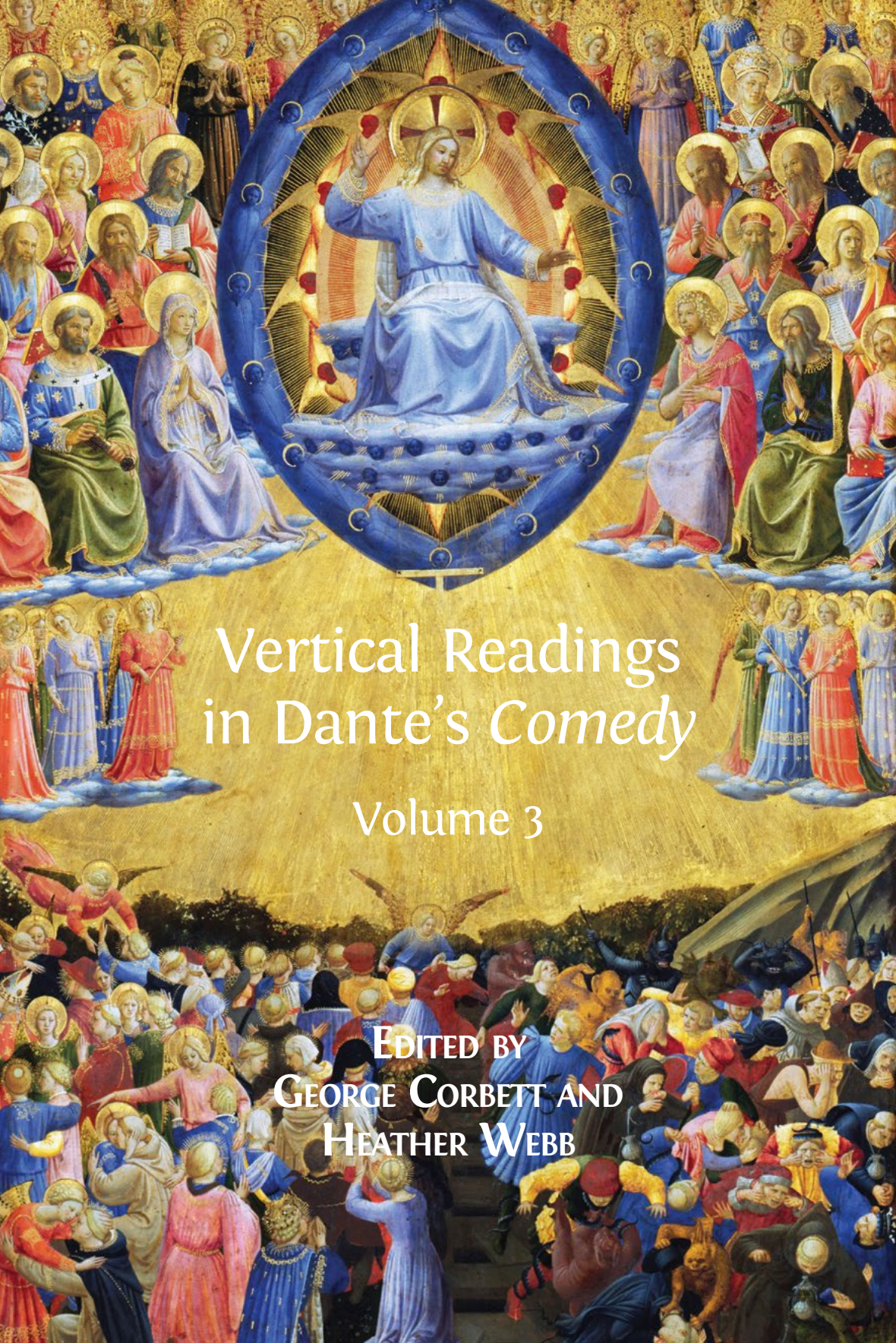

Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*

Volume 3

Edited by
George Corbett and
Heather Webb

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Piero Boitani

The itinerary through our three cantos can be seen as a straight vertical ascent from falseness (*Inferno* xxx) to the human (*Purgatorio* xxx) and then to the divine revelation of truth (*Paradiso* xxx), but this itinerary also takes the form of a change in the nature of poetry itself. Consider, for instance, the opening of the three cantos. Apparently, there is no difference in register between the solemn mythological references of *Inferno* xxx. 1–21, on the one hand, and, on the other, the astronomical passages of *Purgatorio* xxx. 1–6 and *Paradiso* xxx. 1–9. The stories of Athamas and Hecuba, that is, of Thebes and Troy, recalled in *Inferno* xxx are eminently tragic ones and as such need the high style. But the coming of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* xxx is more than that — it is, as we shall see, an event presented as if it were a scene from the Bible or the liturgy, and therefore it requires a 'sublime' elevation. Finally, the immaterial Empyrean and Beatrice's full beauty are the first completely trans-human scenes of the poem and will therefore employ the language of ineffability. Significantly, the stars which shine in the opening of *Purgatorio* xxx begin to disappear in *Paradiso* xxx, in one of the most moving images of a canticle which up to that point has constantly used stars in wonderful similes to describe the heavenly scenery. It is presented in deliberate contrast with an image of *Paradiso* xiv:

> E sì come al salir di prima sera
> comincian per lo ciel nove parvenze,
> sì che la vista pare e non par vera. (*Par.*, xiv. 70–73)

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> [When early evening hours are drawing in, new things begin to show across the sky so that the sight both seems and seems not true.][1]

The beautiful evening of *Paradiso* xiv is replaced, in *Paradiso* xxx, by a beautiful dawn. There, 'nove parvenze', the stars, begin to be visible, each of them 'perde il parere' until they all, including the most beautiful, disappear:

> Forse semilia miglia di lontano
> ci ferve l'ora sesta, e questo mondo
> china già l'ombra quasi al letto piano,
> quando 'l mezzo del cielo, a noi profondo,
> comincia a farsi tal, ch'alcuna stella
> perde il parere infino a questo fondo;
> e come vien la chiarissima ancella
> del sol più oltre, così 'l ciel si chiude
> di vista in vista infino a la più bella. (*Par.*, xxx. 1–9)

> [Maybe, around six thousand miles away, the sixth hour, close to noon, flares out, while earth inclines its shadow-cone to rest, near level. At this same time, the mid-point of the sky will start, so deep above us, to transform, and some stars lose their semblance in those depths. Then brightest Aurora who serves the sun advances and, dawning, the skies, vista by vista, are closed till even the loveliest is gone.]

Athamas and Hecuba, ancient and noble as they might be, cannot even come close to this. And indeed the tragic register itself of *Inferno* xxx's opening terzinas contains as it were the seeds of its own destruction. Both Athamas and Hecuba are going mad, the former 'insano', the latter 'forsennata', the pain wrenching her mind askew to the point of making her bark like a dog. The rest of the canto presents a literal going to the dogs of the high style, replaced in turn by the 'comic' and the novella-like ones.[2] As to the former, the two souls which first appear in *Inferno* xxx, those of Gianni Schicchi and Capocchio, race around the circle, gnashing and goring, 'as swine do when their pigsty is unbarred' (l. 27). As to the latter, the story of Gianni Schicchi disguising himself as Buoso Donati on his deathbed in order to get, by the will he dictated, the best mare of the herd, sounds exactly like one

1 The text of the *Comedy* used in this essay is that established by G. Petrocchi for *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, 2nd edn (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994); English translation by Robin. Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2006–2007).

2 See G. Contini, 'Sul XXX dell'*Inferno*', now in his *Un'idea di Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001 [1970]), pp. 159–70.

of Boccaccio's narratives in the *Decameron*.[3] Later in the canto, the amazing quarrel between Master Adam and Sinon — a quarrel which culminates with Sinon's punch on Adam's belly and Adam's riposte by means of a momentous slap on Sinon's face — sounds precisely like one of Dante's *tenzoni* with Forese Donati or with Cecco Angiolieri.

The central piece of *Inferno* xxx focuses on a man whom the dropsy of Dante's justice has almost turned into a lute — Master Adam, most likely an Englishman provided with the title of Magister Artium who, following instructions from the Counts of Romena, coined false Florentine florins by mixing three carats of dross with twenty-one of gold to reach the prescribed twenty-four, and who was burnt at the stake for this in Florence in 1281, when Dante was sixteen.[4] His individual sin — individual, that is, as distinct from the economic and political error committed by most European governments ever since antiquity — is punished by Dante's *contrappasso* with literal inflation (the lute-like shape), monetary inflation of course being the dire consequence of debasing a gold currency. Adam the counterfeiter, who bears the name of Adam, mankind's father, appears neither comic nor tragic. If anything, he sounds pathetic when, consumed by thirst, he recalls the brooks that trickle down from the Casentine, and terribly angry because he cannot move an inch when he curses the Romenas and Sinon.

For Dante, counterfeiting money is as bad as counterfeiting people, as Gianni Schicchi and ancient Myrrha have done, or falsifying words, the prerogative of Potiphar's wife in Genesis and of Sinon, the Greek who, according to Virgil, followed Ulysses' instructions to deceive the Trojans into bringing the fatal Wooden Horse into the city.[5] Thus, *Inferno* xxx sums up Dante's view of fraudulence or falseness, which has been the poem's theme ever since canto xviii. It is the only theme which *Inferno* xxx might perhaps be seen to share with *Purgatorio* xxx, where Dante the pilgrim is reproached by Beatrice for having, after her death, 'turned his steps to paths that were not true' and followed '*false images of good*' (ll. 130–31). Dante the pilgrim would thus appear to be not an active counterfeiter, but as one

3 I have examined these episodes in *Dante's Poetry of the Donati*, now in *Dante e il suo futuro* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2013), pp. 223–88.

4 Historical information and bibliography about Maestro Adamo is to be found s.v. 'Adamo' in the *Enciclopedia dantesca*, I (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1974). Also available at http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/adamo_res-a2d44ac8-87ee-11dc-8e9d-0016357eee51_(Enciclopedia-Dantesca)/

5 *Inf.*, xxx. 37–45; and see R. Dragonetti, 'Dante et Narcisse ou les faux monnayeurs de l'image', in *Dante et les mythes. Tradition et rénovation*, *Revue des Etudes Italiennes* (Paris: Didier, 1965), pp. 85–146.

who deceived himself into believing those images true (*Purg*., xxx. 127–32). What, on the other hand, this canto might mean to Dante the poet, or what the relationship is between truth and non-truth in Dante's own poetry, is a question which, only noting that *Inferno* xxx casts a disquieting shadow, I must leave open for the moment.

Inferno xxx shares with its cognate thirties of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* an image which revolves around water. The sinners of the tenth *bolgia* suffer unquenchable thirst, and water is, to one of them at least, a dream. Master Adam has the icy cold, sweet streams which flow into the Arno from the green hills of Casentine always before his eyes. Water has, in him, turned into the putrid humour that blows up his belly. The contrast could not be starker. In *Purgatorio* xxx, on the other hand, it is the melting snow of the Apennines that, as we shall see, turns into water when the warm wind from Africa blows on the mountains (*Purg*., xxx. 85–99), and this corresponds perfectly to (in fact, it is the simile the poet uses for) the feelings of Dante the pilgrim, who sheds copious tears at the angels' chant. Finally, in *Paradiso* xxx a river of light becomes visible, and the pilgrim bends down to drink from it with his eyes. The river immediately becomes a lake, or an ocean — a circular figure, in any case, greater than the sun — and the image of the brooks falling from the Casentine returns, after sixty cantos, to describe the way in which thousands of blessed souls are mirrored in that light:

> E come clivo in acqua di suo imo
> si specchia, quasi per vedersi addorno,
> quando è nel verde e ne' fioretti opimo,
> sì, soprastando al lume intorno intorno,
> vidi specchiarsi in più di mille soglie
> quanto di noi là sù fatto ha ritorno. (*Par*., xxx. 109–14)
>
> [It is as though the incline of some hill were mirrored in a lake below, as if to view itself adorned in flower and richest green. Above that light, and standing round, I saw a thousand tiers or more as mirrorings of those of ours who've now returned up there.]

Thus, from *Inferno* xxx to *Paradiso* xxx the water icon runs full circle, but with a varying degree of homogeneity in the relationship between nature and the human being. The tragic contrast between them in Master Adam gives way to perfect harmony between Dante and the melting snow in *Purgatorio* xxx, and finally turns, as it were, upside down in the image

of the hill contemplating itself in the mirror of the brook that flows from it — for the river and the lake of light of the Empyrean are, as the poet says of all he sees up there, shadowy prefaces of their truth, and 'where God rules without some means between, / the law of nature bears no weight at all' (*Par*., xxx. 122–23).

Purgatorio xxx, the next canto in my sequence, brings us closer to an answer to the question I asked earlier on about the nature of the relationship between false and true in Dante's own poetry.[6] This is, as we all know, Beatrice's canto, the canto in which Dante the poet stages his encounter with the long lost lady of his heart by means of one of the most momentous recognition scenes of all Western literature, one with which only three or four stand on a par — Odysseus and Penelope in the *Odyssey*; Pericles, Marina and Thaisa in Shakespeare's *Pericles*; Hermione and Leontes in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*; Pierre Bezuhov and Natasha in *War and Peace*. Elsewhere, I have examined this passage as a recognition scene.[7] What I will therefore do at this point is pick up a few details that seem significant.

First and foremost, there is the general orchestration of the passage, where Beatrice appears as the climax of the long allegorical procession that takes place on the summit of Purgatory. The passage opens with the astronomical image I mentioned at the beginning, and immediately afterwards it is widened and deepened by three proclamations and two similes. In the former, Beatrice is announced as the Bride of the Song of Songs, and hence, as interpretations of that Biblical book would have it, as Wisdom or the Church (*Veni, sponsa, de Libano*); as David and/or Christ entering Jerusalem in the Psalms and the Gospels, but at the same time as Christ about to be present in the Eucharist during Mass (*Benedictus qui venis*); and finally as Augustus' nephew and heir apparent, Marcellus, in Virgil's *Aeneid* (*manibus date lilia plenis*).[8]

6 The best essays on *Purgatorio* xxx are E. Sanguineti, 'Il Canto XXX del *Purgatorio*', in *Letture dantesche*, vol. 2, ed. by G. Getto (Florence: Sansoni, 1965), pp. 605–23; C. J. Ryan, 'Virgil's Wisdom in the *Divine Comedy*', *Medievalia et Humanistica* II (1982), 1–38; R. Jacoff, 'At the Summit of Purgatory', in *Lectura Dantis. Purgatorio*, ed. by A. Mandelbaum, A. Oldcorn, C. Ross (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 341–52.

7 See Piero Boitani, in *Riconoscere è un dio. Scene e temi del riconoscimento nella letteratura* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), pp. 367–408.

8 *Purg*., xxx. 11: Song of Songs 4:8; *Purg*., xxx. 19: Matthew 21:9 and Psalms 117: 25 (Vulgate); *Purg*., xxx. 21; *Aeneid*, VI, 883.

The first simile compares the rising of the angels on the chariot to the rising of the blessed on Doomsday. In the second simile, the rising of the sun veiled by mist at dawn is the image by which Dante presents the appearance of the lady herself. Within a cloud of flowers which rises and falls from the angels' hands, she in the end materializes, olive-crowned over a white veil, and clad, under a green mantle, in the colour of living flame.

All this is quite extraordinary as a sequence, a real explosion of fireworks, but one terzina stands out among the others to show us the ultimate quality of Dante's poetry. Dante compares the rising on the chariot of the ministers and messengers of eternal life, the angels, to the rising of the blessed on Doomsday:

> Quali i beati al novissimo bando
> surgeran presti ognun di sua caverna,
> la revestita voce alleluiando,
> cotali in su la divina basterna
> si levar cento, *ad vocem tanti senis*,
> ministri e messagger di vita etterna. (*Purg*., xxx. 13–18)
>
> [As when the Last New Day is heralded, and happy souls will rise keen from their caves, dressed in new voice, to echo 'Alleluia' so now, *ad vocem tanti senis*, there arose above the hallowed chariot a hundred angels, bearing news of eternal life.]

We accept this as a perfectly normal kind of simile the way we take the sun veiled by vapours and the lady within the cloud of flowers, but in fact it is quite surprising. The resurrection of the flesh is a scene neither Dante nor we have ever witnessed. Dante, followed by some of his readers, might conceive it on the basis of cryptic messages in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew or of what Paul says in the First Letter to the Corinthians ('In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet […] the dead shall be raised incorruptible'),[9] but the actual visualization of the blessed celebrating with halleluias their 'new-clad voice' — or the 'new-clad voices' simply chanting halleluias — is wholly Dantean, as in fact is the verb 'alleluiare' in its wonderful gerund. We are suddenly transported into the imaginative world found in the mosaics on the ceiling of the Florence Baptistry or in Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel at Padua, or later in Signorelli's

9 Mark 13:27; Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52.

fresco of the Resurrection of the Flesh in Orvieto, and in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Judgment.[10] The amazing thing about the passage is that Dante is authenticating an invention (the rising of the angels on the chariot) by means not of something out of ordinary, common experience, but by means of another invention, namely the pictures of Doomsday spread in churches all over Italy at the time — and, ultimately, by means of faith.

When she sees her husband after the slaying of the Suitors, Penelope looks at him both knowing and not recognizing Odysseus. When Pierre Bezuhov returns to Moscow and to Natasha at the end of *War and Peace*, he does not recognize her 'because of the immense change in her' and above all because there is no trace of the old smile in her eyes.[11] Neither Pericles nor Leontes recognize their wives because they believe they are dead. It is this phenomenon that Proust describes with marvellous precision and insight towards the end of *Time Regained*, when Marcel fails to recognize his old friends during the 'Matinée' at the Guermantes:

> For to 'recognise' someone, and, *a fortiori*, to learn someone's identity after having failed to recognise him, is to predicate two contradictory things of a single subject, it is to admit that what was here, the person whom one remembers, no longer exists, and also that what is now here is a person whom one did not know to exist; and to do this we have to apprehend a mystery almost as disturbing as that of death, of which it is, indeed, as it were the preface and the harbinger.[12]

Dante overcomes this terrible contradiction with a magnificent leap. He does not recognize Beatrice, but himself and his old love for her. Before having visual cognition of her, his soul feels the same wonder and trembling it used to feel in adolescence:

> E lo spirito mio, che già cotanto
> tempo era stato ch'a la sua presenza
> non era di stupor, tremando, affranto,
> sanza de li occhi aver più conoscenza,
> per occulta virtù che da lei mosse,
> d'antico amor sentì la gran potenza. (*Purg*., xxx. 34–39)

10 The frescoes by Signorelli and Michelangelo were directly inspired by Dante's *Comedy*.

11 Homer, *Odyssey*, 94–95; L. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, IV, 15.

12 M. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, T. Kilmartin, A. Mayor, vol. 3 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 986.

> [And I, in spirit, who so long had not been, trembling, in her presence, wracked by awe, began again to tremble at her glance (without more evidence that eyes could bring, but darkly, through the good that flowed from her), sensing the ancient power of what love was.]

Recognition is instantaneous, because, as Borges said, 'infinitamente existió Beatriz para Dante'.[13] Time has elapsed, but it does not have to be regained. Beatrice's presence is enough to join past and present without the help of memory, for the 'signs' of anagnorisis are inner motions, which the character knows as he knows himself. Those 'signs' come to life again, ten years after Beatrice's death, resurrected by a 'power' that moves from her. The mystery Proust speaks of is present here, too, the 'virtue' which flows from the Lady being hidden; it is not, however, the mystery that prefaces death, but that of love's might, which radiates in the world and transfixes human beings.

The indelible mark left on the heart by this power replaces all external signs. In order to recognize Odysseus, Penelope must ask him to reveal the 'secret sign' of their bed. In Dante, this has become 'occulta virtù'. And if, as Charles Singleton said, 'recognition "by occult virtue" is common enough in medieval narrative',[14] Dante alone transforms it into a heart-quake. When the 'occulta virtù' becomes 'lofty' through visual power — when it openly explodes — recognition is complete:

> Tosto che ne la vista mi percosse
> l'alta virtù che già m'avea trafitto
> prima ch'io fuor di puerizia fosse (*Purg.*, xxx. 39–42)

> [But on the instant that it struck my sight — this power, this virtue, that had pierced me through before I'd even left my boyhood state.]

Yet, significantly, Dante does not say that he recognized Beatrice, and this is what makes his scene so different, for instance, from the parallel one in the Middle-English *Pearl*.[15] Instead, he manoeuvres Dante the pilgrim to turn to Virgil, who has in the meantime vanished to his confine, and to quote to

13 J. L. Borges, *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1982), p. 152.

14 C. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), vol. 2, p. 739. See also Singleton's *Dante Studies 2. Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

15 *Pearl*, 164-68, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. by M. Andrew and R. Waldron (London: Arnold, 1978).

him the line of the *Aeneid* in which Dido reveals to her sister Anna that she now feels for Aeneas the same passion she felt for her husband:[16]

> Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae (*Aeneid*, iv. 23)
>
> conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma (*Purg*., xxx. 48)
>
> [I recognize the signs of the ancient flame]

Dante does not recognize Beatrice, but the tokens of his old love for her. He feels the 'gran potenza', then voices it, transforming it into an 'ancient flame'. A few instants earlier, Beatrice had appeared as if bathed in the colour of a 'living flame', the colour of charity but also that which she wears in the *Vita nuova*.[17] When Dante feels and then recognizes in himself the signs of the ancient flame, both images ('fiamma viva' and 'antica fiamma') acquire new poignancy, opposing, as it were, and completing each other beyond time, suspended between old love and present charity, between sight and inner feeling, appearance and recognition. Compared to this line, pronounced in Beatrice's presence and addressed to its own source, Virgil, even the cry of Racine's Phèdre, 'Je reconnus Vénus et ses feux redoutables', nearly pales into pompous insignificance.[18]

We can, and indeed must, go two steps further in this reading of the Virgilian ancient flame. The first step is to remember that the *Aeneid* itself is called 'divina fiamma' by Dante's Statius in *Purgatorio* xxi (l. 95). In quoting one of his lines to Virgil, Dante is therefore paying him double tribute, acknowledging the divine status of the poetry of the *Aeneid*. The final step is to recognize a much more disquieting correspondence, that between this 'antica fiamma' and the 'fiamma antica' of Ulysses in *Inferno* xxvi, the only difference between the two being the inverted position of the adjective 'antica'.

Dante never does things like this by chance. Hence we must ask what the correspondence and inversion might mean. In *Inferno* xxvi Ulysses is a flame — to be precise, the 'greater horn of the ancient flame' (l. 85) in which both he and Diomedes are punished as counsellors of fraud

16 *Aeneid*, IV, 23 is, already imitated by Ovid, in *Amores*, II, i., 8.

17 *VN*., II. 3; XXXIX. 1. On this aspect of the *Vita nuova* and the problem of recognition, see A. C. Charity, 'T. S. Eliot: The Dantean Recognitions', in *The Waste Land in Different Voices* ed. by A. D. Moody (London, Arnold, 1974), pp. 117–56.

18 J. Racine, *Phèdre*, I, iii, 277.

in the eighth *bolgia* of the eighth circle, the same circle as Master Adam and the others of canto xxx — Ulysses is a flame because of his 'ardour' to gain experience of the world and of human vices and human worth. In other words, he is the flame of the unbridled passion for knowledge, 'conoscenza'. On the other hand, Dante's feeling towards Beatrice is a flame because of love, his old passion. Beatrice herself obliquely represents Faith or Theology and, quite explicitly in *Purgatorio* xxx, Wisdom, divine 'sapientia'.[19] Thus, we have Ulysses equalling passion for knowledge and Beatrice equalling love of Wisdom. What Ulysses and Beatrice, the two ancient flames, have in common is the burning desire to apprehend and comprehend — they are two figures of intellectual activity, and hence the two most important characters of the *Comedy*. Where they differ — and this is why the adjective 'antica' precedes 'fiamma' in Beatrice's case, whereas in Ulysses' it follows the noun — is both in the nature and the object of this quest. Ulysses' search for knowledge is active, roaming this world — and possibly the other one as well — in search of experience, both of the vices and virtues of human beings and, when the occasion presents itself, of the 'mondo sanza gente' [the world without people] (*Inf*., xxvi. 117) and perhaps even of the world of death. Thus, as if he were following the ideas of the radical Averroists of Dante's time,[20] Ulysses thinks there should be no Pillar of Hercules, no limit, to stop human exploration of the truth. Beatrice's love of Wisdom is contemplative rather than active and its object is not this, or any material, world, but divine Wisdom, i.e. God Himself. Since God is infinite, this, too, has no limit, yet rather than producing endless wandering it looks for its own fulfilment — as *Paradiso* xxx among many other Dantean texts proclaims — in simply gazing at him ('che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace', l. 102).

Beatrice performs only one action in the *Comedy*, her mission to Limbo to ask for Virgil's help in saving Dante lost in the dark wood. Before this action, inspired by the Virgin Mary and by Lucy, Beatrice sat on her throne in the Empyrean, absorbed in contemplation. After that action, recounted in *Inferno* ii, and after guiding Dante through the Heavens, Beatrice returns to contemplation in *Paradiso* xxxi by giving Dante a last smile and look,

19 Lines 31 and 68: the green crown worn by Beatrice is compared to 'Minerva's olive fronds', Minerva representing Wisdom.

20 See Maria Corti, *Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003); Piero Boitani, 'Shadows of Heterodoxy in Hell', in *Dante and Heterodoxy. The Temptations of 13th Century Radical Thought*, ed. by M. L. Ardizzone (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), pp. 60–77.

and then turning to the 'eternal fountain' (*Par.*, xxxi. 93). *Purgatorio* xxx, the canto where she appears to Dante again after ten years, constitutes as it were the hinge of the entire poem, where Dante's past and present join hands and where human and divine meet.

The drama of the reunion, with Beatrice's stern reproaches to Dante and her reconstruction of his life and betrayal, comes in the second section of the canto, where events and themes of the 'vita nova' (i.e. his adolescence and his book) are either implicitly or explicitly recalled, establishing the necessary link with *Inferno* ii and thus creating the myth of Beatrice for the next seven hundred years. The angels try to intercede for Dante by singing Psalm 30, 'In te, Domine, speravi' (*Purg.*, xxx. 83), and thus praying for mercy, with the result that, without moving Beatrice one inch from her inflexible examination of Dante's sins, they make Dante melt into tears. The simile the poet now uses is a crucial example of supreme purgatorial poetry, that is, of a poetry which still employs earthly, and indeed ponderous, terms of comparison, but at the same time points to the lightness of the *Paradiso*.

Dante compares his frozen stance, 'without tears or sighs', when Beatrice utters her harsh words, to the snow which, among the living trees, freezes on the mountains of the Apennines when the northeast wind blows, and then compares his dissolving into 'breath and water', when the singing angels take pity on him, to the snow melting when the warm winds from Africa arrive:

> Sì come neve tra le vive travi
> per lo dosso d'Italia si congela,
> soffiata e stretta da li venti schiavi,
> poi, liquefatta, in se stessa trapela,
> pur che la terra che perde ombra spiri,
> sì che par foco fonder la candela. (*Purg.*, xxx. 85–90)
>
> [Compare: the snow that falls through growing eaves freezes the spine of Italy in drifts blown and compacted by Slavonian winds. But when the southern lands (where shadow fails) breathe once again, within itself it thaws, then trickles down, as candles melt in flames.]

An accumulation of details and metaphors verging on the baroque but still absolutely precise dominates here. Each thing is, to begin with, designated indirectly: 'vive travi' for live, green trees, which then become actual beams; 'dosso d'Italia', the backbone of Italy, for the vertebrae of the Apennines; 'venti schiavi' for the winds from Schiavonia, namely the

Slav countries; 'terra che perde ombra' for Africa; 'spiri' corresponding to 'breath' and 'winds'. Then the snow drips into itself, i.e. the water from the upper layers penetrates into the snow underneath. And a final simile within the simile, the absolutely simple, normal, common flame melting the candle, concludes the passage. To recount a powerful emotional crisis, and the final act of his conversion, Dante deploys the poet's licence and the scientist's precision.

Yet it is in moving, so to speak, towards the melting snow that the poet refines and lightens the image. Without examining passages in *Paradiso* ii and xxvii as I have done elsewhere,[21] I only point to the moment where Dante employs the melting snow image for the last time in the poem, in *Paradiso* xxxiii: 'così la neve al sol si disigilla' [thus the snow comes unsealed in the sun] (l. 64). In terms of poetry, this is what T. S. Eliot would, on the mystical plane, call 'a condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)'.[22]

Purgatorio xxx is in many ways a figural foreshadowing of *Paradiso* xxx. It announces themes and images which the later canto develops and fulfils in the blazing light of the Empyrean. For instance, the theme of resurrection and Doomsday, which in *Purgatorio* xxx appears, as we have seen, in a simile, becomes central in the corresponding canto of *Paradiso*. When Beatrice tells Dante that they have now left the greatest of material spheres and reached the Heaven of pure light, she adds that he will be able to see both heavenly ranks, that of the angels and that of beatified human beings, the latter in such countenance as they will have when standing 'a l'ultima giustizia', on Judgment Day, i.e. with their bodies. The new sight ('novella vista') the pilgrim has acquired upon entering the Empyrean allows him to see the Resurrection of the Flesh, of which Solomon spoke in canto xiv as a future event (*Par.*, xiv. 37–60), as something that has already taken place. Later in the canto, when the mystical rose shines in all its effulgence, Beatrice points to the immensity of the City of God — of the 'convent', she says, of 'white robes' (*Par.*, xxx. 129) — and asks Dante to note how the thrones of the blessed are almost all full. This indicates that Dante, in 1300, thinks Doomsday is about to come, but in fact the expression 'white robes' implies that, from the point of view of the beholder struck by the '*lumen gloriae*', it is already here. For 'white robes' ('bianche stole'), is straight out

21 *Dante e il suo futuro*, pp. 169–83.

22 T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* V (*Four Quartets* IV), 40–41.

of the Book of Revelation (7: 9), and when Dante uses that word, 'stole', as in *Paradiso* xxv (l. 127), he means both the body and the soul, either of Christ after the Ascension and Mary after the Assumption, or of the blessed after the resurrection on Doomsday. It is a time warp which depends only on the way one looks at it.[23]

The second semantic field in which *Paradiso* xxx fulfils *Purgatorio* xxx is that of Beatrice. We have seen how she acquires Biblical and liturgical connotations when she appears in the Garden of Eden, while retaining key features of her earlier *Vita nuova* incarnation. Peter Dronke has pointed out how the old 'libello' is still present in Beatrice's celebration in *Paradiso* xxx, not only because Dante himself points this out, recalling the first day he saw her 'in this life', but also because the circumstances of both events, the first view of Beatrice and the present one, are inserted within a grand cosmic perspective.[24] He is right, too, in considering Beatrice's praise in *Paradiso* xxx ('loda' being *par excellence* a *Vita nuova* word) not so much a farewell to her as a 'Summa Poetica'. Indeed, while holding on to his love for her (he writes, in one of the poem's most beautiful lines, that he turned his sight to her because forced to do so by love and the disappearance of the triumphing angelic choirs he was beholding — 'nulla vedere e amor mi costrinse', l. 15), and while evoking his own life and poetic career, Dante now transports Beatrice into the sphere of transcendence:

> Se quanto infino a qui di lei si dice
> fosse conchiuso tutto in una loda,
> poca sarebbe a fornir questa vice.
> La *bellezza* ch'io vidi si trasmoda
> non pur di là da noi, ma certo io credo
> che solo il suo fattor tutta la goda.
> Da questo passo vinto mi concedo
> più che già mai da punto di suo tema
> soprato fosse comico o tragedo:
> ché, come sole in viso che più trema,
> così lo rimembrar del dolce riso
> la mente mia da me medesmo scema.
> Dal primo giorno ch'i' vidi il suo viso
> in questa vita, infino a questa vista,
> non m'è il seguire al mio cantar preciso;

23 See A. M. Chiavacci Leonardi, *Le bianche stole. Saggi sul 'Paradiso' di Dante* (Florence: Sismel — Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2010), pp. 3–25, 39–70.

24 P. Dronke, 'Symbolism and Structure in "*Paradiso* 30"', *Romance Philology* 43 (1989), 29–48.

ma or convien che mio seguir desista
più dietro a sua *bellezza*, poetando,
come a l'ultimo suo ciascuno artista.
Cotal qual io la lascio a maggior bando
che quel de la mia tuba, che deduce
l'ardüa sua matera terminando,
con atto e voce di spedito duce
ricominciò: 'Noi siamo usciti fore
del maggior corpo al ciel ch'è pura luce…' (*Par*., xxx. 16–39)

[If all that has, till this, been said of her were now enclosed to form one word of praise, it would not, even so, fulfil my need. The *beauty* I saw, transcending every kind, is far beyond us here — nor only us. Its maker, I think, alone could know its joy. From now on, I'll admit, I'm overwhelmed, defeated worse than all before — in comic or in tragic genre — by what my theme demands. As sunlight trembles in enfeebled eyes, calling to mind how sweet to me her smile was, itself deprives my mind of memory. Not since the day that I, in our first life, first saw her face until this living sight, has song in me been cut so cleanly short. It is, however, right that I stand down — as every artist, at the utmost, does — and no more trace her *beauty*, forming verse. And so what then she was I now will leave to clarions far greater than my trumpet sounds, and draw my vaunting line towards its end. As she then was — a guide in word and deed, her work all done — she spoke again: 'We've left the greatest of material sphere, rising to light, pure light of the intellect…']

What has always struck me about this passage is the subtle balance between open proclamation and the inexpressibility *topos*. On the one hand, Beatrice's smile is likened to the sun and her beauty said to transcend the human and to be fully enjoyed only by her Creator, God. On the other, Dante declares himself vanquished from now on more than any tragic or comic writer ever was by a 'point' of his theme. Later, he says that recalling her smile deprives his mind of its very self and that, although from the first day he saw her he never stopped singing of her, he must now desist pursuing her beauty in poetry, as every artist does when he comes to his limit. Indeed he will now leave her — and only in this sense is this a farewell, a farewell to poetry about Beatrice — 'to clarions far greater than [his] trumpet sounds', while he proceeds to complete his 'hard matter': not to a greater poet (it would be ridiculous to think of Dante relinquishing Beatrice to, say, a Petrarch), but to the trumpet the angels will play on the Last Day.

It seems obvious to conclude from all this that Beatrice has become the Absolute, a divine figure, and that the poet encounters the same difficulty in talking about her now as he will have in the last canto in writing about God. 'Bellezza', the word he twice employs here for her, only applies, throughout the *Comedy*, to Beatrice, the angels, and perhaps once each to Mary and to the stars. It is a beauty Beatrice herself first predicates on her own figure in *Purgatorio* xxx, and which she herself says in *Paradiso* xxi constantly increases as they climb higher up through the Heavens. It is the beauty of the Bride in the Song of Songs, the 'claritas' of Wisdom.[25]

In this respect Beatrice's *pulchritudo* is not different from that of the Empyrean, essentially represented by the continuous metamorphosis of light — *lumen*, river, pool, rose — and hence basically coinciding, on the formal level, with what Albert the Great calls *resplendentia* and Thomas Aquinas, following the Latin translation of Dionysius, *claritas*.[26] In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius defines *pulchrum* and *pulchritudo* in the following manner: (I have italicized the words which correspond to Dante's description of the Empyrean):

> The sacred writers lift up a hymn of praise to this Good. They call it beautiful, beauty, love (*dilectio*), and beloved (*diligibile*). They give it the names which convey that it is the source of loveliness and is the flowering of grace. But do not make a distinction between 'beautiful' and 'beauty' as applied to the Cause which gathers all into one. For we recognize the difference in intelligible beings between qualities that are shared and the objects which share them. We call 'beautiful' that which has a share in beauty, and we give the name of 'beauty' to that ingredient which is the cause of beauty in everything.
>
> Supersubstantiale vero pulchrum, pulchritudo quidem dicitur propter traditam ab Ipso omnibus existentibus, iuxta proprietatem uniuscuiusque,

25 Sapientia (Vulgate) 6:13. 'Bellezza / bellezze' begins to be used in *Purg*., xiv. 149: 'chiamavi 'l cielo e 'ntorno vi si gira / mostrandovi le sue bellezze etterne' (angels); then *Purg*., xxix. 87, where the twenty-four *seniores* sing either to Mary or to Beatrice: 'Benedicta tue / nelle figlie d'Adamo, e benedette / siano in etterno le bellezze tue' (see Judith 13:23 and 15:11; Luke 1:28, 42). Beatrice talks about herself in *Purg*., xxx. 128: 'e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era'. The theological virtues ask Beatrice to unveil her 'second beauty', *Purg*., xxxi. 138. In *Par*., vii. 66 'le bellezze etterne' refers to the angels; but in *Par*., xiv. 134 it is Beatrice's eyes that are called 'vivi suggelli / d'ogni bellezza'. In *Par*., xxi. 7, Beatrice speaks about her beauty increasing as she and Dante climb through the Heavens. In *Par*., xxviii. 84, 'sì che 'l ciel ne ride / con le bellezze d'ogne sua paroffia', 'bellezze' must refer to the stars.

26 E. De Bruyne, *Études d'esthétique médiévale*, III, *Le XIIIe siècle* (Bruges: De Tempel, 1946), p. 307.

> pulchritudinem et sicut universorum *consonantiae* et *claritatis* causa, *ad similitudinem luminis*, cum *fulgore* immittens universis pulchrificas *fontani radii* ipsius traditiones et sicut omnia ad seipsum vocans unde et callos dicitur et sicut tota in totis congregans.
>
> [But the 'beautiful' which is beyond individual being is called 'beauty' because of that beauty bestowed by it on all things, each in accordance with what it is. It is given this name because it is the cause of harmony and splendour in everything, because like a light it flashes onto everything the beauty-causing impartations of its own well-spring ray.][27]

As he describes the changing features of the Empyrean, Dante the poet asks God himself to grant him enough power to say what he saw:

> O isplendor di Dio, per cu' io vidi
> l'alto trïunfo del regno verace,
> dammi virtù a dir com' ïo il vidi! (*Par*., xxx. 97–99)
>
> [Splendour of God! Through you I came to see triumph exalting in the realm of truth. Grant me true strength to say what then I saw!]

This kind of invocation becomes frequent, from now on, in *Paradiso*, and culminates in the last canto with the prayer to the 'somma luce' in lines 67–72. But the *incipit* in fact goes back to the conclusion of *Purgatorio* xxxi:

> O isplendor di viva luce etterna,
> chi palido si fece sotto l'ombra
> sì di Parnaso, o bevve in sua cisterna,
> che non paresse aver la mente ingombra,
> tentando a render te qual tu paresti
> là dove armonizzando il ciel t'adombra,
> quando ne l'aere aperto ti solvesti? (*Purg*., xxxi. 139–45)
>
> [Splendour of living and eternal light! Who would not seem — though pale from studying deep in Parnassian shade, whose wells he drinks — still to be much encumbered in his mind, endeavouring to draw what you

27 The English section of this quotations comes from Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, IV, 7, 701 C, in *The Complete Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 76–77; the Latin from S. Thomae Aquinatis *In Librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus* (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1950). M. Ariani has explored Dante's indebtedness to the Dionysian ideas on beauty in his *Lux inaccessibilis. Metafore e teologia della luce nel* Paradiso *di Dante* (Rome: Aracne, 2000), in particular pp. 327–45.

> then seemed, where Heavens in harmony alone enshadow you, as you came forth and showed yourself in air?]

Yet this 'isplendor' is not God's — it is the splendour of Beatrice's 'second beauty', her mouth, which the three theological virtues ask her to unveil. The first line translates Wisdom 7: 26, 'candor lucis aeternae', an attribute of divine Sapientia. But Dante cannot have failed to notice that this line returns at the beginning of the Epistle to the Hebrews (1: 3), where it explicitly refers to Christ. And indeed he has Beatrice heralded, in *Purgatorio* xxx, with 'Benedictus qui venis' (l. 19).[28] What he is saying in this passage at the end of *Purgatorio* xxxi is that the poet who has laboured in his work — grown pale under the shade of Parnassus — or drunk deep of its Castalian spring, would necessarily seem to have a deranged mind if he tried to render the beauty of Beatrice-Wisdom-Christ when it revealed itself by melting into air there, in the Garden of Eden, where the sky, in harmony with it, is but a mere shadow of that beauty. Yet it is just possible to read 'cielo' as 'Heaven' rather than 'sky' for the enormity of Dante's proclamation to become apparent. In that case, while the normal figural reading would have Beatrice foreshadow divine pulchritude, we would find Heaven foreshadowing Beatrice's beauty, and the only consummation devoutly to be wished would be for God himself — as *Paradiso* xxx maintains — to enjoy it.

28 That is, the words with which Jesus is greeted upon entering Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9).

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