55–57), the Muses who are his literary wet nurses. Unlike the composite coliseum and rose of the actual City of God (*Paradiso* xxx–xxxii), the image-rich preview of the Empyrean we witness here is a celestial nursery — a 'kindergarten' made possible by the fruit of Mary's *ventre*, 'ventre / che fu albergo del nostro disiro' [womb that sheltered our desire] (ll. 104–05). This is Dante's version of Augustine's region of unending plenty ('regionem ubertatis indeficientis', *Confessions* 9.10).[14] Or, better yet, it is the Heaven that the seventeenth-century poet Richard Crashaw characterized as 'Milk all the way'.[15]

To climb down the ladder of verticality from this richly female space to the depths of *Inferno* xxiii is to descend from the blessed singing the *Regina coeli* to smart-talking thirteenth-century Frati Gaudenti — hypocrites weighed down by gilded leaden habits, who walk in ponderous procession over the supine forms of ancient Hebrew religious hierarchy. It is a return to the world of men that is also an infernal travesty of the Church Triumphant, the 'collegio / de l'ipocriti tristi' [college of the sad hypocrites] (ll. 91–92). No more roses, lilies, and infantile bliss! Instead, as *Inferno* xxiii opens up, we move between the hardscrabble realms of barratry and hypocrisy. Pilgrim and guide frantically flee the pursuit of the winged Malebranche, the two sliding down the fifth *bolgia*'s embankment in a striking reenactment of

14 *St. Augustine's Confessions*, trans. by William Watts, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 48–49. In an earlier passage Augustine imagines the eternal life of a recently deceased friend as a kind of eternal nursing: 'Now lays he his ear no longer unto my mouth; but lays his spiritual mouth unto thy fountain, and drinketh as much of wisdom as he is able to contain, proportional to his thirst: now without end happy' (p. 13). Cf. the unhappy nursing infants, envious of one another's hold on the breast, in *Conf*. 1. 7 (pp. 20–23).

15 Richard Crashaw, 'To the Infant Martyrs', Poetry Foundation, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/181069#poem

their embrace and scary descent on the back of Geryon (*Inf.*, xvii. 81–96). But now we are presented not with two grown males securely seated on a divinely-controlled monster, but (at least as seen through the lens of simile) with Virgil as a panicked mother and Dante as a child ('figlio', ll. 40, 49) holding tight to the parental breast.

The simile is lengthy, a double comparison that stretches to a full five tercets. It is also, in the first instance, intensely dramatic: a house in flames at night, a startled mother forgetful of her *déshabillé*, a rescued child she loves more than herself. The alacrity of the mother's care, her great haste in the face of danger, is what sets up the likeness to Virgil's speedy vigilance. But with the shift from simile to narrative, melodrama quickly becomes comedy as the briefly imagined *madre* turns back into the pilgrim's *maestro.* The scene is disarmingly antic: the *altissimo poeta* of antiquity is indecorously on the run, sliding down the *bolgia*'s embankment as if careening down a millrace, with the thirty-five-year-old pilgrim held in his arms, borne on his chest, 'come suo figlio, non come compagno' [just like a son, and not like a companion] (l. 51).

In *Purgatorio* xxiii the pilgrim refers to Virgil as 'più che padre' (l. 4). And for good reason: over the course of the second canticle he is seen more and more as a mother than as a father, most explicitly when Statius, without knowing that he stands in the presence of 'Virgilio dolcissimo patre' (*Purg.*, xxx. 50), credits the Latin master's great epic poem as the source of his own poetic inspiration. Virgil's celebration of that 'giusto / figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia / poi che 'l superbo Ilïon fu combusto' [just son of Anchises who came from Troy when proud Ilion was destroyed by fire] (*Inf.*, i. 73–75), was, he says, the divine flame from which he gathered his own embers and sparks: 'de *l'Eneïda* dico, la qual mamma / fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando' [Of the *Aeneid* I mean, which was my mama and was my nurse in writing poetry] (*Purg.*, xxi. 97–98, Durling and Martinez).

At the beginning of the poem the pilgrim offers a similar encomium when, upon meeting the one who would be his *guida*, *duca*, *signore*, *saggio*, he praises Virgil as the honour and light of other poets:

> 'Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
> tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
> lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore'. (*Inf.* i. 85–87)
>
> [You are my master and my author, you alone are he from whom I have taken the pleasing style that has won me honour] (Durling and Martinez).

Although Dante and Statius are separated by millennia, the venerable Roman *pater* played the role of *mamma* and *nutrice*, mother and nurse, for both of them. And not only in *poetando*: Virgil also nurtured the spiritual conversions that launched them on their respective journeys to God. For Statius, reading the *Fourth Eclogue* in the light of the Gospel in effect rolled away the stone ('coperchio', *Purg*., xxi. 94–95) that had long concealed his apprehension of the good; for Dante, Virgil the shade (at the bidding of Mary, Lucy, and Beatrice) led him out of the dark wood, setting him on the 'vera via' that brings him to the Empyrean. That itinerary is in fact recalled in *Purgatorio* xxiii. 124–29.

There are many micro-observations one could make about the correspondences among the canto Twenty-Threes. There are, for instance, references to Jerusalem in each set (*Inf*., xxiii. 115–23; *Purg*., xxiii. 28–30, 73–75; *Par*., xxiii. 133–34: 'lo essilio / di Babillòn'). There is also a foregrounding of the human breast in quite different contexts: the 'petto' (*Inf*., xxiii. 50) of Virgil on the run, the salaciously displayed 'poppe' (*Purg*., xxiii. 102) of Florentine women, and the *Maria lactans* of *Paradiso* xxiii, whose spiritual nursing inspires the deep affection ('l'alto affeto', l. 125) of the blessed.

In addition to these minute connections, there is a larger feature shared by all three cantos, a dramatic moment when the pilgrim looks into the eyes of another and is stopped in his tracks by wonder. The most elaborate of these is the last in the sequence. It takes place in *Paradiso* xxiii, when Beatrice, after previously withholding her gaze in the Heaven of Saturn — and withholding her smile in particular — now bids Dante see her 'face to face':

> 'Apri li occhi e riguarda qual son io;
> tu hai vedute cose, che possente
> se' fatto a sostener lo riso mio'. (*Par*., xxiii. 43–48)
>
> [Open your eyes and see what I now am; the things you witnessed will have made you strong enough to bear the power of my smile.]

It is impossible at this point not to recall the refusal of Beatrice to be seen directly in *Purgatorio* xxx, and then the very hesitant, gradual way in which she unveils herself over the course of the following canto. First she gave the pilgrim her eyes, then the 'second beauty' of her mouth — which prompts the poet to give his readers what amounts to the first ineffability *topos* of the *Paradiso*:

> 'O isplendor di viva luce etterna:
> chi palido si fece sotto l'ombra
> sì di Parnaso, o bevve in sua cisterna,
> che non paresse aver la mente ingombra,
> tentando a render te qual tu paresti
> là dove armonizzando il ciel t'adombra,
> quando ne l'aere aperto ti solvesti?' (*Purg*., xxxi. 139–45)
>
> [O splendor of living light eternal, who has ever grown so pale under Parnassus' shade or drunk so deep of its well that he would not seem to have a mind disabled, trying to render you as you appeared there, Heaven with its harmonies overhanging you, when in the open air you disclosed yourself?] (Singleton).

In *Paradiso* xxiii, by contrast, there is nothing gradual about Beatrice's self-revelation, no need for wooing by her attendant virtues; indeed, she could not be more direct: 'Apri li occhi e riguarda qual son io' [Open your eyes and see what I now am] (l. 46). Yet, rather than describe the increased splendour of her face, eyes, mouth, and smile, the poet struggles in vain to recall the memory. In an address to the reader that stretches for seven *terzine*, he confesses what he once saw 'face to face': her visage aflame ('suo viso ardesse', l. 22), the joy ('letizia', l. 23) flashing in her eyes, her holy smile ('santo riso', l. 59). Despite the effort of memory and art, however, not even a thousandth part of the truth ('al millesmo del vero', l. 58) can be told:

> e così, figurando il paradiso,
> convien saltar lo sacrato poema,
> come chi trova suo cammin riciso. (*Par*., xxiii. 61–63)
>
> [And thus, in representing Paradise, the sacred poem has to leap across, as does a man who finds his path cut off.]

If the poet's inability to represent Beatrice marks a representational failure, it is nonetheless one extravagantly rich in literary reward. It enables him to review his career as a love poet starting from his launch in the *Vita nuova* 21.4, when he first registered the ineffability of Beatrice's smile;[16] then it brings him to the present moment of his writing as he leaps across a visionary

16 *VN*. XXI. 4: 'Quel ch'ella par quando un poco sorride, / non si può dicer né tenere a mente, / sì è novo miracolo e gentile' [When she a little smiles, her aspect then / No tongue can tell, no memory can hold, / So rare and strange a miracle is she.] (*Dante, Vita nuova*, trans. by, Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 61).

chasm with whatever words he can muster.[17] The term 'cammino riciso' [path cut off] (l. 63) takes us back to the very beginning of the poem — 'Nel mezzo del cammin' — and provides a metaphor not only for the pilgrim's journey but also for the literary path of the *Commedia* itself. So, too, the comparison of the poet to a navigator and the *Commedia* to a 'picciola barca' (*Purg*., xxiii. 67–69) recalls the openings of both *Purgatorio* i (ll. 1–3) and *Paradiso* ii (ll. 1–18).

Yet not everything is retrospective as the passage also looks forward. Two cantos hence, in *Paradiso* xxv, Dante will once again refer to his work as a sacred poem, but will do so in still more ambitious terms. His *Commedia* is a 'poema sacro' to which both Heaven and earth have set a hand (ll. 1–2): God is his co-author. We are reminded there as well that the trembling of his mortal shoulder under the burden of his theme, confided in *Paradiso* xxiii 64–66, has indeed taken its toll on his person. No longer a lamb in the Florentine sheepfold, he acknowledges that he is grizzled and worn (l. 6), barred from the city where he would be a shepherd of the flock. Perhaps in part because of what he has earned through suffering, he no longer scruples to reserve the title of 'poeta' exclusively for the poets of antiquity. He openly claims it for himself — 'ritornerò poeta' (l. 8) — even if receiving the laurel crown at the font of his baptism remains only in the future conditional tense, 'Se mai continga' [if it ever should come to pass] (l. 1).

Finally, although the splendour of Beatrice's holy smile and face in the Heaven of Fixed Stars defy description, her ineffable *riso* and *aspetto* nonetheless prepare us for the poet's plight in the Empyrean: 'A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa' [Here my high imagining failed of power] (*Par*., xxxiii. 142). His initial incapacity in the face of Beatrice becomes his failure before the face of Christ, 'la nostra effige' (l. 130). In either case, however, his poetic defeat is not only 'fairly honorable' but fully resonant. It 'says' more than he can say.

To descend the vertical ladder from this paradisiacal height to *Purgatorio* xxiii entails a falling off in splendour and implication. Nonetheless, on the sixth terrace there is another carefully established 'face to face' moment and yet another cause for wonder. The scene is initially set up by liturgical chanting as the penitent gluttons sing an appropriate phrase from Psalm 50

17 See Teodolinda Barolini, 'The Sacred Poem is Forced to Jump', in *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 218–56 (esp. pp. 226–29).

(51). That psalm's incipit, '*Miserere*', was the pilgrim's first spoken word in the poem (*Inf.*, i. 65). Here, the gluttons choose another verse, 'Labïa mëa, Domine', that specifically calls attention to what lips, mouth, and tongue are meant to do in lieu of consumption: 'O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise' (Psalms 50 [51]: 15). Immediately, Dante and Virgil are overtaken by a crowd of souls who look upon them with wonder ('ci ammirava', l. 20). The pilgrim is no less astonished by their extreme 'leanness and sad scurf' (l. 39). Soon one stare begets another:

> ed ecco del profondo de la testa
> volse a me li occhi un'ombra e guardò fiso;
> poi gridò forte: 'Qual grazia m'è questa?'
> Mai non l'avrei riconosciuto al viso;
> ma ne la voca sua mi fu palese
> ciò che l'aspetto in sè avea conquiso.
> Questa favilla tutta mi raccese
> mia conoscenza a la cangiata labbia,
> e ravvisai la faccia di Forese. (*Purg.*, xxiii. 40–48)

> [when — there! — a shade, his eyes deep in his head, turned toward me, staring steadily; and then he cried aloud: 'What grace is granted me!' I never would have recognized him by his face; and yet his voice made plain to me what his appearance had obliterated. This spark rekindled in me everything I knew about those altered features; thus, I realized it was Forese's face.]

'Ravvisai la faccia di Forese': Dante's recognition of an old friend's 'viso' and 'faccia' has less to do with what he sees than with the unique sound of what he hears: 'la voce sua mi fu palese'. There follows an encounter as warm as those shared earlier in Purgatory with two other Florentine *compagni*, Casella (*Purgatorio* ii) and Belacqua (*Purgatorio* iv). Dante learns about how Purgatory 'works': how someone like Forese, deceased for only five years (l. 78), could rise so high on the mountain because of his wife Nella's intercessory prayer (ll. 76–90); how aerial bodies through hunger and thirst can 'resanctify' themselves ('si rifà santa', l. 60); and how the gluttons' starvation is also the source of their comfort and joy (ll. 61–75).

*Purgatorio* xxiii concludes with Dante telling Forese about the one who has been *his* comfort and joy thus far, the companion who led him down through the infernal 'deep night of those truly dead' ('profonda note […] d'i veri morti', ll. 121–22) and up the purgatorial mountain that straightens

all 'whom the world twisted' ('che 'l mondo fece torti', l. 126). Paradise will be the end of his long journey, but when the pilgrim reaches that goal it will no longer be in the company of Virgil: 'quivi convenien che sanza lui rimagna' [there I must remain without him] (l. 129).

This painful departure takes place in *Purgatorio* xxx, but has been foretold from the very beginning of the poem, and by none other than Virgil. Because he did not know God, was even a 'rebel to his law' (*legge*), the Emperor who reigns on high bars his entrance to Heaven's gate:

> 'In tutte parti impera e quivi regge;
> quivi è la sua città e l'alto seggio:
> oh felice colui cui' ivi elegge!' (*Inf.*, i. 124–29)
>
> [In every place he commands, and there he rules (*regge*); there is his city and high throne: O happy the one he chooses (*elegge*) to be there!] (Durling and Martinez).

Dante's personal shepherd is kept from the company of the elect.

Another such moment of painful recognition takes place earlier within our vertical span, in *Inferno* xxiii, after Dante and the hypocrites have exchanged mutual wonder over their respective bodies — the pilgrim's living flesh, the shades' cheeks distilled by grief, their bodies grotesquely impaled upon the ground. The poet then turns our attention to Virgil. Like Dante, he has learned that the naked soul 'crucifisso in terra con tre pali' [crucified on the ground by three stakes] (l. 111) is Caiaphas, the high priest who provided the Sanhedrin's warrant for handing over Jesus to his Roman crucifixion: 'che convenia / pore un uom per lo popolo a' martiri' [it was prudent to let one man — and not one nation — suffer] (ll. 115–17). These words are a close translation of John 11:50 in the Vulgate: '*expedit nobis ut unus moriatur pro populo et non tota gens pereat*'. Prudence here is a cover for expediency, however: it is meant to get Jesus, who has just raised Lazarus to the people's acclaim, out of the way. Recollected in the sixth *bolgia*, the verses bring us into the world of the New Testament, and to the saying that in effect sets the Passion of Christ in motion.

At first sight of Caiaphas, Dante's attention is caught ('l'occhio mi corse', l. 110) even *before* the high priest is identified: simply seeing him crucified on the ground is enough. But we are told that Virgil stands transfixed only *after* the Friars' three-terzina identification. What follows is a 'freeze frame' that intensifies the theme of amazement. For the one and only time in Hell,

*Virgilio* is spellbound by what he sees. Yet rather than bring us inside his thoughts, the poet chooses simply to show him mid-marvel:

> Allor vid' io maravigliar Virgilio
> sovra colui ch'era disteso in croce
> tanto vilmente ne l'etterno essilio. (*Inf.*, xxiii. 124–26)
>
> [Then I saw Virgil stand amazed above that one who lay stretched out upon a cross so squalidly in his eternal exile.]

Because so much is left unsaid, Dante in effect gives us license to 'flesh out' the scene: to imagine Virgil stooping to behold the distended form of Caiaphas 'in croce'; to imagine his astonished face registering shock before the one who appears 'tanto vilmente' beneath his gaze. This intense absorption in the damned, often reproved when indulged in by the pilgrim, stands in contrast to Virgil's deportment elsewhere in the *Inferno*. We cannot help but take notice. What does his wonder mean?

Commentators have their theories. As a Roman, whose death in 19 BCE made him a near contemporary with Caiaphas, both Virgil and the high priest would have been no strangers to the horrors of crucifixion. Virgil would not, however, have seen this particular cast of characters — or this punishment — during his earlier descent through Hell (referenced in *Inferno* ix). Nor as a pagan could he ever imagine that the opprobrium of the cross in all its 'vileness' might ever be understood as an instrument of salvation. The transformation of agony into something like pleasure is precisely what Forese alludes to in *Purgatorio* xxiii when he and the other penitents interpret Christ's cry of dereliction — '*Eloi, eloi, lema sabbachthani*' (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34) — as a joyful utterance ('Christo lieto a dire "*Eli*"', l. 74). There is no solace in *this* sight, however — no paradoxical amazement.

As we are so often reminded in the *Commedia*, between Virgil and Christian reality there is 'a great gulf fixed'. How poignant, then, that Dante should bring Caiaphas and Virgil together in a gaze. One shade who knew Christ in the flesh and rejected him, the other who lived only decades before the Word was made flesh, 'nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi' [in the time of the false and lying gods] (*Inf.*, i. 72), and therefore was too late for the age of grace.[18]

18 See my longer discussion of this moment in *Dante's Testaments*, pp. 114–19.

Virgil's amazement here is perhaps meant to remain a mystery, but I wonder if his fascination with Caiaphas may have as much to do with what he has *overheard* as with what he sees before him on the ground. I am thinking of the Friar's incrimination of the high priest when he quotes the notorious words addressed to the Sanhedrin's 'concilio' [council] (l. 122): 'un uom per lo popolo a' martiri' [one man — and not one nation — suffer] (l. 117). In this close translation of John 11:50 there is an uncanny echo of a line towards the end of *Aeneid* 5, when Aeneas and his men are approaching the shore of Italy. The hero's fearful mother, Venus, intercedes with Neptune for Trojan safe passage; her prayer is granted, but only with Neptune's proviso. Someone must die so that the Trojan remnant can live: '*unum pro multis dabitur caput*' [one life must be given for many] (5. 815).

What do we make of this intertextual link between Gospel and epic? Is it that Virgil hears his own words in those of the high priest and is amazed, perhaps horrified, at their superficial congruence? I am not suggesting any equivalence between Caiaphas' stratagem and the call for human sacrifice that Virgil puts into the mouth of Neptune, nor any commonality between a '*nescius*' Trojan like the helmsman Palinurus (as unknowing as Virgil's other fated victims) and Christ, who made himself a sacrifice, who suffered his death as a martyr ('un uom […] a' martiri', to quote Caiaphas), and not only for his own nation, but 'to gather together in one the children of God, that were dispersed' (as John 11:52 goes on to assert). Rather, I wonder if, given Virgil's startling fixation, together with the resonance of these two texts, we are meant to find in the high priest's *etterno essilio* a grotesque, pitiless image of the ancient poet's own exile. For all their differences, they have some words in common.

Although the damned all live in a state of exile, Virgil's *essilio* is the one we are forced to keep in mind, in part because he refers to it again and again. In *Inferno* i he tells Dante that he is banished forever from the heavenly 'regna' (l. 124); on the brink of Limbo he explains the rationale for his exile (*Inf.*, iv. 31–42); and then in the second canticle he returns to it several times when speaking with Cato (*Purg.*, i. 76–78), the pilgrim (iii. 37–45), Sordello (vii. 7–8), and Statius (xxi. 16–18). In this latter exchange, Statius initially mistakes Virgil and Dante as fellow penitents when he extends them the *Dominus vobiscum*, 'O frati miei, Dio vi dea pace!' [O my brothers, God give you peace] (l. 13). To this, *Virgilio* (l. 14) replies appropriately — in whatever form such a reply might take! ('*et cum spiritu tuo*?') — before he sets the record straight: 'Nel beato concilio / ti ponga in pace la verace corte / che

me rilega ne'etterno essilio' [May the true *court* which binds me in eternal *exile* bring you in peace to the assembly of the blest though it binds me to eternal exile] (ll. 16–18).[19]

*Virgilio*, *concilio*, *essilio*: in a slightly different order we first heard these same rhyme words in *Inferno* xxiii, when Dante presented Virgil's amazement over Caiaphas: *concilio*, *Virgilio*, *essilio*. But this second instance is not the final rhyming. We hear these words once more resounding across the vertical universe of the poem at the conclusion of *Paradiso* xxiii. There is, however, one telling substitution to note there. The passage in question marks a transition in the eighth Heaven between mothers and fathers, breast and brain, garden nursery and university examination hall. St Peter, holding the keys to the kingdom, appears on the horizon of the canto's final line ready to begin a three-canto interrogation of the pilgrim on the theological virtues. Just before that shift in scene, the poet reflects on what he has encountered in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars. With what may be an allusion to the reversal of fortune celebrated in Psalm 125 (126) — 'They that sow in tears shall reap with joy' (5) — he contrasts the eternal bounty of Heaven, its milky *ubertà*, with the struggles of the blessed while on earth. Speaking of Paradise, he says: 'Quivi si vive e gode del Tesoro / che s'acquistò piangendo ne lo essilio / di Babillòn […] sotto l'alto Filio / di dio e Maria […] e con l'antico e col novo concilio' [Here do they live, delighting in the treasure they earned with tears in Babylonian *exile* […] under the high Son of God and of Mary […] together with the ancient and the new / *councils*' (ll. 133–38). In this summary, the *essilio* of Babylon is juxtaposed with Heaven's bicameral *concilio*. The verbal repetition is almost exact. Missing from the familiar rhyme scheme, however, is the name we have come to treasure, *Virgilio*. Taking its place in the rhyme now — in Paradise — is Christ, the '*Filio* di Dio e di Maria'. Before doing my vertical reading, I had missed the fact of this substitution — a new name in place of the old — as well as the bitter-sweetness of the absent presence.

Two exilic fates haunt the *Commedia*: Virgil's from the City of God, known from the outset, and Dante's from the commune of Florence, slowly revealed over the course of the poem. The first is eternal and absolute, reiterated even in the eleventh-hour of *Paradiso* xxxiii, where a final Virgilian allusion strikes a tragic note by focusing on the experience of loss — 'si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla' (l. 66). In this closing moment we are asked

19 I am grateful to Joy Lawrence Clark for her insights on the 'essilio' rhyme scheme in 'Dante's Virgil: A Poet's Type of Exile' (doctoral thesis, Boston University, 2006).

to experience once again the plangent repetition of *Purgatorio* xxx's Virgilio, Virgilio, Virgilio, albeit this time without Beatrice's reproof. The sheer loss of Virgil, however, is not to be lost on us.

By contrast, the whole effort of the *Commedia* is meant to transform the disaster of Dante's temporal exile into a spiritual exodus, a release from Babylonian captivity into that heavenly Promised Land 'onde Cristo è romano' [where Christ is a Roman] (*Purg*., xxxii. 102). What finally marks the difference between the lost *madre-padre*, on the one hand, and the 'found' *fantolino-figlio*, on the other, is none other than Christ, the figure whose 'triumph' ('trïunfa', l. 136) and 'victory' ('vittoria', l. 137) bring *Paradiso* xxiii to a celebratory close. Like the *poema sacro* itself, the 'Filio di Dio e di Maria' joins together Heaven and earth, eternity and time. Because of him, there is no exile from the 'councils old and new' that the pilgrim will see in the Empyrean, but that Virgil will not.

One of the surprises of this investigation is the fact that Christ's physical presence is so subtly woven through the canto Twenty-Threes. In one passage or another we take in the full course of his life's story, from his conception in the Virgin's womb, to his Passion and death on the cross, to his Ascension to the highest sphere. Following this itinerary, we focus on his body and perceive him — and it — according to different perspectives: perversely, through the crucifixions depicted in *Inferno* xxiii; paradoxically, in the recollection of the bloodied joy uttered in his cry '*Elì*' in *Purgatorio* xxiii; salvifically, in Beatrice's celebration of him as 'la Sapïenza e la Possanza / ch'aprì le strade tra 'l Cielo e la terra' [the Wisdom and the Power that / opened the pathways between Heaven and earth] (*Par*., xxiii. 37–39). With the canto Twenty-Threes read vertically, therefore, it would almost seem as if Dante had intended us to see that Christ's Incarnation cuts across the *Commedia*. In the poet's disembodied afterlife, flesh is all. His body, ourselves.

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