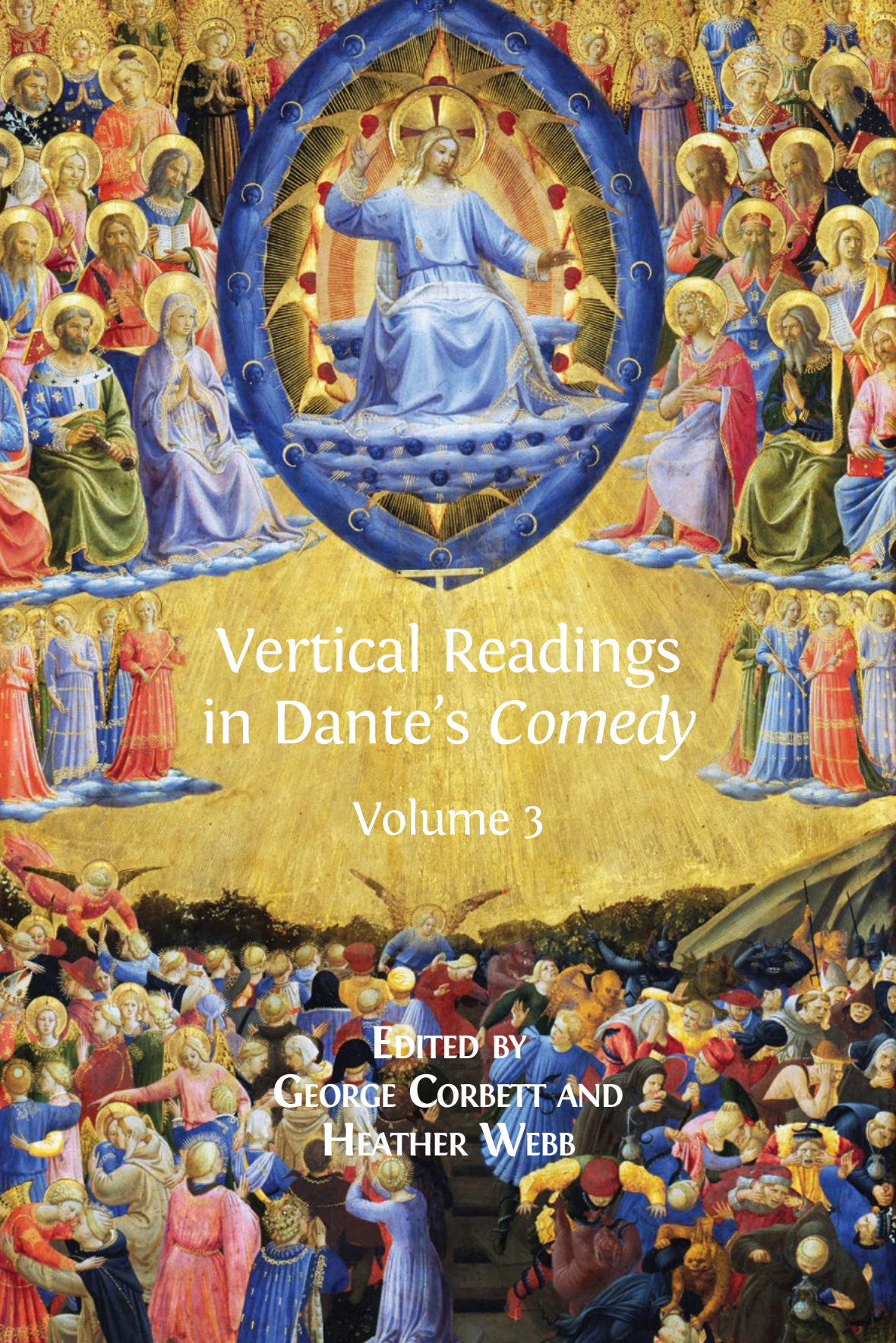

Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*

Volume 3

Edited by
George Corbett and
Heather Webb

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Contents

24. True Desire, True Being, and Truly Being a Poet

Janet Soskice

> 'To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name-calling is injurious. Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language…'[1]

The New Testament writers were Jewish followers of Jesus who read their received scriptures, what Christians came to call the Old Testament, in light of the conviction that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Early Christian writings, including the texts of scripture, are symphonies of *eisegesis* — of 'reading meanings in' — finding Jesus in the Psalms, the promises of Isaiah, and even conversing with Moses from the burning bush. But this way of reading is in continuity of form, if not substance, with Jewish reading practices: the later prophets had reworked the earlier ones; second Isaiah had transformed first Isaiah. These writings are 'saturated' texts, layered with meanings for the communities who received and read them as scripture.

The biblical books of Jews and Christians, unlike the Qu'ran, have always been understood to be historical deposits written at different times and places. Even after the fixing of canons, Rabbinic and Christian readers happily conflated texts in their commentaries and sermons. Liturgy and the glossed medieval bibles brought readers and worshippers into a universe of received interpretation. Although we should not necessarily

1 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 2.

 http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0119.03

regret the Renaissance and Reformation turn to *sola scriptura* and the unglossed text as we have it in modern printed Bibles, nonetheless there was a community of mind in older ways of text-making and guided reading. Dante himself is not only the recipient of layered readings (layered not only in Bibles but in liturgy, architecture and art) but happily layered his own authorities — pagan, literary, scriptural and theological — creating his own poetic midrash and, in a sense, inviting us to do likewise, as we do in this project of *Vertical Readings in Dante's 'Comedy'*.

In the canto Twenty-Fours we move from thieves and gluttons to apostles but find ourselves, I suggest, in the company of poets and reflecting on the obligations of poetic truth throughout. In *Inferno* xxiv Virgil and Dante are still in the eighth circle of the fraudsters, who include the corrupters of public office and those guilty of the vices that infest political and economic negotiations — flattery, hypocrisy, simony, sooth-saying. This brew of calculated self-interest may seem to us to involve wrongdoing of lesser severity or even to be 'just the way the world works', but Dante Alighieri was painfully aware of the ways in which these vices erode the common good and civic life — Dante and Virgil, after all, have glided into the eighth circle on the back of a monster with an honest man's face and the tail of a scorpion.[2]

The eighth circle has ten 'pockets' (the 'Malebolge') of deceivers. As *Inferno* xxiii opens, Dante and Virgil have only just narrowly escaped the devils of the fifth pocket (*Inferno* xxii and xxiii) by an *opera buffa* expedient in which Virgil clutches Dante to his stomach and 'sledges' down the slope with him. In the sixth pocket (*Inferno* xxiii), they find themselves amongst the slow moving hypocrites — defeated, weeping souls who move with creaking difficulty, weighed down by parodic Benedictine robes of lead. The hypocrites are startled by the signs of vitality they see in Dante — the pulse at his throat a sign not only of his bodiliness but of his present fear. Dante and Virgil pass the crucified Caiaphas, the prototype, from the trial of Jesus, of one willing to sacrifice the innocent for political expedience. Thus they make their way to the seventh pocket of the thieves and to our canto, *Inferno* xxiv.

Tone and tempo change from the opening verses which provide a Virgilian description of the softening of Virgil's troubled countenance. This, at first cold as a late winter morning, is described in an extended simile as lifting like the movements of a peasant who, at first seeing morning

2 This essay will refer to the textual Dante as 'Dante', as does Beatrice and find different means of referring to the authorial Dante.

frost grumbles and delays but, finding some hope and under pressure of time, grabs his goad, goes out and prods his lambs to pasture (*Inferno* xxiv. 1–15). The weightless Virgil now proceeds to shepherd his flock of one with vigour, variously hauling and pushing Dante up the steep face from ledge to ledge until they reach the top, where the exhausted Dante flops, his lungs 'milked of breath' ('la lena m'era del polmon sì munta', *Inf.*, xxiv. 4–45).[3] Virgil now issues a stern rebuke:

> 'Omai convien che tu così ti spoltre',
> disse 'l maestro, 'ché seggendo in piuma
> in fama non si vien, né sotto coltre;
> sanza la qual chi sua vita consuma,
> cotal vestigio in terra di sé lascia
> qual fummo in aere e in acqua la schiuma.
> E però leva sù; vinci l'ambascia
> con l'animo che vince ogne battaglia,
> se col suo grave corpo non s'accascia'. (*Inf.*, xxiv. 46–54)
>
> ['Now you must needs', my teacher said, 'shake off your wonted indolence. No fame is won beneath the quilt or sunk in feather cushions. Whoever, fameless, wastes his life away, leaves of himself no greater mark on earth than smoke in air or froth upon the wave. So upwards! On! And vanquish laboured breath! In any battle mind power will prevail, unless the weight of body loads it down'.]

Why speak so harshly to the exhausted Dante? Is it because of what they have just escaped? Charges of corruption in public office, however much he contested them, must have been in Dante Alighieri's mind as he devised the eighth circle. He had been convicted of being a 'barrator', fined and banished.[4] In the poem only Virgil's athletic sledging facilitates their escape from the demon guardians of the barrators. Ronald Martinez and Robert Durling suggest there may be an historical basis for this — perhaps Dante in his exile was nearly seized and tortured by enemies? Yet on an existential and literary level we can also see the exhausted and nearly defeated Dante as being saved, in cantos xxiii and xxiv, by poetry. It is on the breast of a poet that he sledges to safety and it is Virgil who pushes him up, ledge by ledge, to the cusp of the next pocket. The softening of Virgil's face gives a foretaste of redemption to come, and hints at the first

3 All translations, unless otherwise specified, are from Robin Kirkpatrick's three volume translation of the *Commedia*. I am also indebted to his notes throughout.

4 'Autobiography in Cantos 21–23', in Durling and Martinez, I, pp. 567–68.

cantos of *Inferno* where Dante glimpses the sunlit heights that it will take much travail to reach.

If poetry is indeed what saves Dante here, what danger had he been in? What temptation had he been under? Not barratry, to my mind, but very likely *acedia*, a medieval sin somewhere between sloth and despair. Surely our author, barred from office and exiled from his city, must have despaired and even followed the strategy of the depressed — staying in bed all day under a quilt with cushions over one's head? If so, Virgil's bracing admonition at the beginning of *Inferno* xxiv is that Dante not hide under the pillows, not accept exile as defeat or cloak himself in hypocrisy (a leaden weight) in order to secure pardon back in Florence, but rather move upwards and on. Virgil tells him 'you've longer ladders to climb' ('più lunga scala convien che si saglia', *Inf.*, xxiv. 55) and insists that 'in any battle mind power will prevail, unless the weight of body loads it down' ('l'animo che vince ogne battaglia, / se col suo grave corpo non s'accascia', *Inf.*, xxiv. 53–54). Dante rebounds with a fiat: 'Let's go […] I'm all strength and dash' ('Va, ch'i' son forte e ardito', *Inf.*, xxiv. 60).

From his new vantage point, the reinvigorated Dante looks down into the *bolgia* of the thieves, and even asks for a closer look. There are snakes everywhere — exotic and multifarious — from Libya, Ethiopia, the Red Sea and beyond, and all transposed from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is a parody of Eden, with each Adam tormented by his or her own bespoke viper. There seems to have been no end to the different ways one might be guilty of theft, even before the age of internet fraud and insider trading on the stock market. Snakes bind the sinners' hands behind their backs, and send tails and necks between their buttocks in a savage simulacrum of coitus. Dante sees one dart forward and bite a sinner at the nape — a standard animal way to dispatch prey. Then, faster than you could scribble 'I' and 'O', the letters that in Italian compose the first person singular, the sinner ignites, becomes ashes and is recomposed, 'becoming instantly the self it was' ('la polver si raccolse per sé stessa', *Inf.*, xxiv. 105). This is one of the saddest phrases in the *Inferno*, and perhaps its motto. These heaps of ashes are not returning to the Edenic dust recalled in the liturgy of Ash Wednesday ('to dust you shall return'), dust which hopes to be raised incorruptible in the Resurrection. This is a collapse into dust that will happen again and again, which will not resurrect but simply reassemble the same self-deceiving, thieving wretch as before. Advocates of cryogenics take note! If you are brought back from a frozen state, you will still… be you.

Unusually for the *Inferno*, one of the denizens recomposed in this way names himself, and that twice over, declaring himself to be 'Vanni Fucci', known as 'Beast'. Dante knows Vanni to have been a violent man of war, a sobriquet of which Fucci might be proud as he is, apparently still, unendingly proud of his brutal life. Vanni is 'pissed off' ('mi duol', *Inf*., xxiv. 133) to be found in the pocket of thieves for stealing sacred vessels from the sanctuary and 'grassing' someone up for it — an indolent crime since these vessels customarily lay unprotected. This crime returns us to the Edenic theme evoked by the snakes. Theft is a sin of Eden, associated with the serpent's hypocritical coaching. The apple, like the silver vessels, was low-lying fruit. The first couple take something which is not theirs to take and release a tide of successive sins into the world. This includes, in Adam's as in Vanni Fucci case, 'grassing' on people: 'it was Eve who made me do it'. Eve blames the snake. This shifting of blame is, then, the first human discord recorded in the Book of Genesis.

Theft is lazy — a way of getting something without having to work for it — a clandestine hit on the stock market. Theft is a crime against neighbour and, for Adam and Eve in Eden, evidence of a lack of faith that God will provide for all they need. The violent speech from Vanni that ends the canto marks a contrast with the canto's sweet, pastoral opening and presages the crude 'finger' Vanni gives to God, which opens the following canto: 'Togli Dio, ch'a te le squadro!' [Take that! I'm aiming, God, at you!] (*Inf*., xxv. 3).

Purgatorio xxiv

We've come thus far without any mention of desire. This is because I believe Dante Alighieri to be enough of a Thomist to have doubted that *true* desire was to be found in the souls in *Inferno.* There are dashings and couplings and self-absorbed moanings, but true desire is divinely graced and, as such, we should not expect it in Hell. There are however two clear instances of desire in *Inferno* xxiv, though significantly neither in the permanent denizen. There is desire in the softening of Virgil's frozen face, his turning to prod the weary Dante, and there is the corresponding desire of Dante's fiat: 'Va, ch'i' son forte e ardito' [Let's go […] I'm all strength and dash] (*Inf*., xxiv. 60).

Desire is a Christian good, at least in the Augustinian and Thomistic synthesis which informs the *Commedia*. All theologians of the early church

believed, as Augustine memorably recorded, that *our hearts are restless until they rest in thee* and so, too, did Dante. This desiring love for God was the solid conviction of medieval theologians who figure in the *Commedia*: Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure and Aquinas. To be a Christian is to be *in via*, to be a pilgrim travelling to God. They understood love of God to be a desiring love and, in this sense, an erotic love, as had many of the Rabbis. The *Song of Songs*, possibly in origin an Egyptian love poem which somehow made it into the canons of Jewish and Christian scripture, was the text most commented on by the rabbis with Christian theologians following their lead. Bernard of Clairvaux preached over eighty sermons to his brethren on this tiny book, full of expressions of longing and desire and, in the Christian *idiom*, transformed from love of woman and man to love of God.[5]

These writers thought love to be divine and at the same time a universal and natural thing. It is not surprising that in the *Commedia* Virgil provides both the strongest and most theological expressions of natural, desiring love, nor that he does so in *Purgatorio* xvii:

> Lo naturale è sempre sanza errore,
> ma l'altro puote errar per malo obietto
> o per troppo o per poco di vigore.
> Mentre ch'elli è nel primo ben diretto,
> e ne' secondi sé stesso misura,
> esser non può cagion di mal diletto;
> ma quando al mal si torce, o con più cura,
> o con men che non dèe corre nel bene,
> contra 'l Fattore adovra sua fattura.
> Quinci comprender puoi ch'esser convene
> amor sementa in voi d'ogne virtute
> e d'ogne operazion che merta pene. (*Purg*., xvii. 94–105)

> [The natural love can never go astray. The other, though, may err when wrongly aimed, or else through too much vigour or the lack. Where mind-love sets itself on primal good and keeps, in secondaries, a due control, it cannot be the cause of false delight. But when it wrongly twists towards the ill, or runs towards the good foo fast or slow, what's made then works against its maker's plan. Hence of necessity, you'll understand that love must be the seed of all good powers, as, too, of penalties your deeds deserve.]

5 It is not always clear which 'voice' in the *Song* is male or female, beloved or lover.

Dante quite naturally credits to Virgil a 'natural theology' in which the world is made for the Good and all things move towards this source of life.[6]

Here we may point to a Christian influence which would not be within the historical Virgil's gift — the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This was not a concept taken over from Plato or Aristotle but one derived, albeit with Platonic influences, by Jews and Christians from their scriptures. On such an understanding 'all that is' has its being from God who freely creates everything, including space and time. *Creatio ex nihilo* is at the heart of Aquinas's final great work, the *Summa Theologiae* which, like the *Commedia*, is a cosmic narrative in which all things come from God and find their fulfilment in flowing back to God.

It is this God who made all and who moves all who is Love (I John 4:8). Dante Alighieri also believed, or so Kenelm Foster argued in 'Dante and Eros', 'that all human desires *are* radically one'. So did Augustine believe this and, building upon him, Aquinas, and so here does Virgil. It is not a uniquely Christian conviction. There are Platonic and Aristotelian variants including a famous twentieth-century one in the philosophy of Iris Murdoch, and especially her *Sovereignty of the Good*. We are made by Primal Good (in Virgil's term) and long for the Primal Good. All our desiring actions are inflections of this life force within us which is part of our animal — or better, our *creaturely* nature — the force which through the green fuse drives the flower. All things desire the Good, although reasoning creatures like human beings, with complex and circuitous lives, can mistake lesser, shabby and second-rate substitutes for this good.

It is for mistaking the Good and for misdirected desire that the gluttons are now undergoing purgation in *Purgatorio* xxiv. Dante and Virgil have been traversing the terrace of gluttony, Purgatory's sixth terrace, since canto xxi, which seems an extraordinary amount of coverage for what many today would regard as a minor peccadillo. Today we think gluttony is an offence against health and waistline rather than against God. Also surprising is the presence of so many poets in this part of *Purgatorio*. Dante and Virgil meet early on and are accompanied by the Latin poet, Statius, whom Dante-author has made Christian for his purposes. In *Purgatorio* xxiii Dante has come across his old friend and poetic sparring partner, Forese, and the two repent of the callous vulgarity of their *tenzone*, a poetic dialogue in which they traded insults for amusement — or, one might even

6 Note that this is not at all the 'natural theology' of the eighteenth century which becomes elements of proofs for the existence of God.

say, for the hell of it — including references to Forese's sexual relations with his wife, Nella, whose prayers now speed his travels through Purgatory. But what does poetry have to do with gluttony?

Of the three *cantiche*, it is *Purgatorio* that is the pre-eminent poem of desiring love. The souls in *Purgatorio*, certain of their salvation, generally move along briskly. As *Purgatorio* xxiv opens, Virgil, Dante, Statius and Forese are striding forward and talking apace: 'sì come nave pinta da buon vento' [like ships driven by a favouring wind] (*Purg*., xxiv. 3), all in sharp contrast, that is, to the leaden movement of the hypocrites of *Inferno* xxiii and the hectic agitation of the thieves of *Inferno* xxiv. Here we have a Pope who ate too many Bolsena eels and men who drank as though unable to stop. This gluttony makes them more like the thieves in *Inferno* xxiv than first appears. They have sought satisfaction in what cannot satisfy. The desiring itself is not wrong, and nor are Bolsena eels and Vernaccia wine. But gorging 'oltra misura' [past all norms] (*Purg*., xxiii. 65) shows a disordered life whose wretched exemplar is Lucifer in the deepest pit of *Inferno*, insatiably and forever chewing on the flesh of traitors.

How might gluttony relate to the transgression of Eden? In Genesis, Adam and Eve are somehow concerned that they will not have 'enough', that they will not get everything they need (as the serpent suggests), and so they steal the apple. The glutton eats beyond hunger and even enjoyment driven by an emptiness that can never be filled by food stuffed into a body no longer hungry or thirsty. In an analogous way, then, scurrilous and indecent literary jousting is a kind of gluttony. It is toying with or trivializing what is fundamentally good, a piddling away (or worse) of the poet's gift. This bears on the fact that in *Purgatorio* xxiv (as in the preceding canto) Dante brings before the reader the question of the poet's calling and of the nature of true poetry. This need not be Christian, for otherwise Virgil and possibly Statius would be excluded, but it must be oriented to the Good which, for Dante, is God.

Given the *Commedia*'s particular attention to naming (recall, for example, Dante's own longing for the Baptistry of St John in Florence where he was named), it is significant that Forese tells Dante that the souls they meet can now be named. Indeed, Dante says, they 'were happy to be named' ('del nomar parean tutti contenti', *Purg*., xxiv. 26). Vanity and self-importance stripped away, they are becoming their true selves: 'sì munta / nostra sembianza via per la dieta' [milked dry, by fasting, of the way that once we seemed] (*Purg*., xxiv. 17–18).

The discussion with Forese prepares the way for Dante's encounter with Bonagiunta — a respected composer of vernacular love poetry.[7] If Forese enabled Dante to acknowledge what went wrong in his poetry, the encounter with Bonagiunta gives a glimpse into what, or when, Dante thinks it went right. In what seems a self-aggrandizing passage, our poet has Bonagiunta marvel that he should behold a poet whose love writings excel his own:

> 'Ma dì s'i' veggio qui colui che fòre
> trasse le nove rime, cominciando:
> "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore"'? (*Purg*., xxiv. 49–51)
>
> ['But tell me: do I see the man who drew those new rhymes forth, whose opening line ran so: "Ladies, who have intelligence of love…?"']

Note that the text *does not name* Dante who, thus far in the *Commedia*, has not been called by name and will be so only once in the entire poem — when he is upbraided by Beatrice in *Purgatorio* xxx. Dante, unlike the souls he meets here in canto xxiv, is not yet fit to be named and is instead identified with what Saul Kripke calls a 'rigid designation' — a description which, if it has a referent, can identify only one individual — 'the man who drew the new rhymes forth'. By touching on the *Vita nuova*, Dante Alighieri calls up what he regarded as a decisive turn in his poetry.[8] In his reply to Bonagiunta, we learn that this transition from tinny expertise to a poetics of love and praise was spiritual as well as literary, or perhaps literary because spiritual:

> 'I' mi son un che, quando
> Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
> ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando'. (*Purg*., xxiv. 52–54)
>
> ['I am just one who, when Love breathes in me, takes note and then goes on showing the meaning that's ordained within'.]

Robin Kirkpatrick notes that the very form of the work marks this transition: 'The give-and-take of the conversation with Bonagiunta emphasizes how far Dante has progressed beyond the univocal, self-regarding lyrics that even he was inclined to write while he still remained within the lyric tradition.

7 Kirkpatrick, *Purgatorio*, notes, 439.
8 Durling and Martinez, II, p. 413.

In the *Commedia* he creates a drama of competing voice. Meaning is to be established and recorded through dialogue with others'.[9] Dante speaks of his poetry as 'redeemed'. The Love that now breathes in Dante ('Amor mi spira') is the Love through which the world was made, described in Genesis as a divine breath hovering over the waters and as the breath blown by God into the nostrils of the first human to make the creature of dust a living being. Bonagiunta observes that this is the creative power behind which Dante's winged pens fly, transcribing what the Divine *dittator* says, something Bonagiunta's own poetry never attained (*Purg*., xxiv. 58–59).

Meanwhile all around him the souls are quickening their pace. Forese strikes ahead leaving Virgil, Statius and Dante making their way to a laden fruit tree. Souls have paused below it to reach and cry inarticulately, like little children ('quasi bramosi fantolini', *Purg*., xxiv. 108). 'Fantolini' — the inarticulacy is tied to this child-like status. Dante uses the work 'fante' to designate the speaking subject, and here we have a diminutive. It is worth noting that Augustine makes play with the Latin *infans* (deriving etymologically from being unable to speak) when telling of his own conversion in the Milan garden, a conversion that rendered him temporarily unable to speak.[10] This is not the inarticulacy of infancy but of souls born again who can sense and scent what they long for, can glimpse but not yet reach.

The three poets proceed in silence until encountered by an angelic voice. With what must be an allusion to the conversion of St Paul on the road to Damascus, Dante shies in terror like an untamed animal. He cannot see and becomes, like Paul in Acts 9, dependent on his friends to lead him. These are in Dante's case his fellow poets. He senses wind like a breeze of May, 'annunziatrice de li albori' [first messenger of whitening dawn] (*Purg*., xxiv. 145), and feels his brow touched by the feathers of a wing as the penultimate mark is removed from his brow. Purged, it would seem, of misdirected ambition, he is able to hear the words from the Beatitudes, which have underscored pilgrim life on the whole of the terrace of gluttony: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness / justice; for they shall have their fill' (Matthew 5:6). More than that, as a sign of his maturing faith, he is bold enough to cast these in his own words:

9 Kirkpatrick, *Commentary* on *Purgatorio* xxiv, p. 441–42.

10 For an account of this incident in the *Confessions* see Soskice, Janet, 'Monica's Tears', *New Blackfriars* 83. 980 (October 2002), 448–58.

'Beati cui alluma
tanto di grazia, che l'amor del gusto
nel petto lor troppo disir non fuma,
esurïendo sempre quanto è giusto!' (*Purg*., xxiv. 151–54)

['The truly blessed are lit with so much grace that in their hearts a lot of food fumes forth no false desire, esurient always for the good and true!']

Paradiso xxiv

Paradiso xxiv finds us in the midst of the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, a celestial location which is the setting for *Paradiso* xxii–xxvii. Vittorio Montemaggi has pointed out that these cantos are 'the only time in the *Commedia* in which Dante explicitly presents himself as doing something like academic work in theology' and this is done by means of Dante's interrogation by three apostles, Peter, James and John on the three 'theological' virtues of faith, hope and charity.[11]

Dante continues his layering of biblical motifs and themes. No one can be accused of eisegesis in finding here themes of eating and drinking which have already emerged in our discussion of *Inferno* xxiv and *Purgatorio* xxiv. Eating and drinking is precisely where *Paradiso* xxiv begins, with Beatrice addressing guests at the celestial banquet:

O sodalizio eletto a la gran cena
del benedetto Agnello, il qual vi ciba
sì, che la vostra voglia è sempre piena. (*Par*., xxiv. 1–3)

[You chosen confrères of the Blessèd Lamb who feeds you at his solemn feast so well that you are full in all you wish and will.]

One might suppose that the desire which suffused *Purgatorio* would now drop out of the picture in Heaven for if, following Augustine, our 'hearts are restless' in this life then presumably they will rest when they 'rest in thee' in Heaven. But not so in the *Paradiso*. This is not merely because the souls Dante meets have yet to be reunited with their bodies — something

11 Vittorio Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 90. The whole of Montemaggi's chapter here, 'Truth and Theological Virtue', is worth reading for wonderful insights on faith, truth and theology in these cantos and throughout the *Commedia*.

they very much desire. Dante's blessed souls are still desirous in a manner akin to the eschatology of Gregory of Nyssa for whom desire will be ever present even in the next life not, as in this life, by virtue of lack but because of the unending splendour and beauty of God. Beatrice is accordingly full of desiring love and, introducing Dante to this heavenly host, speaks of his immense ardour ('l'affezione immensa', *Par*., xxiv. 7). It is interesting that she does not identify Dante by name (as she has in her accusatory encounter in the *Purgatorio*), but by ostensive reference — 'this man here'. She tells the blessed souls that the same springs of grace from which they forever drink, now refresh his thought.

The guests at the celestial banquet are so filled with love that it is natural to them, in the Augustinian rubric, 'to love and do what you will'. It is not that they have ceased to desire — not at all — they are alive, spinning and golden with it, like so many fiery comets. Now, however, their 'wish and will' is rightly ordered to love, the love that is the cause and ground of all that is. Paradise, of course, is not a spiritual realm to be contrasted with a material one. It too is part of God's creation and the blessed souls participate in the joy of created life which will only be enhanced when, after the final judgement, they are reunited with their resurrected bodies.

The souls are whirling in a dance of measured delight, in an intricately balanced mechanism — a perfection of order in which the right ordering of the one goes up to make the harmony of all. Beatrice asks that Dante's evident zeal be tested, and then:

> Di quella ch'io notai di più carezza
> vid' ïo uscire un foco sì felice,
> che nullo vi lascio di più chiarezza (*Par*., xxiv. 19–21)
>
> [From one I'd marked of dearer worth, I saw a fire flare out with so much joy that none now left behind it was so clear.]

This is St Peter, holder of the keys to Heaven, who circles around Beatrice three times (a point to which I will return) and at her instigation quizzes Dante on his faith.

We should pause on the wonderful irony, of which Dante Alighieri would be aware, that it should be Peter, who is the rock on which the Church is founded, who holds the keys to Heaven and who now tests Dante on his faith. In the Gospel narratives Peter is devoted, rash and

persistently gets things wrong: as Jesus explains he must suffer and die, Peter corrects him: 'this will never happen to you!' (Matthew 16); witnessing the Transfiguration, Peter proposes lingering to embellish the occasion with three booths for Moses, Elijah and Jesus, thus misunderstanding the necessity of proceeding to Jerusalem and the cross (Matthew 17); in the ignominious walking on water incident, of which Beatrice lightly reminds him: 'per la qual tu su per lo mare andavi' [by which you came to walk across the sea] (*Par*., xxiv. 39), Peter is directly accused by Jesus of lacking faith (Matthew 14). And yet, in *Paradiso* xxiv, Peter is clearest of the bright souls.

Dante Alighieri captures Peter's flawed perfection wonderfully. Now a kind of blazing comet, he comes forward to test Dante, circling Beatrice three times, a movement he will complete at the end of the canto. Three is a salient number for St Peter because on the night of Jesus's arrest and before the cock crowed Peter betrayed his master, as Jesus had predicted, three times: 'Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times"' (Matthew 26:75). In *Paradiso* xxiv the forgiven, faithful Peter performs the threefold sign of his betrayal and yet — just as the risen Christ bears the wounds of his crucifixion — Peter's circling of Beatrice is no longer a source of pain, but a sign of glory. This blessed fire is Peter post-Pentecost, filled with the Holy Spirit, the tongues of fire which descended on the followers of Jesus and enabled them to speak intelligibly to all peoples: 'Poscia fermato, il foco Benedetto / a la mia donna dirizzò lo spiro' [Then, when that blessèd fire had come to rest, / it breathed directly to my lady there in words of fire] (*Par*., xxiv. 31–32). The Italian here is Latinized to accentuate the connection between breath, spirit, speech and inspiration that we have seen in Dante's exchanges with the poets in *Purgatorio* xxiv. Although there are no poets apart from Dante (and maybe Beatrice) in *Paradiso* xxiv, there are other writers who write with 'verace stilo' [truthful pen] (*Par*., xxiv. 61). It may turn out that to be a poet is to be such a one for, as much as *Paradiso* xxiv concerns Dante's faith, it is also concerned with *graced writing and speaking*.

St Peter questions Dante about his faith, the first and foundational of the three theological virtues. Since these virtues are not attainments, Dante cannot claim to have earned what has come as a gift. He can, nonetheless, build on it, present it, as Aquinas insists one should, as bedizened reason. A reasoned account is what Dante attempts. He begins his account of faith by praying for God's aid, as was normal in medieval theological writing:

> 'La Grazia che mi dà ch'io mi confessi',
> comincia' io, 'da l'alto primipilo,
> faccia li miei concetti bene espressi'.
> E seguitai: 'Come 'l verace stilo
> ne scrisse, padre, del tuo caro frate
> che mise teco Roma nel buon filo,
> fede è sustanza di cose sperate
> e argomento de le non parventi;
> e questa pare a me sua quiditate'. (*Par*., xxiv. 58–66)

> ['Let grace, which grants that I confess my faith to you, the noblest of centurions, make', I began, 'my thoughts be well expressed'. And next: 'As written by the truthful pen, Father, of your dear brother, Paul, who set, with you, great Rome upon its rightful track: "Faith is substantial to the things we hope, the evidence of things we do not see". And such, in essence, I believe it is'.]

Dante's language here is scholastic and sounds technical (speaking for instance of faith's quiddity — *quiditate*), and carries echoes of Aquinas's *De Veritate* and *Summa Theologiae*, yet the fulcrum of Dante's account of faith is profoundly scriptural. It is scripture to which Dante turns, specifically the Epistle to the Hebrews. Decisive is his direct citation of Hebrews 11:1: 'Faith is substantial to the things we hope, the evidence of things not seen', a text which had of long-standing been taken as the biblical definition of 'faith' (*Par*., xxiv. 64–65), and a key text for Thomas Aquinas in his treatment of the virtue of faith.[12] It should not be thought, however, that resort to scripture is in contrast with being 'scholastic'. Perhaps nothing is more 'scholastic' in Dante's theology than his constant recourse to scripture — Thomas Aquinas was after all, by profession, *Magister in Sacra Pagina*, his further writings intended to illuminate the reading of scripture.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews unfolds the meaning of faith by a series of incidences in the lives of the biblical forerunners in faith. To a beleaguered early Jewish Christian church, the author of Hebrews holds forth a list of the faithful who have gone before, this great 'cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12:1):

> By faith Abel's sacrifice was found more acceptable than Cain's.
> By faith, though it was without precedent, Noah built an ark.

12 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, q. 1, a. 4.

> By faith Abraham left his homeland and old religion to follow the LORD.
> By faith Sarah, though well past child-bearing age, bore Isaac, the son of promise.
> By faith her husband, Abraham, took that same son, the son through whom his posterity was promised, and at God's request, prepared to slaughter him, until a ram trapped in a thicket was given instead.
> It was by faith that Moses' parents hid him in a basket of rushes and by faith that the adult Moses refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter and sided instead with the enslaved Israelites. It was by faith that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, pursued by Egyptian chariots.
> It was by faith that the prostitute Rahab welcomed spies and was not killed in the taking of Jericho.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives us a list of the things *hoped for*, and realities as yet *unseen*. Not all are success stories in worldly terms. Noah floated to dry land but Abel, also on the list, was slain. Abram (later renamed 'Abraham') left his native land without any certainty of the future. The Israelites fled the abundance of Egypt into a lifeless desert. Moses never saw the promised land. Hebrews 11 continues by noting that many of the faithful were pilloried, imprisoned, flogged and killed. They were homeless, ill-treated and reduced to dressing in sheepskins:

> All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:14–16)

This chapter of Hebrews is, in short, a *cri de coeur* for exiles and pilgrims, for those who have lost one homeland and must seek, by faith, another. No wonder Dante can insist to St Peter that his own coin will pass assay! But has he got it in his purse?

Although faith as a theological virtue is profoundly rational, it is not just the possession of a set of propositional convictions about God. Faith is faith 'in' God. To have faith is to trust in God, to be orientated to God and that is why faith is foundational to hope and love, as Peter confirms in a further question:

> […] 'Questa cara gioia
> sopra la quale ogne virtù si fonda,
> onde ti venne?' (*Par*., xxiv. 89–91)
>
> [That precious gem of joy in which all other virtues find their ground — whence does that come to you?]

Dante replies that it is the gift of the Holy Spirit, flowing from the texts of scripture, Old Testament and New. St Peter asks him on what basis he can trust these, to which Dante replies:

> La prova che 'l ver mi dischiude,
> son l'opere seguite, a che natura
> non scalda ferro mai né batte incude. (*Par*., xxiv. 100–02)
>
> [The proof, for me, that unlocks truth is found in deeds that followed from that faith. Nature can't heat or hammer steel like that.]

Several verses later Dante refers to these 'deeds that follow from faith' as 'miracoli' [miracles] (*Par*., xxiv. 107). Durling and Martinez suggest that Dante Alighieri is here referring to 'the miracles it (the Bible) narrates, obviously regarding them as historical fact'.[13] I struggle with this interpretation especially if, as the remark suggests, they are thinking of 'miracles' as referring to the miracles of Jesus, which appear to be violations of the laws of nature. Dante's text nowhere suggests the miracles of Jesus are the 'miracles' under discussion here. Instead, 'Se 'l mondo si rivolse al cristianesmo […] sanza miracoli' [Suppose the world had turned to Christian faith without these miracles] (*Par*., xxiv. 106) appears to refer back directly, in my view, to lines 100–02.

These are the miracles performed, not by Jesus, but by the faithful hammered to steel by their faith in God. The key text here is precisely that which Dante has already quoted, Hebrews 11, which chronicles these acts of faith — Rahab housing the spies of the Israelites, Moses choosing to identify with his enslaved forebears and not Pharaoh's daughter, Abel offering a lamb. These are not miracles like walking on water. The pioneers of faith in the Book of Hebrews perform wonderous things because, in the midst of adversity, they trust in their God:

13 Durling and Martinez, III, p. 495.

> And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. (Hebrews 11:32.34)

Dante no doubt did believe in the miracles of Jesus but it is much more potent and pertinent to his case (as well as making better sense of the text) if we take the 'deeds that followed from that faith' as deeds of the faithful like those praised in the Epistle to the Hebrews, deeds performed by girls, widows, a prostitute, weak people made strong like St Peter and Dante himself. His clinching argument, taken from Christian antiquity, is the historical fact that a group of poor, uneducated Galilean provincials, as were Peter and the Apostles, founded a faith that took the world by storm. Dante seemed to have found this kind of faith at his moment of near despair, the moment he thought to pull the coverlet and pillows over his head and give up on lost fortune, lost reputation, lost city. At this moment, guided by Virgil but directed to God, he found the faith to go on, despite a future unseen.

Having justified his faith, Dante is now asked by Peter to confess it. It might appear odd that Dante, now in the realm of certainty, should be asked to make a further confession.[14] This is an overly 'epistemological' way to look at it. Faith is not the opposite of uncertainty. The biblical demons and Satan himself are certain of the reality of God but have no faith. Confession of faith is not just a matter of contradicting doubt but, from antiquity, a form of praise. Most Christians and all Catholic Christians confess their faith in reciting the Creed. At a baptism, those in the congregation are asked to join in the public confession of faith that the postulant for baptism must make. This Christian confession is doxological — personal but not private — and, tellingly, Dante is assisted by Beatrice in coming to speech. He now makes what, as Montemaggi observes, is both a 'richly traditional and a strikingly original profession of faith':[15]

14 Durling and Martinez seem to find it paradoxical that Dante pilgrim is asked to confess his faith since his whole journey has expressed it and, having just seen Christ, Mary and now St Peter, is in the realm of certainty. See Durling and Martinez, III, p. 490.

15 Montemaggi, p. 107.

> […] Io credo in uno Dio
> solo ed etterno, che tutto 'l ciel move,
> non moto, con amore e con disio. (*Par*., xxiv. 130–32)
>
> [I believe in one true God, sole and eternal who, Himself not moved, moves all the spheres by love and with desire.]

This confession is based on proofs taken from physics and metaphysics and comes to him as the waters of revelation from Moses and the prophets, the writers of Gospels and Psalms and, from the writings of St Peter himself: 'per voi che scriveste / poi che l'ardente Spirto vi fè almi' [the words you wrote when once the ardent Spirit raised you high] (*Par*., xxiv. 137–38).[16] Dante now underscores his own participation in this celestial order. Our pilgrim is here the template for the faithful Christian on earth, and even now bears flashes of the celestial glory that already illumine the guests at the heavenly banquet. St Peter circles Dante three more times and the canto ends.

Many have noted that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate Dante author and Dante pilgrim in much of the first person confessional poetry of *Paradiso* xxiv. Can we presume that Dante's stated faith is that of the historical Dante? There is a similar challenge in Augustine's *Confessions* and a similar consideration to make. If Augustine in writing his *Confessions* and Alighieri in composing *Paradiso* xxiv are not being honest here they are not simply being dishonest with their readers but dishonest to their God. We are left with radical alternatives. Maybe Dante Alighieri was not really a Christian but just using shared cultural motifs to further his poetic ambitions? A radical variant of this would be to affirm that Dante does not risk damnation for this artful deception since he knows there is no God anyway (I have heard such arguments made about Augustine's *Confessions*.) I find the first suggestion wholly implausible for Dante, or even for a man of his time. In the canto Twenty-Fours, as I have tried to trace them, Dante seems to me to give an account of being snatched from the brink of either death or despair by hope. In *Inferno* xxiv he glimpses the goodness of the

16 Durling retains the plural and translates *Paradiso* xxiv. 136–38 as 'through Moses, through prophets, and through psalms, through the Gospel and through all of you, who wrote when the burning Spirit made you nourishers'. The translation 'nourishers' fits well with the feasting and feeding themes which open this canto, and which (in their longing) are anticipated by the souls in *Purgatorio* xxiv.

created order in Virgil's face softening like the promise of spring. Virgil, that is 'Poetry', in the same canto carries Dante forward when he is heavy with despair, hinting at salvation by poetry — the one thing never lost to Dante, the author, is his poetic gift. *Purgatorio* xxiv interrogates this gift and Dante's earlier misuse of it with Forese. In *Purgatorio* xxx, the sole instance in the entire poem where Dante is called by name, Beatrice not only names him but accuses him of squandering his talents. *Purgatorio* xxiv delineates his turn to a true, or truthful poetry which is a poetry of love, inspired and fed by the waters of the tree of life. Here Beatrice herself speaks as a 'Word' of God.[17] *Paradiso* xxiv finds Dante praising God by confessing his faith amongst those who are themselves breathers of fire, tongues of God. It is the fulfilment of his life as a Christian and as a poet.

Although Dante is not named in the passages which chronicle the Heaven of the Fixed Stars (*Paradiso* xxii–xxvii), these cantos contain one of the more telling instances of self-denomination in the whole work, and it is tied directly to his confession of his baptismal faith. These are the only cantos where Dante names himself as 'Poet' and one of the few places where Dante, both character and poet, refers to the completed work we know as the *Commedia*:

> Se mai contінga che 'l poema sacro
> al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
> […]
> vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
> del bello ovile ov' io dormi' agnello,
> […]
> con altra voce omai, con altro vello
> ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte
> del mio battesmo prenderò 'l cappello.
> però che ne la fede, che fa conte
> l'anime a Dio, quivi intra' io, e poi
> Pietro per lei sì mi girò la fronte.
>
> [If ever it should happen that this sacred work, to which both Earth and Heaven have set their hands, […] might overcome the cruelty that locks

17 On this, see Kevin Grove, 'Becoming True in the *Purgatorio*: Dante on Forgetting, Remembering, and Learning to Speak' in *Dante, Mercy, and the Beauty of the Human Person*, ed. by Leonard J. DeLorenzo and Vittorio Montemaggi (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), pp. 45-64.

> me out from where I slept, a lamb in that fine fold, […] with altered fleece, with altered voice, I shall return as poet, taking, at my fount of baptism, the laurel for my crown. For I first entered there within the faith that makes us known, in soul, to God, and then, for that same faith, St Peter ringed my brow.] (*Par.*, xxv. 1–12)

In this return, if not to Florence and the Baptistry of St John where he first entered the faith, then to the heavenly home of all exiles and pilgrims, the 'true Dante' and the 'true poet' will be one.[18]

18 I am grateful to Vittorio Montemaggi for pointing out that it is only in these cantos that Dante accords himself the name 'poet'.

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