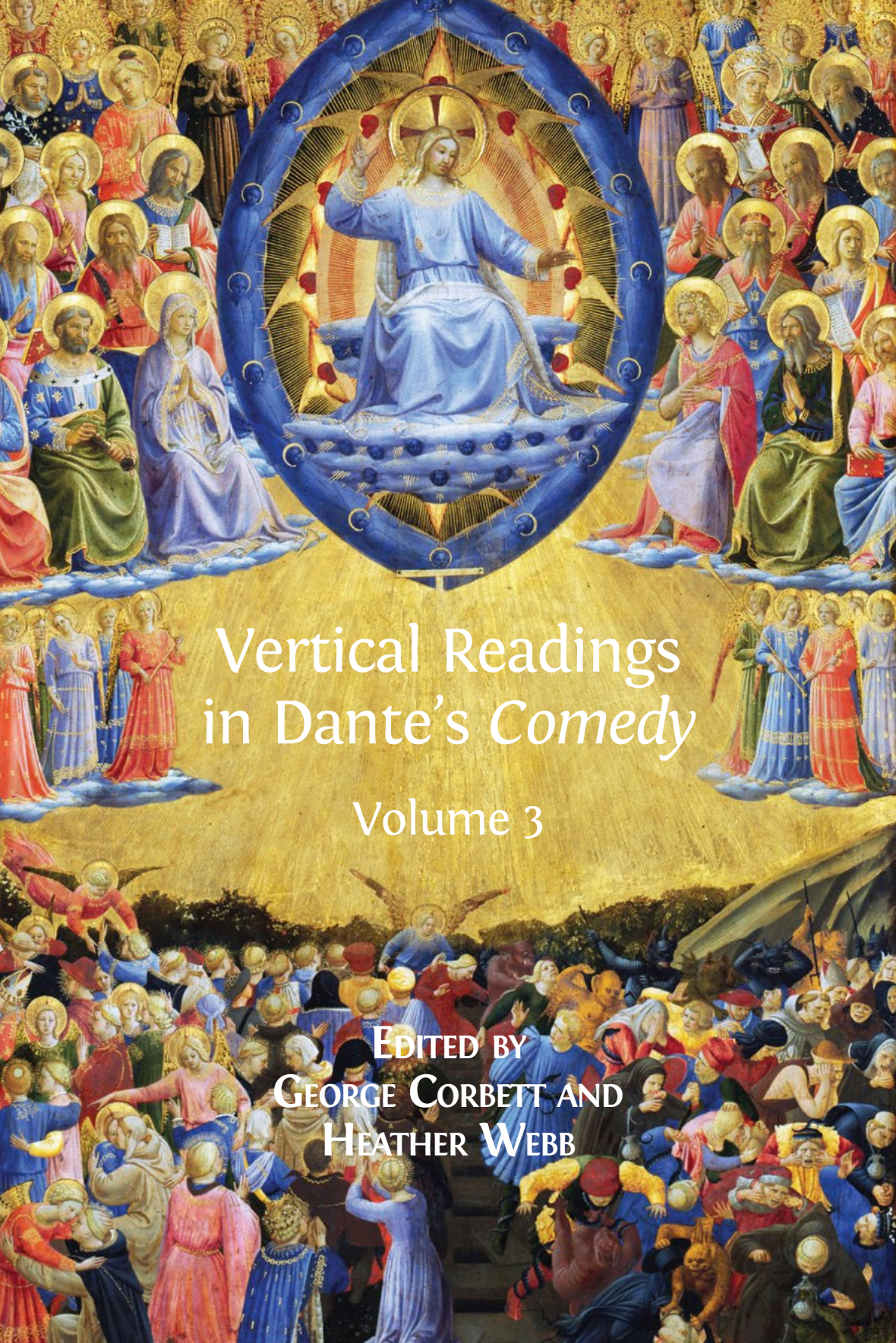

Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*

Volume 3

Edited by
George Corbett and
Heather Webb

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25. Changes

George Ferzoco

Over the centuries, much scholarship on Dante's *Commedia* has taken the form of the *lectura Dantis*, in which one digs as deeply as one can into the depths of the poem's text. The project of Cambridge's vertical readings, on the other hand, is reminiscent not of the deep shafts dug by miners but rather of long narrow trenches, of the sort gently excavated by archaeologists. The trenches we are digging in our enterprise follow not a physical structure but a numerical one. Someone like Dante, whose faith in names and numbers as revelatory interpretive keys is so blatant, surely intended readers to observe these numbers and to meditate on their appearances: what there is that leaps to the eyes, and what might lie slightly below the surface. This particular trench follows the straight line that is the number twenty-five; it is dug knowing that in the medieval mental universe of Italy, there existed a sort of cultural synesthesia. Unlike physical symptoms of synesthesia that can associate a number with a precise colour, its medieval cultural equivalent is the association of a number with a precise concept. Although this trench barely scrapes the surface, one should allow the number twenty-five to trace its path and lead the reader, first in a literal narrative and then to the text's allegory and beyond.

A Literal Synopsis of the Canto Twenty-Fives

Inferno xxv shows Vanni Fucci at his memorable best, blaspheming God and getting attacked by serpents; the sight of this leads the poet to vent his disgust with Pistoia. Returning to the action, Vanni leaves the scene, covered with snakes, pursued by a centaur-like creature identified by

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Virgil as Cacus, who paid for his crimes by being bludgeoned to death by Hercules. Three thieves then appear, startling Dante and Virgil. They do not notice the pair, however, and speak to each other. The poet addresses his readers, saying they cannot be blamed for not believing what he is about to narrate, since he himself can barely accept what happened. Two of the thieves, Agnello and Cianfa, strangely share their bodies in a new form. With tremendous speed, two other thieves arrive, one in human form, the other reptilian. The poet warns in no uncertain terms that he is going to do something beyond the capacities of other great poets, and proceeds to describe Buoso and Francesco actually exchanging their own natures. Apologising for being unable to register the continual changing, the poet identifies another thief, Puccio Sciancato, and notes that of all the thieves seen here, this is the only one whose nature did not change at all.

Purgatorio xxv finds Dante and Virgil ascending the terrace of gluttony steadily and rapidly in the mid afternoon; with them is their new companion Statius. Dante wants to say something yet gets nervous, so Virgil needs to encourage him to say what is on his mind. Dante blurts out his problem: if the shades on this terrace do not need food or drink, how is it that they clearly are losing weight? Virgil provides two brief replies; both seem to the reader, and probably to the discussants, insufficient, so Virgil invites Statius to provide an answer. Statius says he will do so only because Virgil asked him, and says immediately that he can answer the question successfully. Blood becomes perfected by being digested in four parts of the body, lastly the heart; from there, in the man, it descends to the genitals, and from *there* it joins with the perfect blood in the woman, which rests in her genital area. His blood is 'active', her blood is 'passive'. The active blood is instrumental in creating a new animating soul in the new being in the woman's womb. The embryo develops, and when its brain reaches a certain point, God infuses into it a rational soul. This rational soul unites with the animal soul that already was present, such that the two become one single being.

What happens when this being, this person, dies? The soul leaves the body. It carries both states of the original two souls; the animal or physical one goes silent, while the rational one makes up for that by becoming even more active than it had been while the person was alive in the body. The soul is judged: if it is condemned for eternity, it goes to the bank of the river Acheron; if it is deemed to be worthy of Heaven, it finds itself next to the Tiber. The soul discovers its fate only when arriving at the appropriate river.

The soul acquires a new body, one that consists largely of air. This new body stays with the old soul, which informs it of how the old body used to be and used to operate. Its senses work as did the old body's, and with this body of air it becomes a new form of being: a shade. Statius's explanation ends exactly when the ascent is completed. The pilgrims' path runs right next to a fire, and they must go one after the other, as Virgil warns his ward to take care not to fall. The souls here sing the hymn *Summae Deus clementiae* [God of the greatest mercy] (*Purg*., xxv. 121). The pilgrim looks at these singers intently but knows he must look down from time to time to ensure his feet are treading safely. The souls call out the examples of chastity that are Mary and Diana, as well as historical examples of chaste spouses.

In *Paradiso* xxv the reader reaches the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, and confronts the poet's reflections on what he hopes will happen to him in the future. Declaring that the poem is the product of both Heaven and earth, and of years of effort, he wishes to return to his native Florence, from where he has been so savagely excluded. He departed as an exile; he wishes to return as a poet, a poet who will be honoured with the laurel crown, bestowed upon him in the Baptistry. The poet, who is there with Beatrice and St Peter, is joined by a new light; this is St James the Great. The two apostles join in the manner of paired doves, and exude such light as to blind Dante. Beatrice invites James, who wrote of God's generosity, to speak to them about hope, the virtue he embodied from the time of his discipleship. James tells Dante to look up and to reassure himself, since all things in Heaven reach a most ready or ripe state. The pilgrim does as requested, and is able now to see again. James says he wants Dante to strengthen hope not only in himself but also in those who read the poem; to that end, he poses three questions concerning hope: 'dì quel ch' ell' è, dì come se n'infiora / la mente tua, e dì onde a te venne' [tell what it is, tell how your mind blossoms with it, and tell whence it came to you] (*Par*., xxv. 46–47).

Beatrice interrupts, answering the second question for the pilgrim, saying in essence that no living Christian has greater hope than Dante. She then lets the pilgrim answer the other two questions. He defines hope, and says he got hope from the psalmist and from James himself. James likes this answer; glowing more brilliantly, he asks a fourth question: 'What does hope promise you?', to which Dante answers 'This is found in Scripture' (*Par*., xxv. 79–96). With this, the pilgrim's examination is complete. Angels sing 'Sperent in te' [May they trust in you] (xxv. 98), just when a new figure

arrives. Beatrice explains that this is St John. Dante strains his eyes, trying to discern the contours of the saint's body, but John chastises him, telling him his body is not there. Like tired rowers who stop in unison, the three apostles' dance ends abruptly, and Dante turns to look for Beatrice but cannot do so, since he is now, once more, blind.

The Incipits of the Twenty-Fives

Now, this literal synopsis of the Twenty-Fives is at once short and long. It is short because there are many details that have been omitted. It is long for the simple fact that these three cantos are incredibly detailed and complicated. Many have drawn attention to at least one of these three cantos as being worthy of the closest scrutiny.[1] Nonetheless, one finds thematic continuity within them, and it is my intention here to note this but also to draw upon the tradition of Cambridge Dante studies in examining our cantos with an eye to theology, to spirituality, and particularly to religious cultural outlook and practice. My contention is that Dante intended the Twenty-Fives to be particularly noteworthy, and that there are explicit signs of this in his writings; moreover, these signs are indicative of the cultural milieu of his readers.

Starting at the beginning, one can profit from looking at the openings of each of Dante's one hundred cantos. Except for the ends of each canto's first and third lines, and of the antepenultimate and final lines of each canto, Dante's terza rima has three rhymes for each sound in concatenated fashion — ABA, BCB, CDC, DED, and so on — throughout the entire poem. At the start and end of each canto, however, there are only two rhymes. Of the hundreds of rhymes used by Dante throughout the poem, only a couple of dozen or so are used once. And of these, only a handful are used solely at the start of cantos. Of these rarest of rhymes, three different ones are chosen by Dante to start the Twenty-Fives:

1 An entire book of essays has been devoted to themes raised by the twenty-fifth canto of *Paradiso*: *Se mai continga… Exile, Politics and Theology in Dante*, ed. by Claire Honess and Matthew Treherne (Ravenna: Longo editore, 2013). In a recent *lectura Dantis* of *Purgatorio* xxv, Dennis Costa's first sentence was 'I somehow can't believe that I offered, actually offered, to present to you this evening the most difficult, the most opaque canto of the entire *Commedia*'. See http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/costa/. In relation to *Inferno* xxv, the poet himself draws attention to the peculiarity of the canto, stating that Vanni Fucci's pride was the most extreme of anyone encountered in the pilgrim's infernal journey: 'Per tutt' i cerchi de lo 'nferno scuri / non vidi spirto in Dio tanto superbo' [Through all the dark circles of Hell I saw no spirit so proud against God] (*Inf.*, xxv. 13–14).

Inferno xxv. 1–3: '-adro'

> Al fine de le sue parole il ladro
> le mani alzò con amendue le fiche,
> gridando: 'Togli, Dio, ch'a te le squadro!'
>
> [At the end of his words the thief raised his hands with both the figs, crying: 'Take them, God, I'm aiming at you!']

The rhyme '-adro' appears only once in the entire poem, and it appears here, at the beginning of the canto, only twice rather than the usual three times.

Purgatorio xxv. 1–3: '-orpio'

> Ora era onde 'l salir non volea storpio;
> chè 'l sole avea il cerchio di merigge
> lasciato al Tauro e la notte a lo Scorpio.
>
> [It was an hour when our climbing brooked no lameness, for the sun had left the meridian circle to the Bull and night to the Scorpion.]

The rhyme '-orpio' similarly appears only once in the entire poem, and it appears here, at the beginning of the canto, only twice.

Paradiso xxv. 1–3: '-acro'

> Se mai contiga che 'l poema sacro
> al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
> sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro
>
> [If it ever happen that the sacred poem, to which both Heaven and earth have set their hand, so that for many years it has made me lean]

Unlike '-adro' and '-orpio', the rhyme '-acro' does not appear only once; however it appears but twice in the entire *Commedia*: once here, and the other time also at the beginning of a canto, *Purgatorio* xxxi, re-using the word 'sacro' in reference to the river Lethe.[2]

2 'O tu che se' di là dal fiume sacro', / volgendo suo parlare a me per punta, / che pur per taglio m'era paruto acro' ['O you who are beyond the sacred river', turning toward me the point of her speech, whose mere edge had seemed sharp to me] (*Purg.*, xxxi. 1–3).

No other trio of identically numbered cantos begins with rhymes that are used so rarely as we find here with the Twenty-Fives. The reader may take this break in Dante's usual phonetic and poetic strategy to signal other changes. Given the literal summary of the cantos provided above, one may already sense that the number of these changes is large in comparison to the rarity of these initial rhymes.

Changes in the Twenty-Fives

From the very moment one starts reading *Inferno* xxv, it is clear that things are amiss, even by the standards of Hell and of the cantica. Dante's usual strategy in the *Inferno* is to finish a canto when a character completes his or her movements through a given sphere of Hell. In the case of canto twenty-four, one witnesses the punishment meted out to a damned soul — in this case, a thief — as well as that individual's dramatic prophecy. But canto twenty-five of *Inferno* makes its topsy-turvy character evident from its first words: we have here a canto beginning not with an *In principio* but with the words *Al fine* [At the end], and this marks the end of one series of words, directed to the pilgrim, only to replace it with another series of words, forming an invective aimed at God.

> Al fine de le sue parole il ladro
> le mani alzò con amendue le fiche,
> gridando: 'Togli, Dio, ch'a te le squadro!' (*Inf*., xxxv. 1–5)
>
> [At the end of his words the thief raised his hands with both the figs, crying: 'Take them, God, I'm aiming at you!']

The words *le sue parole* metamorphose into an expression of physicality, *le mani alzò*, and that physicality metamorphoses from the literal, and natural, *le mani*, to another body part represented figuratively — and, thereby, with an artificially imposed physical gender — by the *fica*. Moreover, whereas the female body has only one such part, the sinner here has created two of them. The days of the Roman culture, with the omnipresence of phalluses at city gates and house entrances, even as doorbells, are gone; Dante is following the nascent medieval practice of using the symbols of genitalia for negative, hostile purposes.[3] Indeed, a defensive tower in Pistoia, Vanni's

3 See George Ferzoco, *Il murale di Massa Marittima. The Massa Marittima Mural*, 2nd edn (Florence: Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2005).

home city, presented carved representations of two hands in the form of the *fiche*, pointed directly at the enemy, Florence.[4] (Even the very form of the *fiche* is subject to the changing interpretations of readers: some would have them in the form of the *corna*, others making a circle with the thumb and index finger, but most in placing the tip of the thumb between the bent index and middle fingers.[5])

More than one sin is evident here — not just theft, but pride and blasphemy too, and a perverse twisting of lust; the neat demarcations of Dante's infernal architecture give the appearance of falling apart. This link to Pistoia, through Vanni Fucci, can be tied to bad blood — not simply of a feuding or criminal sort, but genetically, as the reference in line 12, 'il seme tuo', makes clear: the inhabitants of Pistoia descend from the soldiers of Catiline, known for their ferocity.[6]

There begins a sort of *danse macabre*, led by the damned and by serpents. Attention must be drawn, albeit most briefly, to a couple of elements here; they involve something the pilgrim does, and something the poet says. For the former: in lines 44–45, quite exceptionally, there is a change in the leadership of this travelling duo, as the pilgrim takes over the lead from his guide, by giving Virgil an order to keep quiet. He does so not in words but in deed: 'io, acciò che 'l duca stesse attento, mi puosi 'l dito su dal mento al naso' [I, so that my leader should pay attention, stretched my finger from chin to nose] (*Inf.*, xxv. 44–45). In the realm of sign language, literally Dante is telling Virgil to keep quiet; but figuratively, he is drawing attention to another guide, another poet. By deliberately pointing to his *naso* he invokes Publius Ovidius Naso, or Ovid.[7] Dante is thereby saying that we are entering a terrain that is Ovidian, and that he knows at least as much about this as does his guide, Virgil.

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4 Alberto Agresti, *Dante e Vanni Fucci. Nota letta all' Accademia Pontaniana nella tornata del 24 aprile 1892* (Naples: Tipografia della Regia Università, 1892), p. 7.

5 Re the *corna*, see Vittorio Gassman's interpretation in his recitation of the canto: https://youtu.be/L6bKBACp0Uo; for the circular gesture, see Ignazio Baldelli, 'Le "fiche" di Vanni Fucci', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 174 (1997) 1–38; and for the thumb between the fingers, see Andrea Mazzucchi, 'Le "fiche" di Vanni Fucci (Inf. XXV 1–3). Il contributo dell'iconografia a una disputa recente', *Rivista di studi danteschi* 1 (2001), 302–15. Mazzucchi's argument agrees with the representation in the mid-fourteenth-century manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, Holkham misc. 48, p. 38.

6 Giampaolo Francesconi, 'Infamare per dominare. La costruzione retorica fiorentina del conflitto politico a Pistoia', in *Lotta politica nell'Italia medievale. Giornata di studi, Roma, 16 febbraio 2010*, ed. by Isa Lori Sanfilippo (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 2010), pp. 95–106 (p. 102).

7 For similar observations, see Madison U. Sowell, 'Dante's Nose and Publius Ovidius Naso: A Gloss on *Inferno* 25.45', *Quaderni d'italianistica* 10 (1989), 157–71.

For the latter (something the poet says): from being an equal to Lucan and Ovid when visiting Limbo in Canto 4, Dante now becomes their superior, as he announces:

> Taccia Lucano omai, là dov' e' tocca
> del misero Sabello e di Nasidio,
> e attenda a udir quel ch'or si scocca.
> Taccia di Cadmo e d'Aretusa Ovidio,
> ché se quello in serpente e quella in fonte
> converte poetando, io non lo 'nvidio (*Inf.*, xxv. 94–99)
>
> [Let Lucan now be silent, where he touches on miserable Sabellus and Nasidius, and let him listen to what the bow now looses. About Cadmus or Arethusa let Ovid be silent, for if in his poetry he converts him into a serpent and her into a fountain, I do not envy him.]

What we begin to see here is the way our Christian poet presents the alternating natures of the creations of these two classical poets, creations that he himself will better with a literary portrayal of metamorphosis that, as shall be seen, transcends even the talent and imagination of those with whom he shared company while visiting Limbo. Soon after Dante's challenge to Lucan and Ovid, we see the transmutation of Buoso and Francesco, whose very natures are changed from one to the other. Notice also the beautiful pun that Dante could not pass up: in referring to Lucan's literary work, he mentions the figure of Nasidius — in Italian, that is *Nasidio*, a word that looks suspiciously close to *Naso Dio*, or 'Ovid God', a sign of the poetic god that Dante is about to meet face to face, and to overtake.

The shifts of the shapes of the damned in this episode of Hell are well studied, but the very story of the acquisition of the relic that drew Vanni Fucci to Hell involves an unusual example of shifting matter. Around 1140, the bishop of Pistoia sent his deacon to Compostela in order to request a relic of St James. The Galician bishop, accustomed to such requests, did as he had done before: he reached into the urn containing St James's relics, and without looking grabbed hold of some hair to pass along to the visiting deacon. Onlookers were amazed to see that there was more than just hair, for attached to it was part of the base of the saint's skull, thus making the relic much more impressive and potent. This was taken back to Pistoia where an ornate chapel was dedicated on 25 July 1145, in the year

that witnessed the start of the Second Crusade in which Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida was to fight and die.[8]

The presence of this relic caused Pistoia to become one of the Italian peninsula's leading pilgrimage sites, and certainly the greatest one dedicated to St James. As Pistoia is close to the Via Francigena, the primary north-south pilgrimage route leading to Rome, many pilgrims could make safe and convenient detours to Pistoia, bringing more renown and more money to the city. These factors permitted the creation of a staggeringly impressive reliquary in Pistoia's cathedral; work on this began in 1287, and it was here, about 1295, that Vanni Fucci and his henchmen committed their most dastardly crime: the theft not only of sacred vessels and art, but of relics, too.[9]

Rather like the pilgrim, in moving quickly to *Purgatorio* xxv, one finds Virgil using a metaphor in encouraging his charge to speak: 'Scocca l'arco del dir, ch 'nfino al ferro hai tratto' [Loose the bow of speech, which you have drawn to the very iron] (*Purg*., xxv. 17–18). The metaphor appears to be classical, but in fact it resounds in a contemporary Christian context, as the great Dominican theologian Hugh of St Cher instructed his charges that 'First the bow is bent in study, then the arrow is released in preaching': a balance between learning and the active life is necessary.[10]

We are now about to get a great deal of learning from Statius, who presents a detailed explanation — presented in a form one could consider an oral treatise, or perhaps a university exercise such as a disputed question or a *quodlibet* — regarding the formation of the human body and of its afterlife version. This explanation is given not by Virgil, nor by a person known for his scientific knowledge, but by a poet dead for over a millennium. Why should Statius have such knowledge, and in such detail? This marks a mysterious shift in the narrative thrust of the entire cantica,

8 Diana Webb, 'St James in Tuscany: The Opera di San Jacopo of Pistoia and Pilgrimage to Compostela', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 50 (1998), 207–34.

9 The relic was of such importance that on 22 November 1145, Pope Eugenius III sent a letter to Bishop Atto of Pistoia, granting an indulgence to those visiting the altar containing the relics of James; see *Patrologia Latina* 180, col. 1063. Even the chanting of the liturgical hours needed to be altered here, due to the noise made by the crush of pilgrims for the feast of the saint; see Benjamin Brand, 'The Vigils of Medieval Tuscany', *Plainsong and Medieval Text* 17 (2008) 23–54 (p. 38).

10 M. Michèle Mulcahey, *'First the Bow is Bent in Study…'. Dominican Education before 1350* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998).

emphasising that the closer one gets to the realm of the heavenly, the less obviously useful is Virgil's presence. Everything to be learned here has to do with Christian perfection, and with that education comes, almost by osmosis, an understanding of how the true soul, the Christian one, moves through the various phases of nascence, life and afterlife with its changing bodies. Statius's discourse — at 78 lines (31–108) his longest by far, and one of the longest of the entire *Commedia* — is timed to end just as the terrace of the lustful is reached. In this manner, the poet shows not only that humans are unities of body and soul, but that because of this it is necessary to keep both parts healthy and holy.

At this point of the narrative, the pattern of noting the exemplars of chastity starts typically, with penitents singing an appropriate hymn, the *Summae Deus clementiae*, regarding the desire to be purged of lust, and calling upon Mary and a classical model of chastity (Diana). In starting to sing again, they evoke the names of chaste spouses, and precisely here, at the top of the terraces of Purgatory, the pattern changes: no names are given. Cynics might be quick to say that there are no such things as chaste spouses, but such a response would in this regard be out of keeping with the trends of medieval spirituality, which permitted and in some cases glorified people who lived in matrimony without intercourse. St Cecilia and her husband Valerian mark the *locus classicus* for this;[11] more recently, in the thirteenth century, Marie d'Oignies was but one woman with an international reputation for holiness who lived chastely with her husband.[12]

But living chastely within marriage was not an easy thing, perhaps not so much because of the passions of people but because of the strict and often (to us) inadvertently hilarious regulations that priests were told to use with their flock. Penitentials — guide books on how to judge sin and to allocate appropriate penance — were a minefield for all concerned. To illustrate this point, James Brundage created in 1987 a flow chart indicating when it would be licit for people to engage in sexual intercourse;[13] according to these guidelines, almost every person having sex would sin at some point,

11 Carolyn Muessig, 'Paradigms of Sanctity for Medieval Women', in *Models of Holiness in Medieval Sermons. Proceedings of the International Symposium (Kalamazoo, 4–7 May 1995)*, ed. by Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération International des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, 1996), pp. 85–102.

12 Jennifer N. Brown, 'The Chaste Erotics of Marie d'Oignies and Jacques de Vitry', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 (2010), 74–93.

13 James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 162

and upon confession would need to do penance. But as Dyan Elliott has demonstrated, chaste couples could and did exist, and could and did serve as models for others.[14]

Entering the realm of the fixed stars, one finds a link between hagiographical history and St James, when he is referred to by Beatrice as a 'barone'. Here we see the direct influence of a book that was widely disseminated, and seen by many to be a literary model for a range of works, including the *Paradiso*. This is the part of the Codex Calixtinus often referred to as the *Historia Turpini*, which tells of how St James convinced Charlemagne to clear Iberia of the infidel. The *Historia* narrates how Charlemagne, exhausted from fighting, observed a massive body of stars in the sky, moving from the north and then across to the west, and then how St James appeared to him as a most handsome nobleman and beseeched him to restore religious order to Galicia and the rest of the peninsula. Here, Dante is clearly using the model of James as baron, and setting him among those same fixed stars that enthralled Charlemagne (although ironically, the *Historia*'s fixed stars change position and direction).[15]

In proceeding to examine Dante, James's questions seem to lack the diamond-edged precision that we saw in Statius's speech on the development of the body. This is because here the educative model is, interestingly, reflective not of the scholastic milieu but rather of the mendicant one, where student friars would be examined by a provincial minister in matters of faith in order to ensure the candidate could take up the office of preacher. As Neslihan Şenocak and Ian Wei — both of them experts in mendicant and university education — have noted, we do not know anything about pass rates, but one gets the impression that the less gifted would have been weeded out before any such examinations.[16] One witnesses, in the precision and readiness of Dante's answers, an expertise in the subject matter that far outstrips that of his former master Virgil when he was, so to speak, examined by the pilgrim back in *Purgatorio* xxv.

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14 Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage. Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

15 See *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Turpin. Book IV of The Liber Sancti Jacobi (Codex Calixtinus)*, ed. and trans. by Kevin R. Poole (New York: Italica Press, 2014), pp. 7–9.

16 Both these scholars have kindly communicated this with me privately. Among their relevant publications are Neslihan Şenocak, *The Poor and the Perfect. The Rise of Learning in the Franciscan Order, 1209–1310* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), and Ian Wei, *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris. Theologians and the University, c.1100–1320* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Interest in the epistle of James changed radically around the time that Dante lived. For centuries the only notable commentary had been by Bede, although a short letter from Augustine discussed one verse regarding the role of work in salvation.[17] In the thirteenth century, it was once again Hugh of St Cher who seems to have been the writer of a new commentary on James, and it was he who followed the trends established by Pope Innocent III and St Anthony of Padua earlier in the century by identifying the three apostles most emblematic of the three greatest virtues: Peter of faith, James of hope, and John of charity.[18] It may well be that it was Dante's education at the Dominican *studium* at Santa Maria Novella that familiarised Dante with this trinity of apostles and their allocated virtues. Far from being fixed for centuries, Dante's religious reality was one that had changed from previous times. We see that many sermons based on the theme of the Epistle of James (1. 17) were delivered throughout Europe in the later Middle Ages, as this reading featured in the liturgy for the fourth Sunday after Easter, commonly known as Cantate Sunday: 'Omne datum optimum et omne donum perfectum desursum est descendens a Patre luminum apud quem non est transmutatio nec vicissitudinis obumbratio' [Every best gift, and every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change nor shadow of alteration].[19] Given the content of this verse, and the singing that pervades Dante's Paradise, we see a good match between content and character here, one that may not have been possible even fifty years before Dante wrote the *Commedia*.

The examples touched upon here — and many others present in these cantos — make clear the extent to which change is in the air in all three of the Twenty-Fives. This brings us back to our beginning, and to the notion that the very number twenty-five may be considered a significant symbol for change, for renewal, for remembering, so that one may act in an invigorated and improved manner.

17 On this theme in Augustine and its relation to Dante, see Debora Marletta, 'Aspects of Dante's Theology of Redemption. Eden, the Fall, and Christ in Dante with respect to Augustine' (doctoral thesis, University College London, 2011), p. 187.

18 Mulchahey, *'First the Bow is Bent in Study…'*, p. 203.

19 Johann-Baptist Schneyer, *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters für die Zeit von 1150–1350*, 11 vols, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters. Texte und Untersuchungen, 43 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1969–1990), vol. 9, p. 534.

Dante and the Number Twenty-Five

In the terms of Dante's cultural framework, the number twenty-five can be seen as an important one objectively and, for Dante, subjectively. Objectively, the number twenty-five can be linked to the passage of time, to the celebration of liturgical feasts, to salvific and terrestrial history, and even to a particularly relevant part of popular culture.[20]

Why the passage of time? Because in Florence, like in so many other places, the calendar year began on 25 March. The Roman calendar equated this date with the vernal equinox, but for medieval Europeans this date relied on a liturgical view of salvific history: given that Mary conceived on 25 March, the Saviour was able to enter the world as flesh, and thus the Feast of the Annunciation was observed on this same day. New life for humankind led to a new calendar year to mark the passage of time.

It is obvious, of course, but nine months later Jesus was born on 25 December (the date on which the Roman calendar marked the winter solistice). The two-hundred and seventy-five days between these two dates can be seen to be eleven times twenty-five days, but much more importantly the imprint of this numeral twenty-five led to its liturgical observance in other months of the year, and probably in another calendar-related time period, the fifteen-year period known as the indiction. Depending on where one lived, indictions, so essential for the dating of legal or diplomatic agreements, began either on 25 December or 24 September (not simply very nearly the twenty-fifth day of the month, but also the Roman calendar's autumnal equinox).

A strong argument can be made for the feasts of the twenty-fifth day to be among the most important of any day in the liturgical calendar. Here are just some of the major feasts of the universal church that fall on the twenty-fifth day:

- 25 March: the Annunciation
- 25 April: St Mark
- 25 May: St Bede, Gregory VII

20 Among the works relevant to the discussion of dates and feasts that follow are: John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and *Computus and its Cultural Context in the Latin West, AD 300–1200: Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on the Science of Computus in Ireland and Europe, Galway, 14–16 July, 2006* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010).

- 25 August: Louis the King; St Genesius (Genesius is regarded as the patron saint of those who work in the theatrical arts, and these seem to include lawyers and barristers)
- 25 November: St Catherine of Alexandria
- 25 December: Christmas
- 25 January: the conversion of St Paul

This is but a partial list of the more universally famous saints. There are other very important local saints with feasts on the twenty-fifth; these were the patron saints of Florence, Zenobius and Miniatus, whose feasts were on 25 May and 25 October respectively.

Like the indiction that could begin on 24 September, there were two major saints' feasts celebrated very near to the twenty-fifth. One is the 26 September feast of Sts Cosmas and Damian, who would soon become so important as patrons of the Medici family, and the other is the hugely significant feast of St John the Baptist held on 24 June; six months apart from Christmas and the Roman calendar's summer solstice, this feast was often considered throughout Western Christendom as a sort of mid-year festival, both liturgical and lay. For the purposes of this focussed liturgical calendar, one other feast — not a minor one — must not be forgotten. It is the feast of St James, the star attraction of *Paradiso* xxv, celebrated in the month of July and, not surprisingly, on the twenty-fifth day.

Finally, a further feast must be considered here, not simply for the sake of completeness but also to help us understand another aspect of the importance of the twenty-fifth day of the month. St Dismas was celebrated on 25 March. Overshadowed by the feast of the Annunciation, poor Dismas would rarely if ever get a look into liturgical festivities, but his feast is hugely symbolic. Tradition has it that St Dismas was the name of the good thief on the Cross next to Jesus. According to Scripture, Jesus promised Dismas that he would be in Heaven that day. The feast of Dismas is celebrated on 25 March because it was customarily considered that this was the actual date of the Crucifixion.[21]

21 I therefore find it very difficult to believe that Dante intended his comedic journey to begin on any day other than Friday 25 March 1300 — the symbolic value of this date would surely trump the more likely one, in terms of calendrical measurement, which is Friday 8 April 1300.

What else can be said about the twenty-fifth day of a month? It is also the day that Adam was created, on 25 March. Some held that this was the date on which Abraham sought to obey the order to sacrifice his son, Isaac, the subject of James's Epistle 2. 21–23:

> Abraham pater noster nonne ex operibus iustificatus est offerens Isaac filium suum super altare? Vides quoniam fides copperabatur operibus illius et ex operibus fides consummata est? Et suppleta est scriptura dicens credidit Abraham Deo et reputatum est illi ad iustitiam et amicus Dei appellatus est.
>
> [Was not Abraham our father justified by works, offering up Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou, that faith did co-operate with his works; and by works faith was made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled, saying: Abraham believed God, and it was reputed to him to justice, and he was called the friend of God.]

These very lines, this very event, is implicit in *Paradiso* xxv. 88–90, when Dante answers James's fourth and final question regarding what promise hope holds to him: He says, 'Le nove e le Scritture antiche / pongon lo segno, ed esso lo mi addita, / de l'anime che Dio s'ha fatte amiche'. [The new Scriptures and the old set forth the target for the souls whom God has made his friends, and that fact points it out to me.]

To finish with the date of 25 March, there is an event that is obviously anti-scriptural but drawn by the weight of all the other important events of this day: there were some in medieval Europe who held that the Last Judgement would take place on this date. The religious calendar for the twenty-fifth is most imposing, but Dante is also reflecting an aspect of Florentine popular culture in his interest in the twenty-fifth day of March, because traditionally Florentines would eat bread that was made on 25 March in order to become fertile.

These are what could be termed objective reasons for Dante to take twenty-five seriously, but there are others that, although not shared by the entire populace, would be held to be of vital importance by our poet. In Book 4 of the *Convivio* (xxiv. 4), Dante discusses the divisions of the human life cycle. He says:

> Avemo dunque che la gioventute nel quarantacinquesimo anno si compie. E sì come l'adolescenzia è in venticinque anni che precede, montando, a la gioventute, così lo discendere, cioè la senettute, è [in] altrettanto tempo che succede a la gioventute; e così si termina la senettute nel settantesimo anno.

> [Maturity is completed in the forty-fifth year. Just as adolescence lasts for the first twenty-five years, ascending toward maturity, so the descent, that is, old age, lasts for the same number of years following maturity; and so old age concludes in the seventieth year.]

Dante's division is one that is not unusual for his century, but it does differ from those of previous times in the Christian West. For earlier monks and clerics, life was more or less a steady continuum, and any age was a good age to convert and live well. Dante would not deny this, but he emphasises that there is a peak in human existence, and that peak runs from the twenty-fifth to the forty-fifth years of one's life.

Now, it is obvious that Dante sets the *Comedy* in the thirty-fifth year of his life, the apex of the arc, down from which he can look, Janus-like, to the past and to his future. But in the crafted autobiography of Dante's earlier years, the *Vita Nova*, we find something I believe to be significant:

> Io dico che, secondo l'usanza d'Arabia, l'anima sua nobilissima si partìo ne la prima ora del nono giorno del mese; e secondo l'usanza di Siria, ella si partìo nel nono mese de l'anno, però che lo primo mese è ivi Tisirin primo, lo quale a noi è Ottobre; e secondo l'usanza nostra, ella si partìo in quello anno de la nostra indizione, cioè de li anni Domini, in cui lo perfetto numero nove volte era compiuto in quello centinaio nel quale in questo mondo ella fue posta, ed ella fue de li cristiani del terzodecimo centinaio. (*VN*., XXIX. 6)

> [I say, then, that according to the division of time in Italy, her most noble spirit departed from among us in the first hour of the ninth day of the month; and according to the division of time in Syria, in the ninth month of the year: seeing that Tisirin, which with us is October, is there the first month. Also she was taken from among us in that year of our reckoning (to wit, of the years of our Lord) in which the perfect number was nine times multiplied within that century wherein she was born into the world: which is to say, the thirteenth century of Christians.]

If Beatrice died on 8 June 1290, and if scholars are correct in believing Dante to have been born in late May 1265, then this makes him barely twenty-five years old at the moment of the death of his beloved. Dante's passage to manhood, to maturity, is linked inextricably to the most important moment of his artistic, if not emotional, life. In the midst of life is death, and we see this perfectly demonstrated with these dates. Dante's mature life, wherever it may have led him, changed the moment he became a man.

Moreover, that age of twenty-five coincides with the highly symbolic age at which, according to Numbers 8. 24, Levites could begin to be priests,

and at which the Council in Trullo (held in Constantinople, 691–692) decreed that one could take religious orders; it is also the age at which one fully acquired legal rights in Roman law.[22]

As a result of this possible coincidence, it may be considered whether Dante's dark night of the soul might be reflected numerically. That dark night, as represented in his *Comedy*, would be the journey to and through Hell. If one were to count the divisions of the *Inferno* in which Dante met the souls of that cantica's human inhabitants — starting from the beginning of his journey, where he meets Virgil in the dark wood, to the bottom where he sees Judas, Brutus and Cassius before escaping to Purgatory — one finds twenty-five of them: one per year of his *iter* to maturity.[23]

Paradiso xxv ends with Dante's blindness that accompanies the sudden halt of the dance of the three apostles, who stop like tired rowers in unison. The first great rowers of antiquity were the Argonauts who are recalled, in an extremely precise manner, almost at the very end of the *Commedia*. In *Paradiso* xxxiii. 94–96, we read, after Dante sees everything in the universe all together at once: 'Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo / che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa / che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo'. [One point alone is greater forgetfulness to me than twenty-five centuries to the enterprise that made Neptune marvel at the shadow of the Argo.] In other words, because of the incapacity of his memory, Dante has forgotten more of what he perceived in that fleeting instant, in which he saw all things in unity, than what all of humanity has forgotten since the enterprise of the Argo, twenty-five hundred years ago.

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22 'Haec est lex Levitarum: a viginti quinque annis et supra ingredientur ut ministrent in tabernaculo foederi'. [This is the law of the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upwards, they shall go in to minister in the tabernacle of the covenant.] See also *The Council in Trullo Revisited*, ed. by G. Nedungatt and M. Featherstone (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1995), pp. 87–88, and Emiel Eybel, 'Young Priests in Early Christianity', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum.* Supplementary volume 22 (1995), 102–20. Regarding late medieval Florence, see Ilaria Taddei, 'La notion d'âge dans la Florence des XIVe et XVe siècles', *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Moyen-Age* 118 (2006), 149–59.

23 The pilgrim meets human souls in the following areas of the *Inferno*: 1) dark wood; 2) the neutrals; 3) Limbo; 4) the lustful; 5) gluttons; 6) the avaricious and the prodigals; 7) the angry and the sullen; 8) heretics; 9) the violent against others; 10) the violent against one's self; 11) the violent against God; 12) panders and seducers; 13) flatterers; 14) simoniacs; 15) diviners; 16) barrators; 17) hypocrites; 18) thieves; 19) false counsellors; 20) schismatics; 21) counterfeiters; 22) fraudulent against relatives; 23) fraudulent against party or homeland; 24) fraudulent against guests; 25) fraudulent against rightful lords.

Everything in the flow of *Paradiso* xxxiii's narrative stops here, just like the apostles who stopped so suddenly. There is a sudden shift to the present tense. The rhythm breaks completely, and this helps us to understand completely the next line, 'Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa' [Thus my mind, entirely lifted up]. The Argonauts enter onto the domain of Neptune, just as a living man, Dante, enters into the realm of the blessed. The Christianization of antique myth, of classical religion, is completed right here. We recall John Scott's observation that in line 7 of *Paradiso* xxv, Dante hopes to return with 'altro vello' [with another fleece]; he can only accomplish this by changing Jason's fleece into that of Dante's civic patron.[24]

This Christianization of antique myth is completed by reference to the number twenty-five. Surely Dante did not absolutely need to use this number, or any number, here. Perhaps this number twenty-five would have been a throw-away detail anywhere it appeared in the *Comedy*. I highlight it for a number of reasons. One is that twenty-five is not a number used often in the *Comedy*; in fact, its appearance in *Paradiso*'s final canto marks its only explicit reference. If Dante were desperate to use this number in relation to the Argo, he could have used it to describe the number of the pairs of oarsmen, the same men who would have stopped from exhaustion just as the three saints in *Paradiso* xxv paused: twenty-five. He could have made a point of mentioning that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* consist precisely of 250 tales, or that poor Lucan met his death at the horribly young age of twenty-five. Instead, he uses it to amplify the ultimate change, from a classical to a Christian universe, and for Dante, this number twenty-five seems to be one he associates strongly with change.

In these cantos deeply packed with action, with science, and with theology, many changes are clearly seen. We move from the *fiche* of Hell to the uterus of Purgatory to the anticipation of the glorified body in Paradise, and from the hellish bodies of the thieves to the emaciated ones of Purgatory to the spiritual ones of Heaven. We move from mythology to science to theology, and from the hellish bad blood of Pistoia to the perfect blood that gives earthly life to the spilled blood that brings eternal life to James, the first apostle to be martyred. From darkness we move to fire to

24 On this transformation from classical to Christian writing, see Michelangelo Picone, 'Dante argonauta. La ricezione dei miti ovidiani nella *Commedia*', in *Ovidius redivivus. Von Ovid zu Dante*, ed. by M. Picone and B. Zimmermann (Stuttgart: M&P Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1994), pp. 173–202. See also John A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), p. 296.

blinding light. In Hell we witness the monstrous body; in Purgatory the human body is explained before the fate of the blessed body is exposed in Paradise. Sex in *Inferno* is actual and violent; in *Purgatorio* it is described in its natural manner, and chastity is presented as an ideal; and in *Paradiso* the chaste apostles hold centre stage. We see how monstrous metamorphoses in Hell transform into a poetic union of wine and sun when discussing the human soul in Purgatory, and from then to consideration of how the perfection of the soul affects the fate of its partner, the body. We moreover see that St James is present in the Pistoia of sinner Vanni Fucci as a relic, and in Heaven as himself.

In short, the number twenty-five is not limited to infernal shifts or purgatorial progression but to the perfection of the Christian, where the embodiment of the three theological virtues meet and shock and blind him, a blinding that proves temporary and whose cure, like that of Saul, keeps the pilgrim on the road.

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