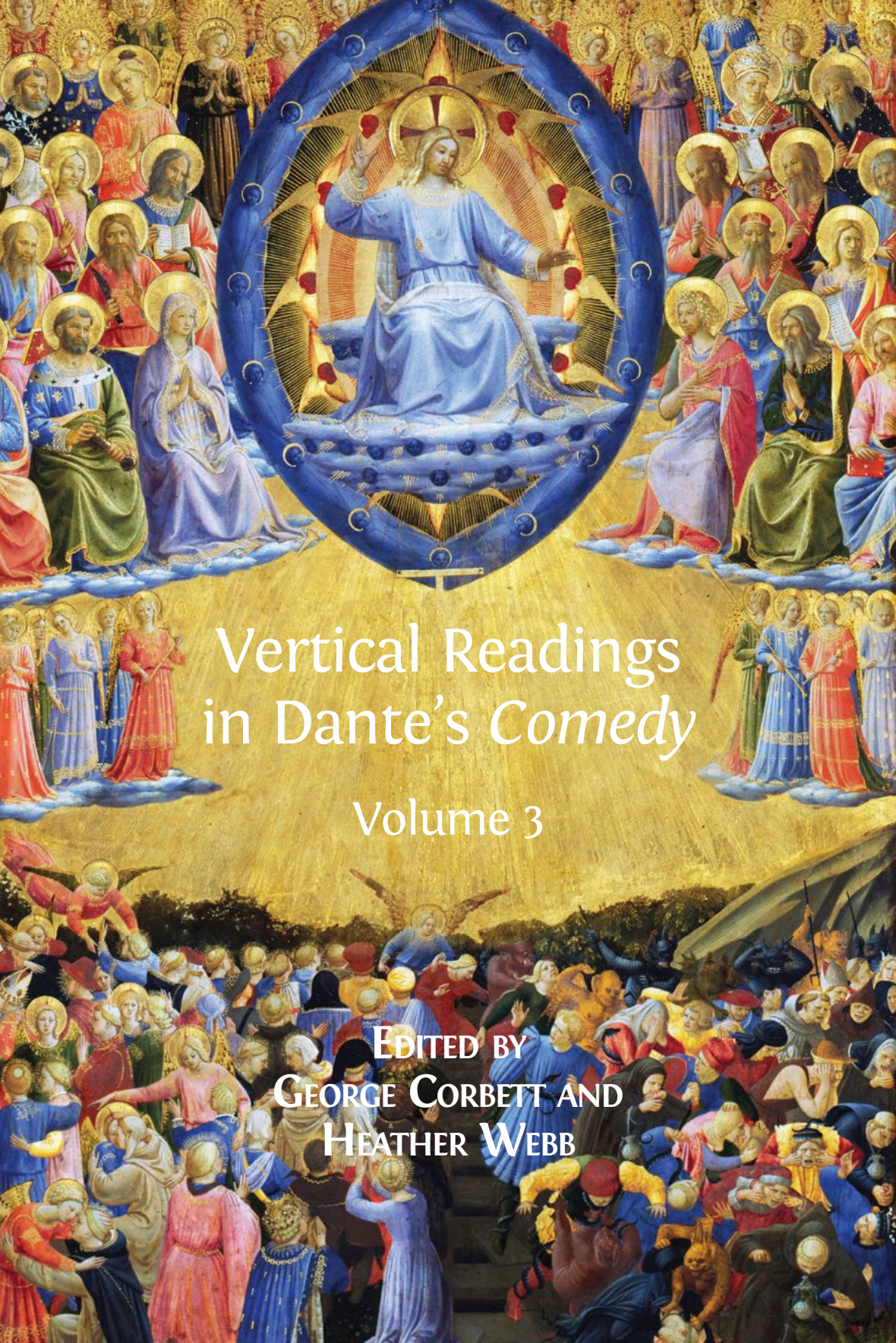

Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*

Volume 3

Edited by
George Corbett and
Heather Webb

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Contents

26. The Poetics of Trespassing

Elena Lombardi

On a first reading, one textual detail links the three canto Twenty-Sixes: the image of flames. In *Inferno* xxvi, the fraudulent counsellors are placed inside tongues of fire, and among them Virgil and Dante meet the two-pronged flame engulfing Ulysses and Diomedes. The speech that follows, retelling Ulysses's journey in the southern hemisphere, is considered one of the high points of the poem (and of world literature). In *Purgatorio* xxvi, the purging souls of the lustful lovers are surrounded by flames. Homosexual and heterosexual ranks meet and exchange embraces and kisses, shouting out examples of their erotic excesses. Here Dante encounters the soul of Guido Guinizzelli, the 'padre' [father] (*Purg*., xxvi. 97) of the sweet new style ('dolce stil novo') previously celebrated in *Purgatorio* xxiv. 49–63 (especially line 57), as well as the Occitan poet Arnaut Daniel (*Purg*., xxvi. 136–48). *Paradiso* xxvi brings to completion the so-called 'cycle of exams': Dante is tested on the last theological virtue, *caritas*, or divine love, by the Apostle John, and meets the soul of the first human being, Adam, with whom he discusses language and original sin, among other things. The blessed souls appear as flames in this canto as well.

These three cantos act like magnets within the *Comedy* — they attract multiple readings and diverse textual alliances, and they have drawn uninterrupted critical attention since the early commentaries. Indeed, the canto of Ulysses is one of the pillars of the *Comedy*, as the Greek hero stands as an exciting and threatening alter ego of Dante, and his flight beyond Hercules' pillars is an image of Dante's daring intellectual and poetic enterprise. With one unforgettable line, 'dei remi facemmo ali al folle volo' [of our oars we made wings for the mad flight] (*Inf*., xxvi. 125), Dante makes

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Ulysses a creature of flight and folly, establishing a thread of navigation, flight, and madness that crosses the entire poem.

Echoes of the canto Twenty-Sixes resound throughout the poem at several levels. For instance, in the discourse on charity, Dante inserts the image of 'il mare dell'amor torto' [the sea of twisted love] (*Par*., xxvi. 62), from which the love for God has saved the traveller by putting him on the shore of the right love:[1]

> ché l'essere del mondo e l'esser mio
> la morte ch'el sostenne perch' io viva,
> e quel che spera ogne fedel com' io,
> con la predetta conoscenza viva,
> tratto m'hanno del mar de l'amor torto,
> e del diritto m'han posto a la riva. (*Par*., xxvi. 58–63)

> [for the existence of the world and my existence, the death that he underwent that I might live, and what each believer hopes for, as I do, along with the aforesaid lively knowledge, have drawn me from the sea of twisted love and placed me on the shore of right love.]

In the expression 'mare dell'amor torto' readers encounter one of the great ciphers of the *Comedy*, which encapsulates and weaves complex and crucial discourses within the poem. With it, Dante brings them back to the beginning of his poem, just after a 'diritta via' [straight way] (*Inf*., i. 3) is lost, to find him represented as a sailor that has just survived shipwreck, with the same rhyme 'riva' / 'viva' establishing a clear link between the passages:

> E come quei che con lena affannata,
> uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
> si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,
> così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
> si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
> che non lasciò già mai persona viva. (*Inf*., i. 22–27)

> [And like one with laboring breath, come forth out of the deep onto the shore, who turns back to the perilous water and stares: so my spirit, still fleeing, turned back to gaze again at the pass that has never yet left anyone alive.]

1 For this image, and for *Paradiso* xxvi, see Elena Lombardi, 'Identità lirica e piacere linguistico: una lettura di *Paradiso* xxvi', forthcoming in *Studi danteschi.*

Readers are almost automatically redirected to Ulysses, who has navigated the sea of twisted love because of his excessive desire for knowledge, and to the beginning of *Purgatorio* and the non-mad flights of both the poet, his talent lifting the sails and leaving behind the 'mar sì crudele' [sea so cruel] (*Purg*., i. 3), and the traveller, who witnesses the angel's anti-Ulyssean navigation-cum-flight (*Purg*., ii. 31–36). From there, readers are led to the great discourse on just and twisted loves and on desire at the centre of *Purgatorio* (cantos xvi–xix), which ends, not by chance, with a Siren, full of pleasure ('di piacer […] piena', *Purg*., xix. 21), who twists sailors (and Ulysses himself, according to her) away from their journey. This is the same misleading and illusive pleasure that Beatrice criticizes in Eden, when accusing her lover of having forsaken her memory for the attraction of temporal and deceptive delights (*Purg*., xxx. 131: 'imagini di ben […] false' [false images of good]; and xxxi. 34–35: 'le presenti cose / col falso lor piacer' [present things with their false pleasure]), delights that have very complex and compelling links with Dante's own lyrical and philosophical past. The image of the sea then brings the readers to the beginning of Paradise, where natural desire helps all creatures to navigate 'lo gran mar de l'essere' [the great sea of being] (*Par*., i. 113), but can also set the creatures off course when that desire is 'torto da falso piacere' [twisted by false pleasure] (i. 135). That very sea is, according to Piccarda Donati in *Paradiso* iii, the image of God: 'ell' è quel mare al qual tutto si move / ciò ch'ella crïa o che natura face' [he is that sea to which all moves that his will creates or Nature makes'] (*Par*., iii. 86–87). In sum, the image of the twisted and right seas of love in *Paradiso* xxvi evokes a complex and structural discourse on natural desire, and its relation to reason, will, the senses, divine and human love, and poetry.

Moreover, each canto is deeply embedded in its own surroundings. In particular, *Inferno* xxvi is fastened to the following canto xxvii by both the image of navigation (employed literally by Ulysses and metaphorically by Guido da Montefeltro) and by a linguistic puzzle that involves grammatical languages (Latin and Greek) and the Lombard dialect. *Purgatorio* xxiv–xxvi, known as the 'cantos of the poets', constitute a rather compact cluster where Dante conceptualizes the novelty of his 'sweet new style' with the help of two predecessors (Bonagiunta da Lucca in canto xxiv and Guido Guinizzelli in canto xxvi) and through a very interesting excursus on embryology (canto xxv). Finally, *Paradiso* xxiv–xxvi, known as the 'cantos of exams', are very similar in structure and pattern: the examinations that Dante is required to pass on the three theological virtues in order to ascend to the highest (and only) section of Paradise, display a regular format.

Some crucial alliances, however, can be established solely within the three canto Twenty-Sixes.[2] In them, we see the merging of two great fault lines of the *Comedy*: the discourse of poetry (poetic ambition and poetic authority) merges and clashes with that of desire (erotic and intellectual alike). Such themes are threaded by the equally crucial discourse on language. The expression 'fault lines' is employed consciously: these are the elements that 'make and break' the *Comedy* — language, desire, and poetic authority constitute the *Comedy*'s strength and vulnerability. All such themes are also tied to the question of transgression, which in these very cantos is embodied and consolidated by the figure of a tri-headed alias for the poet-traveller, Ulysses — Adam — Dante, a metamorphic and unstable figure that attracts and deflects Dante's challenge to established genres, established languages, and to the very representation of the divine.

My reading of the cantos focuses on the themes of language, desire and trespassing, and of the three-headed alias, but, to begin on a somewhat light note and to do justice to how excited and daunted one feels when reading these three cantos, it is worth taking a quick look at another superficial *trait d'union* between them: the somewhat over-excited reaction of the traveller upon meeting the three great souls, which measures not only the magnitude of the three characters, but also the authorial excitement in writing or re-writing them. When hearing that Ulysses and Diomedes are trapped in the double burning tongue, Dante behaves in a rather childish manner:

> 'S'ei posson dentro da quelle faville
> parlar', diss' io, 'maestro, assai ten priego
> e ripriego, che 'l priego vaglia mille,
> che non mi facci de l'attender niego
> fin che la fiamma cornuta qua vegna;
> vedi che del disio ver' lei mi piego!' (*Inf.*, xxvi. 64–69)
>
> ['If they can speak within those flames', I said, 'master, much do I beg you, and beg again that each prayer may be worth a thousand, that you not refuse to wait until the horned flame comes here: see that I bend toward it with desire!']

2 For previous vertical readings of the canto Twenty-Sixes, see Peter Hawkins, 'Virtuosity and Virtue: Poetic Self-Reflection in the Commedia', *Dante Studies* 98 (1980), 1–18; Franco Fido, 'Writing Like God — or Better? Symmetries in Dante's 26th and 27th Cantos of the *Commedia*', *Italica* 53 (1986), 250–64; Sebastiano Valerio, 'Lingua, retorica e poetica nel canto XXVI del *Paradiso*', *L'Alighieri* 44 (2003), 83–104.

Upon hearing that he has been speaking to the soul of his dear precursor Guido Guinizzelli, Dante stages himself within a fairly remote simile from Statius' *Thebaid* (v. 710–24), half-comparing himself to the sons of Hypsipyle saving their mother by throwing themselves in the middle of the guards who are escorting her to capital punishment.

> Quali ne la tristizia di Ligurgo
> si fer due figli a riveder la madre,
> tal mi fec' io, ma non a tanto insurgo,
> quand' io odo nomar sé stesso il padre
> mio e de li altri miei miglior che mai
> rime d'amore usar dolci e leggiadre. (*Purg*., xxvi. 94–99)
>
> [Such as in Lycurgus' grief the two sons became, seeing their mother again: so did I become — though I do not rise so high — when I hear our father name himself, the father of me and of the others, my betters, who ever used sweet and graceful rhymes of love.]

Finally, again from the *Thebaid* (vi. 854–59, with an antecedent in *Aeneid* iv. 442–49) comes the slightly odd simile with which Dante describes his desire to meet Adam, that of a tree stretched by strong winds. Very much like with Ulysses, here the traveller 'bends in desire' toward Adam:

> Come la fronda che flette la cima
> nel transito del vento, e poi si leva
> per la propria virtù che la soblima,
> fec' io in tanto in quant' ella diceva,
> stupendo, e poi mi rifece sicuro
> un disio di parlare ond' ïo ardeva. (*Par*., xxvi. 85–90)
>
> [Like a branch that bends its summit at the passing of the wind and then lifts itself again, its own strength driving it upward: so did I as she spoke, marveling, and then I gained confidence again from a desire to speak that burned within me.]

To Dante's elastic desire, Adam responds with the equally odd image of the restless animal under cover (ll. 97–102), which has sparked much discussion about whether it represents a war-horse or a cat.[3] Such

3 *Par*., xxvi. 97–102: 'Talvolta un animal coverto broglia, / sì che l'affetto convien che si paia / per lo seguir che face a lui la 'nvoglia; / e similmente l'anima primaia / mi facea trasparer per la coverta / quant' ella a compiacermi venìa gaia' [Sometimes a hidden

stretchings and bendings and burnings illustrate the quintessential narrative of the *Commedia*: an ardent desire for bursting into language, for telling new stories, or retelling them anew, and for trespassing into poetry.

Language

Insofar as language is concerned, the canto Twenty-Sixes provide a wonderful microcosm of Dante's non-conventional, ever-flexible, poetry-obsessed linguistic thought.[4] In order to reconstruct such a complex scenario, it is helpful to begin with the end, with Adam's famous observations on the mutability of language. While in his *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante had claimed that Hebrew was the original sacred language co-created with Adam, which had been the universal language until Babel, and the language of grace until the diaspora (*DVE.* I. iv–vii), in *Paradiso* xxvi he features Adam as not only the user, but also the maker of his language, having him mention 'l'idioma ch'io usai e che io fei' [the language that I spoke and that I devised] (l. 114). Adam explains that while the faculty of speech is a work of nature, language, since its inception, has been a mutable system:

> La lingua ch'io parlai fu tutta spenta
> innanzi che a l'ovra inconsummabile
> fosse la gente di Nembròt attenta:
> ché nullo effetto mai razïonabile,
> per lo piacere uman che rinnovella
> seguendo il cielo, sempre fu durabile.
> Opera naturale è ch'uom favella;
> ma così o così, natura lascia
> poi fare a voi secondo che v'abbella. (*Par*., xxvi. 124–32)
>
> [The language that I spoke was all extinct before Nimrod's people became intent on the unfinishable work, for no rational effect, because of human preference, which changes following the heavens, has ever been enduring. It is a natural operation that man speaks, but whether in this way or that, Nature allows you to do as it may please you.]

---

animal stirs in such a way that its affect appears as its covering follows it; similarly the first-made soul made me see through its wrapping how gaily it came to please me]. A quick browse of the commentaries to these lines from the Dartmouth Dante Project, http://dante.dartmouth.edu/search.php, gives a sense of the controversies that this image has sparked: see in particular Hollander and Fosca *ad locum*.

4 On Dante's linguistics and Adam's language see Elena Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire. Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 121–60.

Adam denies any degree of stability even to Hebrew, pointing out that the language he used was already extinct prior to Babel. Even the name of God, the 'sign of all signs', was subjected to the fluctuations of time. It first was *I* and only then *El*, whilst in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (I. iv. 4) he had argued that the first word ever pronounced by Adam was the name of God, *El*.

> Pria ch'i' scendessi a l'infernale ambascia,
> *I* s'appellava in terra il sommo bene
> onde vien la letizia che mi fascia;
> e *El* si chiamò poi: e ciò convene,
> ché l'uso dei mortali è come fronda
> in ramo, che sen va e altra vene. (*Par*., xxvi. 133–38)
>
> [Before I descended to the oppression of Hell, the highest Good, whence comes the gladness that envelopes me, was called *I* on earth and later was called *El*. And that is necessary, for the usage of mortals is like a leaf on the branch, which departs and another comes.]

The explanations for the two names of God are diverse and convincing: while *El* is traditionally understood as the most typical of the Hebrew names for God, *I* can be interpreted as a simple letter, a number, a shortened form for *Ia*.[5] More significantly, this is, as Zygmunt Barański observes, 'a perfect synthetic example of the instability of human linguistic creation'.[6] The two other canto Twenty-Sixes precisely dramatize such fickleness, diversity and humanity of language, but also its creativity and poetic nature.

As mentioned earlier, in *Inferno* xxvi, Dante creates a veritable riddle with regards to language, beginning with the lines in which Virgil bids the eager pilgrim to hold his tongue and let him do the speaking because 'the Greeks' might disdain his speech, positing an inextricable question of language and style:[7]

> Lascia parlare a me, ch'i' ho concetto
> ciò che tu vuoi; ch'ei sarebbero schivi,
> perch'e' fuor greci, forse del tuo detto. (*Inf*., xxvi. 73–75)

5 For the different names of God, see Gino Casagrande, ''I s'appellava in terra il sommo bene'' (*Par*., XXVI. 134)', *Aevum* 50 (1976), 249–73.

6 Zygmunt Barański, 'Dante's Biblical Linguistics', *Lectura Dantis* 5 (1989), 105–43 (p. 126).

7 For the riddle of language in *Inferno* xxvi and xxvii, see Elena Lombardi, 'Plurilingualism *sub specie aeternitatis*. Language/s in Dante's *Commedia*', in *Dante's Plurilingualism. Authority, Vulgarization, Subjectivity*, ed. by M. Gragnolati, S. Fortuna and J. Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), pp. 133–47.

> [Let me speak, for I have conceived what you wish; for perhaps they would shun, because they were Greeks, your words.]

In the *captatio benevolentiae* that follows (ll. 79–84), Virgil appears to address the heroes with the formalities of the 'alta tragedìa' [high tragedy] (*Inf.*, xx. 113), using the 'parola ornata' [ornamented speech] (*Inf.*, ii. 67) that traditionally belonged to the 'grammatical' languages, Latin and Greek. In the *De vulgari eloquentia* (I. i. 3 and I. ix 11) such languages are posited as the antidote to the unruliness and degradation of the vernacular. However, at the beginning of the next canto, Virgil's supposedly lofty and ornate *licentia* — 'la licenza del dolce poeta' [the permission of my sweet poet] (*Inf.*, xxvii. 3) — is overheard as spoken in dialect by Guido da Montefeltro, who reduces the presumably highly ornate ending of his speech to a quite basic, popular, and comic language.

> 'O tu a cu' io drizzo
> la voce e che parlavi mo' lombardo,
> dicendo "Istra ten va, più non t'adizzo"'. (*Inf.*, xxvii. 19–21)

> ['O you to whom I direct my voice and who were just now speaking Lombard, saying: "*Istra* you may go, I incite you no further"'.]

Moreover, in *Inferno* xxvi and xxvii, Dante also dramatizes the torturous nature of utterance, underlining what Leo Spitzer calls 'the self-mutilating, sadistic power of speech'[8] with Ulysses's painful expression through the tongue of fire (xxvi. 85–89) and the comparison of Guido's language to a torture machine (xxvii. 7–15). The puzzle of language in *Inferno* xxvi and xxvii, and the reference to the pain of utterance, represent the grotesque inscription of the fickleness of human language. In this truly post-babelic realm, high style and ruled language clash with comic style and Lombard dialect to create a parodic and disconcerting effect on the reader. Paradigmatically, in the pouch of evil counsellors who used their speech for sinful purposes, there is no difference between the 'ornamented language' of the classics and humble dialect: they both turn grotesque, as well as painful.

Purgatorio xxvi is the only place in the *Comedy* where a substantial excerpt of a foreign language is recorded, and it has the same puzzling

8 Leo Spitzer, 'Speech and Language in *Inferno* XIII', in *Representative Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 143–71 (p. 155).

effect on the reader as the riddle of *Inferno* xxvi. Dante pays homage to one of his poetic masters, Arnaut Daniel, from whom he had 'borrowed' and transported into Italian the complex sestina strophe, and to whom, and whose language, he now lends his terzina. As opposed to the diverging extremes of high ruled language and dialect, here Dante offers his readers an extract in Occitan, the foreign variant of the very 'illustrious vernacular' that the *De vulgari eloquentia* seeks as an alternative to both Latin and dialect. The linguistic shock of a long passage in Occitan is devised, in my view, precisely to flag up the role of the vernacular in its quintessential poetic form. Moreover, as opposed to Ulysses's torturous and fatigued speech, Arnaut speaks freely and liberally:

> El cominciò liberamente a dire:
> '*Tan m'abellis vostre cortes deman,*
> *qu'ieu no me puesc ni voill a vos cobrire.*
> *Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan;*
> *consiros vei la passada folor,*
> *e vei jausen lo joi qu'esper, denan.*
> *Ara vos prec, per aquella valor*
> *que vos guida al som de l'escalina,*
> *sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor!*'.
> Poi s'ascose nel foco che li affina. (*Purg*., xxvi. 139–48)

> [He began freely to say: '*So pleasing to me is your courteous request, that I cannot nor will not hide myself from you. I am Arnaut, who weep and go singing; with chagrin I view my past folly, and rejoicing I see ahead the joy I hope for. Now I beg you, by the Power that guides you to the summit of the stairway, remember my suffering at the appropriate time!*' Then he hid himself in the fire that refines them.]

Quite aptly we find here a beautiful thread that joins *Paradiso* xxvi and *Purgatorio* xxvi. To describe the role of human pleasure in language, Adam uses a Provençal word — 'v'abbella' (*Par*., xxvi. 132) — which recurs in the *Comedy* only in Arnaut's speech, where he expresses his joy at meeting Dante as '*Tan m'abellis vostre cortes deman*' (*Purg*., xxvi. 140).

As in *Inferno* xxvi, Arnaut's speech is a matter of the inversion of both language and style. As a poet, the 'historical' Arnaut exercised the so-called *trobar clus* (a formally difficult and complex poetics) whereas Dante rewrites him in a much lighter form, technically called *trobar leu*. Moreover, in Arnaut's excerpt we find many keywords of courtly poetry that are somehow re-semanticized in a Christian and purging mode, as shown, for

instance, by the last word 'affina' (l. 148), technically the courtly word for the art of poetry (the tuning and perfecting of the song) here turned into the operation of the purgatorial fire. With this excerpt, Dante shows the adaptability of the poetic vernacular and points out that this language not only beautifully and elegantly expresses the matter of love, but is indeed able to convey the spiritual discourse as finely.

Arnaut's experience of language is one of craftsmanship. Like Adam, Arnaut is the forger of his language, indeed a 'miglior fabbro del parlar materno' [a better fashioner of his mother tongue] (*Purg*., xxvi., 117). However, while Adam is a motherless man — 'vir sine matre, vir sine lacte' [the man who never had a mother nor drank her milk] (*DVE*. I. vi. 1) — Arnaut shapes his mother tongue. This brings into focus a crucial aspect of Dante's linguistics: the feminine and maternal aspect of the vernacular, the language that, with the exception of Adam, all human beings learn 'without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses' ('sine omni regola, nutricem imitantes', *DVE*. I. i. 2).[9]

Thus, Adam's statement on the mutability of all languages, which is central to the poetics of the *Commedia*, is illustrated from the vantage point of the canto Twenty-Sixes on the one hand by the demolition of ruled and authoritative languages (when Virgil's lofty speech is assimilated by Guido's dialect) and, on the other, by the elevation of the poetic use of the 'maternal' vernacular (Arnaut's excerpt) to a very relevant spiritual status.

Desire and Trespassing

Crucially, the three canto Twenty-Sixes are about desire.[10] Ulysses is the image for the desire for knowledge and experience — that which is established at the beginning of the *Convivio* as the very aim of the human being: 'Sì come dice lo Filosofo nel principio della Prima Filosofia, tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere' [As the Philosopher says at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, all men naturally desire to possess knowledge]

9 On this aspect, see Gary Cestaro, *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), and Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati, '"Attaccando al suo capezzolo le mie labbra ingorde": corpo, linguaggio e soggettività da Dante ad *Aracoeli* di Elsa Morante', *Nuova corrente* 55 (2008), 85–123.

10 For the theme of desire in Dante's work, see Elena Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

(*Conv*., I. i. 1). Such a natural impulse transforms Ulysses's circular journey, his *nostos* towards Ithaca, where other, more familiar desires would attract him, into a mad linear tangent toward the unknown:

> 'Quando
> mi diparti' da Circe, che sottrasse
> me più d'un anno là presso a Gaeta,
> prima che sì Enëa la nomasse,
> né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta
> del vecchio padre, né 'l debito amore
> lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,
> vincer potero dentro a me l'ardore
> ch'i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto
> e de li vizi umani e del valore'. (*Inf*., xxvi. 90–99)
>
> [When I departed from Circe, who held me back more than a year there near Gaeta, before Aeneas gave it that name, neither the sweetness of a son, nor compassion for my old father, nor the love owed to Penelope, which should have made her glad, could conquer within me the ardour that I had to gain experience of the world and of human vices and worth.]

The keyword of these lines is the word 'ardore', the burning desire that compels the Greek hero to forego all other dutiful loves (to son, father, wife, homeland) and impels him relentlessly on his quest for the experience of human worth and vices. It is important to stress that this burning desire is part of Ulysses's story, not of his 'sin': the turning away from localized desires toward a more important, higher aim is precisely how Dante understood the way in which the Christian must desire God, for instance in the fourth book of the *Convivio* and in the central cantos of the *Purgatorio*. With Ulysses, however, Dante inscribes in Hell an idolatrous desire for knowledge and experience, one that makes itself God, as he had already done with Francesca and erotic desire in the fifth canto of *Inferno*.

The terrace of lust evokes the theme of erotic desire, and its population of poets invokes the specific declension of erotic desire that is lyric poetry, as the sublimation and extension of desire in language. The way in which Dante stages the relation between lust and love poetry is very polarized, quite the opposite to what he had done in the episode of Francesca in *Inferno* v, where the two were presented as dangerously similar. While Arnaut Daniel transfers with apparent ease his refined courtly language to

spiritual matters, the other poet, Guido Guinizzelli, defines (heterosexual) lust quite brutally, with the example of Pasiphae's coupling with the bull.[11]

> Nostro peccato fu ermafrodito
> Ma poiché non servammo umana legge,
> Seguendo come bestie l'appetito
> In obbrobrio di noi, per noi si legge,
> Quando partinci, il nome di colei
> Che s'imbestiò ne le 'mbestiate schegge. (*Purg*., xxvi. 82–87)
>
> [Our sin was hermaphrodite; but because we did not keep human law, following our appetite like beasts, in our own reproach we read out, when we part, the name of her who made herself a beast within the beast-shaped planks.]

By choosing to illustrate heterosexual excess through bestiality, Dante evokes one of the subspecies of lust, species crossing, which, according to Aquinas, is by far the worst form of lust, because it goes beyond the bounds of humanity.[12] Thus, by having Guido Guinizzelli quote the example of Pasiphae, Dante seems to draw the reader's attention to the ultimate similarity *sub specie aeternitatis* of two extreme happenings of what in *Inferno* v he discusses ambiguously as 'love': on the material/bodily side, the extreme sexual choice of 'species crossing', on the intellectual/spiritual side, the extreme expansion of courtly poetry.

The discussion of charity in *Paradiso* xxvi verges again on the role of love and desire in the soul's dealing with the divine, a desire that is at once rational and passionate. Dante discusses divine love first 'per filosofici argomenti' [by philosophical arguments] (l. 25), explaining it rationally as the necessary desire for the highest and most perfect good, and supporting his speech with evidence from philosophical and scriptural authorities (*Par*., xxvi. 25–45). Yet, when the apostle asks him to verify his belief in a rather more passionate way, a new mystical lexicon, powerfully erotic, erupts into his speech. In the discourse on love of *Paradiso* xxvi, we find reflections of the other canto Twenty-Sixes. In the philosophical syllogism

11 For the definition of lust in the terrace of the lustful, see Elena Lombardi, '"Che libido fe' licito in sua legge". Lust and Law, Reason and Passion in Dante', in *Dantean Dialogues. Engaging with the Legacy of Amilcare Iannucci*, ed. by M. Kilgour and E. Lombardi (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. 125–54.

12 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, q. 154, aa. 11–12.

about the greatest good, there is an echo of Ulysses' fixation with the idea of a higher good that must be pursued by overcoming all other goods, and in the quite blunt mystical language, a trace of the instinctual passion of the lustful.

The passionate desire for God is described with two images, the 'pulling of the heart' and the 'biting of the heart'.

> 'Ma dì ancor se tu senti altre corde
> tirarti verso lui, sì che tu suone
> con quanti denti questo amor ti morde'.
> […]
> Però ricominciai: 'Tutti quei morsi
> che posson far lo cor volgere a Dio,
> a la mia caritate son concorsi'. (*Par*., xxvi. 49–51; 55–57)

> ['But say again if you feel other cords drawing you toward him, so that you sound out with how many teeth this love bites you' […] Therefore I began again: 'All the piercings that can turn our hearts to God have worked together in my charity'.]

Lino Pertile has explained the 'pulling of the heart' as one of the fundamental metaphors for the reciprocity between divine and human love in Heaven.[13] The 'biting of the heart' is less recognisably religious, and has an interesting past. It originates in Boethius, who employs it to describe the way the pleasures of the flesh hassle and sting those who indulge in them, eventually biting their smitten hearts.[14] With a similar meaning Dante employs such images in two songs which celebrate a 'lustful' and painful love: the 'stony rhyme' *Così nel mio parlar* ('la morte che ogni senso / co li denti d'Amor già mi manduca' [death which already is devouring all my senses with the teeth of Love]; ll. 31–32) and the late 'mountain song' *Amor da che conven ch'io pur mi doglia* ('per che l'armato cor da nulla è morso'

13 Lino Pertile, '"La punta del disio": storia di una metafora dantesca', *Lectura Dantis* 7 (1990), 3–28 (pp. 22–23). For the pulling of the heart with ropes, see also D. Pirovano, 'A la riva del diritto amore: Paradiso XXVI', in *Dante e il vero amore. Tre letture dantesche* (Pisa: Serra, 2009), pp. 91–126 (esp. pp. 111–12).

14 *De consolatione Philosophiae* iii, poem 7: 'habet hoc voluptas omnis / stimulis agit fruentes / apium par volantum, / ubi grata mella fudit, / fugit et nimis tenaci / ferit icta corda morsu'. In Boethius, *Theological Tractates; The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. by H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand, trans. S. J. Tester (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[nothing bites through to her heart within its armour]; ll. 73–74).[15] Both songs can be viewed as part of Dante's own *trobar clus*, a celebration of harsh loves through difficult language and complex style, which includes, for the 'stony' sequence, the appropriation of the Provençal sestina. Thus, a rather resistant memory of Dante's own controversial lyric past is inscribed in the celebration of charity in *Paradiso*, a further testimony to both the creativity of the poetic vernacular and the irreducibility of desire.

In *Paradiso* xxvi, Dante registers another desire, much more akin to Ulysses' transgressive ardour. Adam's desire for the forbidden fruit is defined as trespassing — 'il trapassar del segno' [going beyond the mark] (*Par*., xxvi. 117) — and almost automatically recalls the same injunction and defiance on the part of Ulysses in going beyond the geographical limits of the known world, the warnings ('riguardi', *Inf*., xxvi. 108) posited by Hercules on the coasts of Spain and Africa. The trespassing of both Ulysses and Adam is impelled by their desire for the forbidden unknown. Incidentally, the lustful too have trespassed: they have forced open another crucial border, the limits that reason and the law impose on human passions: 'non servammo umana legge, / seguendo come bestie l'appetito' [we did not keep human law, following our appetite like beasts] (*Purg*., xxvi. 83–84).

When looking at the canto Twenty-Sixes together, it is helpful to drop the distinction between intellectual and erotic desire, secular and divine love. Dante's long and thorny reflection on this topic shows that desire is initially one, only later bifurcating into intellectual and sensual; and that the possibility of swerving toward good or bad ends is inbuilt in desire, which comes to require the control of the will. Desire is trespassing: it is the force, drive, momentum that is in itself neither positive nor negative. It impels the self outside of its limits and borders, toward the other (the beloved, the object of knowledge, God) and both imbalances and satisfies the self, both imperils and saves it. Adam and Ulysses show that desire is both transgressive and necessary. Both lust and charity depend on a very primal, instinctual unbalancing of the self.

Trespassing towards the unknown by means of desire is also what Dante does in his *Comedy*, as a traveller who, like Ulysses, is concerned

15 In *Purgatorio*, this image recurs in a rather more obvious manner as the 'biting of remorse' (*Purg*., xxxi. 88: 'Tanta riconoscenza il cor mi morse'), which Valentina Atturo has shown to be linked to the palinody of Dante's lyric past: see Valentian Atturo, 'Dalla pelle al cuore. La "puntura" e il "colpo della pietra", dai trovatori a Petrarca', *Studi romanzi* 8 (2012), 85–101. However, the image of the biting of the heart in Heaven retains the eroticism of the lyric image rather than the palinode of Purgatory.

about the madness of his enterprise, and as a poet who is aware that his great work is a flight towards the unknown and the forbidden. At the outset of the journey, Dante voices his fears of geographical and authorial trespassing in terms of folly: 'temo la mia venuta non sia folle' [I fear lest my coming may be folly] (*Inf*., ii. 35). A comparative reading of the canto Twenty-Sixes offers the coordinates of Dante's position, by offering us two views of 'folly'. In *Inferno* xxvi, Ulysses, the epic hero, forcing his readers to gaze ahead, celebrates his 'folle volo' (l. 125), his mad and daring push through Hercules' pillars. In *Purgatorio* xxvi, Arnaut, the lyric poet, casts a somewhat melancholic backward gaze ('*consiros*', l. 123) to his past folly ('*pasada follor*', *ibid*.). Dante's present is in the encounter of these two forces; the forward drive of the future epic and the sweet call of the lyric past: one never overcomes the other, and both make the originality and greatness of the *Comedy*.

Ulysses-Adam-Dante

The theme of desire as trespassing fosters in these three cantos the moulding of the three-headed alias Ulysses-Adam-Dante. As mentioned above, the concept of 'il trapassar del segno' (*Par*., xxvi. 117) establishes a firm link between Ulysses and Adam.[16] Throughout the poem, however, the equivalence between Dante and Ulysses (and between journey and poem) is also established on the grounds of folly and ambition, in the comparison between Dante's 'venuta folle' in *Inferno* ii. 35 and Ulysses's 'folle volo' in *Inferno* xxvi. 125, and throughout *Paradiso* ii. 1–9, where Dante describes himself as a new Ulysses (and us, his readers, as Ulysses's crew) embarking on a journey in uncharted seas.[17] Interestingly, Dante is also presented as

16 The identification of Ulysses and Adam is forcefully proposed in Bruno Nardi, *Dante e la cultura medievale* (Bari: Laterza, 1949), pp. 125–34, and it is widely, if not universally, accepted.

17 Compare the two 'short orations' to their sailors. *Inferno* xxvi. 112–20: '"O frati", dissi, "che per cento milia / perigli siete giunti a l'occidente, / a questa tanto picciola vigilia / d'i nostri sensi ch'è del rimanente / non vogliate negar l'esperïenza, / di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente. / Considerate la vostra semenza: / fatti non foste a viver come bruti, / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza"' ['O brothers', I said, 'who through a hundred thousand perils have reached the west, to this so brief vigil of our senses that remains, do not deny the experience, following the sun, of the world without people. Consider your sowing: you were not made to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge]. *Paradiso* ii. 1–9: 'O voi che siete in piccioletta barca, / desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti / dietro al mio legno che cantando varca, / tornate a riveder li vostri liti: / non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse, / perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti. / L'acqua ch'io prendo

Ulysses in *Purgatorio* xxvi, when the purging souls praise him as one who travels in order to acquire experience, literally to 'get experience on board', the words 'esperienza' and 'morir' pointing quasi-parodically to *Inferno* xxvi.

> 'Beato te, che de le nostre marche'
> ricominciò colei che pria m'inchiese,
> 'per morir meglio, esperïenza imbarche'. (*Purg*., xxvi. 73–75)
>
> ['Blessed are you, who from these border lands of ours', began the shade who had inquired of me previously, 'are taking on a cargo of experience, so as to die better'.]

In *Paradiso* xxvi, Dante is linked to both Ulysses and Adam. To Ulysses, as mentioned before, when he describes himself in the discourse of charity as someone who has survived 'the sea of twisted love' and landed on the shore of divine love (ll. 62–63). To Adam, for the fact that Adam himself draws many parallels between himself and the traveller: not only it turns out that they have spent the same time in Eden (ll. 139–42), but he also pitches his own story in Dantean terms, whereby Eden where he first dwelled is 'l'eccelso giardino, ove costei / a così lunga scala ti dispuose' [the high garden where she there readied you for so long a stairway] (ll. 110–11), and Limbo, where he waited in anguish for Christ's harrowing of Hell, is just the place 'onde mosse tua donna Virgilio' [whence your lady sent Virgil] (l. 118). Moreover, Dante at the threshold of the Empyrean can be seen as a new Adam, a reformed first man.[18]

The equivalence between Adam, Ulysses and Dante begs one further question: if Adam stands for the biblical, and Ulysses for the epic, what does Dante stand for? According to the point of view of the canto Twenty-Sixes, he is a lyric poet (as illustrated by Guido and Arnaut), armed with

già mai non si corse; / Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo, / e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse' [O you who in little barks, desirous of listening, have followed after my ship that sails onward singing: turn back to see your shores again, do not put out on the deep sea, for perhaps, losing me, you would be lost; the waters that I enter have never before been crossed; Minerva inspires and Apollo leads me, and nine Muses point out to me the Bears]. See also Maria Corti, *Percorsi dell'invenzione. Il linguaggio poetico e Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), pp. 147–63.

18 On this point, see in particular Giovanni Getto, *Canto XXVI. Lectura Dantis Scaligera, Paradiso* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1971).

his unruly and beautiful mother tongue (as sanctioned by Adam), facing his future madness (his own Ulyssean 'folle volo') with his past folly ('*la passada follor*'), the 'excess' of lyric poetry even in its most experimental and painful declensions.

In conclusion, I shall turn again to a quite minute textual point, which helps connect the several threads explored so far. As seen at the beginning of this reading, one very superficial link between the three cantos is the fact that the characters are represented as engulfed, surrounded, or appearing as flames. The keyword for the episode of Ulysses, 'ardore' (*Inf*., xxvi. 97) is also related to burning. Although we do not find the word 'ardore' in the other canto Twenty-Sixes, we do find the verb 'ardo' [I burn], in both cases enclosed in a very similar rhyme scheme. At the beginning of *Purgatorio* xxvi, the lustful souls approach Dante and Guinizzelli addresses him:

> poi verso me, quanto potëan farsi,
> certi si fero, sempre con riguardo
> di non uscir dove non fosser arsi.
> 'O tu che vai, non per esser più tardo,
> ma forse reverente, a li altri dopo,
> rispondi a me che 'n sete e 'n foco ardo'. (*Purg*., xxvi. 13–18)

> [Then some approached me as closely as they could, always taking care not to come out where they would not be burned. 'O you who are walking behind the others, not because you are slower, but perhaps reverent, answer me, who am burning in thirst and fire'.]

At the beginning of the speech on charity, Dante recalls his very first meeting with Beatrice:

> 'perché la donna che per questa dia
> regïon ti conduce, ha ne lo sguardo
> la virtù ch'ebbe la man d'Anania'
> Io dissi: 'al suo piacere e tosto e tardo
> vegna remedio a li occhi, che fuor porte
> quand' ella entrò col foco ond' io sempr' ardo'. (*Par*., xxvi. 10–15)

> ['for the lady who leads you through this bright region has in her glance the power of the hand of Ananias'. I said: 'At her pleasure, soon or late, let the remedy come for my eyes, which were the gates when she entered with the fire that always burns in me'.]

As I discuss elsewhere, 'sguardo: ardo: tardo' is a very common lyric rhyme.[19] In it, we find the memory of Dante's past: of the first encounters with Beatrice as recounted at the beginning of the *Vita nuova* (chapters 2 and 3), which Dante still chooses to record just at the outset of the discourse on *caritas*; of his two best friends, Guido Cavalcanti and Cino da Pistoia, who used this rhyme very conspicuously; and of his own wonderfully varied search for a new poetic language moulding the creativity of the maternal with the eloquence of the artificial — as they merge and melt with the severity of the *Convivio*'s desire for knowledge, and the grandiosity of Ulysses' epic ardour.

19 Elena Lombardi, 'Identità lirica e piacere linguistico', forthcoming.

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