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INTRODUCTION

AN AMERICAN VOICE FOR DANTE

WHAT IS THE *DIVINE COMEDY*?

The *Divine Comedy* (*Divina commedia*) is an epic-allegorical poem, consisting in the account of an imaginary journey through a tripartite afterlife divided into Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. This journey is undertaken by its author and protagonist, Dante Alighieri, a Florentine poet and exiled politician. The poem was composed in the Tuscan vernacular in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, using Christian, Greco-Roman, and autobiographical elements. These three layers of the poem's identity—its narrative thrust, its authorship, and the three cultural traditions it syncretizes—deserve to be parsed out individually, starting with the poem's basic plot.

NARRATIVE AND SPACE

The *Comedy* is a travel narrative along which are arranged disparate elements. As readers progress in it, they encounter descriptions of hellish, natural, and celestial “landscapes” dotted with built environments. They are given detailed accounts of the protagonist's movements or of the passing of time and are drawn into orienteering dialogues the protagonist has with the souls inhabiting these spaces. The narrative backbone of the poem is, in essence, the chronotope of the journey, and with this basic feature, Dante's work aligns itself with some of its literary models. The great epic poems from antiquity—in particular, Homer's *Odyssey* and the first six books of

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Virgil's *Aeneid*—also tell the tale of a journey. Similarly, medieval romances hinge on the protagonist's search for an object, a place, or a person particularly charged with meaning. Organized as a series of adventures in chivalric novels, the quest is the engine of the hero's actions. Even visionary descriptions of the afterlife, a particularly popular genre in the Latin and vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages with which the *Comedy* shares many details, involved experiential journeys. A crucial literary trend from this period is reflected in the narrative setup of Dante's work. In his poem, the afterlife is not only an intrinsic condition of the souls, described or shown to the protagonist by way of a vision. In line with Christian thinking, but with a descriptive radicalism that sets the *Comedy* apart from other works dealing with the afterlife, the poem reveals that the state of the souls after death is indissolubly linked to precise spatial coordinates. The afterlife is a time, but it is also immediately and primarily a place, with which the protagonist and the souls he encounters interact and through which they are acted upon.

As the protagonist embarks on his voyage, the story treats these spaces in more detail. First, he travels from the immense, subterranean chasm of Hell to the ledges of the mountain of Purgatory, guided by Virgil. Then, in a dizzying flight with Beatrice, he crosses from the material heavens to the nonspace and nontime of the Elysian, the immaterial final and proper Heaven. There, under the tutelage of his third guide, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the protagonist receives his final vision of God. Even though the poem starts in an essentially symbolic space, the "dark wood" in *Inferno* I, it handles the itinerary through the spaces of the afterlife with great attention to constructing—or even, one is tempted to say, conveying—their reality. It is true that the poem's first canto lacks geographic coordinates and is built with symbolic elements: the wood, valley, hill, and desert in which Dante finds himself are all easily translatable into an allegorical account of the protagonist's mental state. Soon afterward, however, the narrative proceeds through a landscape that ceases to be a simple exteriorization of psychological processes. The world of the *Comedy* consists, in sum, of places that are conceived

as real and, particularly for Dante's Purgatory, within theoretical traveling reach. While Hell is rather mysteriously geolocated and Heaven is only apophatically a place, the island of Purgatory exists on our world map. There is, of course, no navigation chart that may lead us there, but only because a metaphysical and moral prohibition makes it inaccessible: paradoxically, a sailor might venture out into the ocean to reach it. Ulysses's fateful last journey, as conceived of by Dante in *Inferno* XXVI, had exactly that destination and brought Ulysses and his crew sufficiently close to its shores to glimpse the tall mountain that hosts the souls purging themselves of earthly attachments and vices.

RELIGIOUS UNDERPINNINGS

The world of the *Comedy* is unabashedly Christian. The metaphysical reference points of the poem, starting with its imaginary landscapes, are systematically and cogently presented as such. Christianity is a religion that formed around a body of texts—namely, through the absorption of the Hebrew Bible (the Law, Prophets, and Writings, categorized as the Old Testament) into an organic whole that also comprises a new set of texts (the New Testament, containing the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Canonical Epistles, and Revelation). For Dante, the textual quality of his poem's religious horizon is an evident and profound concern. In a long episode spanning four cantos (*Purgatorio* XXVIII–XXXI), which he stages in the Earthly Paradise, Dante provides a visionary and poetic figuration of the book-based canon as a hieratic procession of elders escorting a griffin, a double-nature Christ figure. Biblical writings are the bedrock of the Christian religion, but they are not the only texts shaping it. Occupying a subordinate position and performing an interpretive function in Dante's Christian library are the writings of the Church Fathers. Under this label are gathered several late-antique authors who discussed theological and religious issues and were responsible for defending and shaping the dogmatic identity of the Christian faith. To these texts were added those penned by

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the Church doctors, a whole gamut of medieval philosophers and theologians who systematized religious thinking in and for Dante's culture. The weight-bearing elements of the poem's religious universe all come from this tradition of writing, one that was supported in Dante's time by constant liturgical and homiletic practice, which has left deep traces in the poem.

The author of the *Comedy* could reasonably assume that his audience was familiar with this textual tradition and its internal stratification. When Dante opens canto III of the *Inferno*, for instance, he seems to count on the fact that his readers will have no difficulty in understanding the allusive diction of the second tercet in a theological vein. In the phrase "Justice moved my high maker; / the divine power made me, / the supreme wisdom, and the primal love" (*Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore; / fecemi la divina podestate, / la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore*), the threefold agency that has produced the gates of Hell is a transparent transcription of the Christian Trinity. Similarly Trinitarian, but involving a more precise association with each Person in the Christian Godhead, the triad of "power," "wisdom," and "love" directly evokes patristic discussions of the divine attributes of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, respectively. Finally, the poetic and theological scandal at the core of the first line, in which justice is said to have "moved" the Maker, is generated by its contrast with the scholastic definition of the Christian God as the unmoved mover of the universe.

Dante's reliance on his readers' mental Christian library is paramount in the *Comedy*. In the poem, the Trinitarian God of Christianity governs the afterlife. One in substance, God is also hypostatized into three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God reigns in Heaven but also rules the universe, including Hell. This God is the all-powerful agency that governs the course of human history, orienting it through Providence. For Dante, history has a direction, in which some crucial turning points are discernible. Human history progresses from the beginning of time, coinciding with the creation of the cosmos and humankind, and with the latter's first trespass, original sin, to the historical circumstances of human redemption,

obtained by the sacrifice of Jesus, Son of God. From this point, progressing toward and across the present moment, history extends to the second coming of Christ, who will sit in judgment of the living and the dead. With that moment of final universal resurrection and reckoning, history will reach the end of time, and humanity will begin to live an everlasting life of bliss with God in Heaven or pain separated from God in Hell.

Running parallel to the time of earthly history, in Dante's universe, there is also a time of otherworldly existence. While waiting for the final judgment, souls already experience a temporary version of their eternal destiny in the Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise where the protagonist's journey takes place. At the moment of their death, all human beings undergo a judgment that determines their destination. Once again, it is the Christian God's retributive justice that metes out the exact eternal amount of punishment or bliss to each soul, based on the choices they have made in life—how they used their free will. Accordingly, the scale of values that inform divine justice, as reflected in the poem's moral metaphysical structure, is also recognizably Christian. Its basic principles are derived from Mosaic law, as the Bible lays them out in the Ten Commandments, reworked in an ethical-religious system that combines later Christian and classical elements to form a distinct sevenfold category of deadly sins. Traditionally, these sins are identified as pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. In Dante's poem, the seven deadly sins have only limited impact on the structure of Hell, since they provide the organizing principle just for the opening cantos of the *Inferno* and are replaced by a more finely grained system of ethical distinctions once we reach canto XI. However, they come back in full force as the basic structure of Dante's Purgatory, and traces of their importance are detectable even in Paradise. Although souls residing there have transcended any inclination to sin and thus abide in perfect bliss in the Empyrean with God, they still manifest themselves to Dante in the intermediate material heavens to signal, especially in the first three lower heavens, their earthly tendencies.

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The imaginary geography and topography of the afterlife that Dante adopts in his poem are also traditionally Christian. The status of the individual souls, which exist in independent forms after separation from the physical body at death, in Dante's universe is essentially the same as was accepted by the theology of his time. Dante's adherence to standard doctrinal guidelines is particularly true for Hell, which appears as a subterranean place, dominated by darkness, violence, and chaos, in which the wicked in this life are eternally punished. Torments come from demons, a class of beings in which Dante distinctively includes both creatures of classical mythology and biblical fallen angels, as well as from the hostile environments in which souls reside. Wind, rain, mud, and ice, but also rivers of boiling blood, packs of infernal hounds, lakes of excrement, and most predictably fire—falling from the sky, enveloping individual sinners, and even turning sepulchres red-hot—contribute to torture souls for eternity. Even Heaven, the realm directly opposed to Hell, is aligned with traditionally Christian theological and doctrinal expectations. As the poem clarifies, after staging a measured series of encounters with souls who gradually manifest themselves to the protagonist through the material heavens of creation, the eternal and actual seat of the blessed is the Empyrean Heaven, the highest and most sublime realm in the universe. The only place that should be considered properly Paradise, the Empyrean is located beyond time and space, and it is inhabited by the souls of the righteous who, together with the faithful angels, contemplate God's essence for eternity. In this active contemplation, both hosts of heaven find their deepest and most perfect happiness, which consists in the knowledge of and love for God.

Although it is still essentially Christian from a doctrinal point of view, Purgatory represents a special case in Dante's poem. Indeed, of the three realms of the afterlife that were included in the otherworldly Christian geography of Dante's time, Purgatory was the least developed in terms of structure and physical imagination. Theology had established a few doctrinal elements for the intermediate realm. Agreement had been reached that Purgatory existed,

that it was a temporary condition linked to a specific place, and that its demarcation from the world of the living was somewhat permeable, with prayers for the dead having the power to propel souls faster through their purgation process and dead souls' apparitions to and interactions with the living being plausible. In essence, Dante would have been familiar with an image of Purgatory as a space where the souls of sinners reconciled with God did penance for the sins that they had repented of before death but did not have time to atone for. In the *Comedy*, this relatively recent and imaginarily vague theological creation receives just as much space and narrative care as its more established counterparts. One might even say that it was Dante who provided a fundamental impulse to the cultural concretization of Purgatory. His poem represents Purgatory as a mountain emerging from the ocean, the only dry land in the southern hemisphere, and devises a particular place and a specific "physical" (i.e., bodily) discipline for each category of former sinners, according to the vices they had in life. In Dante's Purgatory, souls make their way along the various ledges carved into the flank of the mountain while undergoing penance and performing spiritual practices of purification that will rid them of their proclivity to sin. Each tendency toward vice corresponds to a specific physical penance, and these penitential actions range from being forced to carry heavy boulders (a task imposed on the proud) to having their eyes sown with steel wire (the envious) and being engulfed in flames (the lustful). However, all souls also partake in communal prayer and are asked to meditate upon specific historical examples of vices punished and virtues rewarded. In undergoing a kind of discipline that is also a form of schooling, the souls both pay for the penance they did not undertake in life by suffering and adopt a therapeutic regimen that will eventually free them from all inclination to sin and ready them for heaven.

A word of caveat is in order here. Stating that the *Comedy* is a Christian poem does not in any way imply that it is also a paradigm of orthodoxy. Several, often grave, religious and cultural idiosyncrasies emerge from Dante's text, and early readers did not

fail to recognize and flag them. The poem reserves, that is, several surprises for its Christian readers. I have already mentioned the theological quasi-blasphemy of claiming that God, the unmoved mover, was moved by justice in the making of Hell's gates. Other moments of theological untenability also emerge from the poem. They range from the clear-cut undermining of the Church's function (as is the case with the first recognizable sinner in Dante's Hell in *Inferno* III, who seems to be the recently sanctified pope Celestine V, or with Manfred, the son of the emperor Frederick II, who died excommunicated but is among the souls Dante meets in Purgatory) to the unbelievable decision to count certain figures among the blessed (such as Cato, a pagan suicide promoted to the rank of warden for a Christian Purgatory, or Rhiphaeus, a minor figure in the *Aeneid*, appearing to Dante in the Heaven of Jupiter). They also include incidental theological paradoxes, such as the denial of bodily resurrection to suicides or the idea that traitors die at the very moment of betrayal and their bodies are immediately possessed by a demon. While Dante's text is, in other words, fully Christian, it is also neither fully conformist with the doctrines it promotes nor literal in the dogmas it references.

The decision of Dante to include unorthodoxies in his poem produces a specific counterbalancing behavior in his poetics. To preemptively defuse accusations of heterodoxy, the poem takes advantage of two alternative strategies. On the one hand, Dante avails himself of the poet's freedom to freely imagine supernatural scenarios, which would theoretically be within the purview of the theologian or the preacher, without needing to worry too much about the actual doctrinal correctness of his inventions. As a rule, poets can lie, because the core ethical truth that their works convey ultimately matters more than the veil or bark of fiction under which they hide it. On the other hand, the author of the *Comedy* claims for himself the inalienable right of conscientious objectors to criticize the Church to which they belong from the inside—that is, based on the principles that their Church should but does not uphold. These two attitudes, which allow Dante to play both the poet and

the prophet, produce a specific reading pact with his audience to which we must return in due course. For now, we shall simply add one last ostensibly orthodox element to the list of the Christian underpinnings of the *Comedy*: the role of saintly intercession.

The idea that some exceptional individuals have bridged the infinite gulf separating humanity from God—now that Christ, or God made man, has opened an age of grace—is profoundly Christian. In effect, Christian hagiography—that is, the cult of saints not simply as models of behavior but also as mediators—is based on this core belief. In the Christian thinking of Dante’s time, saints were considered intercessors and go-betweens in the human and divine realms. Dante’s poem provides two striking examples, one at its beginning and one at its end, whose differing degrees of orthodoxy may provide a sense of how the poem engages with this facet of Christian lore.

Let us start with the more foreseeable presence of Saint Bernard as the third guide during Dante’s journey in *Paradiso* XXXIII. Renowned for his Marian theology, Bernard of Clairvaux is chosen as the final intermediary between the protagonist and God. It is through Bernard’s prayer to the Virgin that the final, face-to-face vision of the Trinity is granted to the protagonist. There is little to surprise medieval Christian readers in this juncture of the poem. The human being closest to God, Mary the Mother of God, is asked by one of her devotees, who has a high rank in the heavenly court, to intercede on Dante’s behalf. The prayer is accepted, the grace elicited, the vision granted. However theologically extreme the notion that a living human being is given a full-fledged experience of God, the chain of mediation that leads to it is unimpeachable. The situation is completely different at the start of the narrative. In *Inferno* II, in a vernacular equivalent of a classical epic prologue in the heavens, Virgil explains to a perplexed and concerned Dante that the journey the protagonist is hesitant to undertake is willed in Heaven. Virgil describes a chain of exchanges that links three denizens of Heaven in a coordinated intervention on the protagonist’s behalf: a “gracious lady” (usually identified as the Virgin Mary); who addresses Saint Lucy (an early Christian martyr to whom Dante

was likely particularly devoted); who in turn addresses Beatrice (the woman to the love of whom Dante dedicated his first literary work, the *New Life*, *Vita nuova*); and who finally addresses Virgil himself and entrusts him with the role of guide to Dante. Some elements of this vignette are basically orthodox, while others are at the very least idiosyncratic. As is the case with *Paradiso* XXXIII, two of the characters who intervene on behalf of the poem's protagonist are aligned with the Christian imagination. Mary is traditionally considered the advocate of humankind, and she is cast in that role. Saint Lucy's holiness had long been recognized by the Church, and her cult was widely and stably established by Dante's time, so her mention also makes sense. By contrast, Beatrice, a young Florentine woman who had died only a few years before the fictional date of the narrative, has no claim to being ranked among the official intercessors of the *Comedy* beyond having inspired a book of poetry by its author. Dante's choice to make her an intercessor is as surprising as it is courageous, as is his choice to make Virgil, an ancient pagan poet, the last link in the chain of intercessions in a Christian poem and the guide through a Christian afterlife.

CLASSICAL POETICS

The first clause of the *Comedy* reads, "Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood." Thus, the poem establishes itself as an epic from the start by claiming that it is beginning to tell its story in *medias res*—in the midst of the action. Dante will repeatedly make similar, at times even more ambitious, claims of proximity to classical exemplars both for his text and for himself as its author. In *Inferno* IV, for instance, he will insert himself as sixth in a list of ancient Greco-Roman poets that includes Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and Lucan. In *Inferno* XXV Dante will challenge Ovid and Lucan, two master epic poets, on their own terrain as champions of horrific metamorphosis and ophidian lore, respectively. In *Purgatorio* XXII Dante will build a hermeneutical bridge between the pagan Latin past and his Christian vernacular present by creating

a fantastic version of the spiritual biography of the poet Statius, whom Dante turns into an intermediary figure, at once a Virgilian devotee and a Christian convert. In *Paradiso* he will entrust an entire canto—the sole example in the poem—to the voice of the emperor Justinian, who charts the providential course of Roman power from its origin in the conflagration of the city of Troy, through the age of the Roman republic and principate, to the contemporary institution of the Holy Roman Empire. Characters from antiquity, both historical and mythological ones, are also abundant in the poem. *Inferno* IV is devoted almost in its entirety to the drafting of a canon of poets, philosophers, and heroes from the classical past. In addition, several episodes in the *Inferno* bring together ancient and modern characters in parallel episodes, such as Virgil's Dido and Dante's Francesca da Rimini among the lustful in *Inferno* V, the contemporary Venedico Caccianemico and the classical Jason among the panderers and seducers in *Inferno* XVIII, and the epic hero Ulysses and the Ghibelline warlord Guido da Montefeltro among the evil counselors in *Inferno* XXVI and XXVII. Sometimes the poem stages otherwise impossible interactions in its imaginary panchronic afterlife, such as the animosity between the souls of the thirteenth-century Pier da Medicina and the mute Curio, a partisan of Julius Caesar in the Roman civil wars, in *Inferno* XXVIII, or the bickering between the ancient Greek Sinon and the modern Tuscan Mastro Adamo, both trapped among the falsifiers in *Inferno* XXIX. Monsters from classical imagination also mark the space of Hell, appearing at striking junctures: from anthropomorphic creatures such as Charon, Minos, Flegias, and the proud giants guarding the entrance to the last circle of Hell to semihuman beasts such as Cerberus, the Minotaur, the Centaurs, the Harpies, and the enigmatic Geryon, whom Dante encounters while crossing from the area of violence into that of fraud. Ancient narratives also provide a host of examples that the poem both embeds into similes—such as when his fear of flight in *Inferno* XVII is compared to that of Icarus or Phaeton—and evokes as paradigmatic cases of virtue and vice on the various ledges in Purgatory—where, on the ledge of Pride in

canto XII, mythical Niobe and biblical Saul are carved side by side on a historiated rock pavement.

The Greco-Roman past is everywhere in the *Comedy*, but it is perhaps with Virgil that the poem establishes itself most strongly as a classical object. Indeed, among the many other roles Virgil is called to play in the narrative, he is a conduit for the appearance of classical cultural material. In the first place, his *Aeneid*—and within it especially book 6, which contains a most influential account of a descent into the underworld—is the source for a host of poetic and narrative material for Dante’s poem. But there is more. Virgil is also treated as a metaphorical and metonymical representative of the classical world. At times, in other words, he represents it in full; at others, he acts in the text as a specific part of it. Virgil is a metaphor for the ancient world, on whom Dante projects the expectations that his contemporary culture has created about the poetic, philosophical, historical, and religious nature of antiquity. Virgil thus becomes the walking and talking authority on all ancient historical events, as well as the expert vehicle for all knowable pre- or simply non-Christian matters. The role carries some prestige, but it is not immune to criticism. Dante subjects his Virgil to all the limitations in vision, errors in perspective, and misapprehensions of data with which Christianity, starting from the anti-Virgilian and anti-Roman polemics of late-antique writers such as Augustine, has charged classical culture. A case in point is the explanation Virgil gives in *Inferno* XII for the earthquake that accompanied Jesus’s death on the cross, which he interprets for Dante as an example of the universe’s tendency to move cyclically from order to chaos and back. An even graver example is Virgil’s repeated inability to deal successfully with nonclassical demons guarding specific sections of Hell: Virgil is embarrassingly inept at getting past the host of fallen angels barring him and Dante from entering the city of DYS in *Inferno* IX, and similarly gullible when he encounters the fraudulent trickster-devils in charge of the barrators in *Inferno* XXI. In this role, Virgil is not himself—that is, he is not only the poet from Lombardy, who lived during the Roman civil wars and Augustus’s principate, the author

of the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*, as he himself declares in *Inferno* I; he is also, more simply, an intellectual from antiquity.

At the same time, but inversely, Virgil is a metonymy for the classical world. He is an ancient intellectual, that is, but he is not antiquity, tout court: he is a part that is called to represent the whole but does so while maintaining an individual identity. In this light, Virgil is not a stand-in for Ovid or Lucan, nor, a fortiori, Seneca or Aristotle. In a way, Virgil's point of view and opinions carry a measure of personal responsibility. Dante's Virgil is thus presented as only partially competent when faced with material that does not appear in his works, as is the case when he is marginalized while Dante observes the metamorphoses of the thieves in *Inferno* XXV or at a loss in convincing an ancient giant in *Inferno* XXXI to lend a hand in the journey. In these cases the limited authority of Virgil derives from his authorial textuality. His works have the space neither for the theme of metamorphosis nor for pseudonaturalistic gigantism, in contrast to the works of Ovid or Lucan.

Through Virgil the *Comedy* also furthers one of its cultural pursuits: the revision of classical models. Dante achieves this result through two related strategies. On the one hand, he pointedly corrects the tradition on local matters, using his text as a counter-commentary, an interpretive gloss that is not content with simply occupying a subordinate space on the page or in the canon but challenges the ancient text on equal terms. On the other hand, he systematically uses that same tradition to delineate the truth status of his poem, which, while a fiction that contains extraordinary and at times unbelievable elements, is also a text that asks to be read as true. Consequently, Dante's character of Virgil may contradict himself—that is, he may contradict the authority of the text the historical Virgil wrote. The most compelling example of this is found in *Inferno* XX, where he revises some crucial points of the version of the origin story of his city, Mantua, relayed in the *Aeneid*, and insists that the only true version is the one contained in the text we are reading now. He is also silenced in and by this new poem, in front of the incredible and incredibly well-wrought metamorphoses

of the thieves, acting as a representative of a mendaciously fictitious literature that has been bested by a truthful Christian way to handle the supernatural. In this case, the superiority of the new Christian poet is not simply local but general. Dante casts himself as the representative of a different and new kind of poetry, one in which all fiction, including its most marvelous elements, is not just a fable or the product of poetic fancy but an account of the authentic experience of the supernatural through which its author, appearing in the text as the protagonist, has effectively lived.

Dante's claim to autopsy, which distinguishes the truth status of his poem from that of its classical antecedents, also influences the pact he establishes with his readers. The pact involves an overall trust in the veracity of the narrative. For the purposes of reading his text and accessing its moral content, Dante insists, readers should believe that the letter of the poem is historically true. Failure to accept this notion would relegate the text to the realm of easily dismissible classical fables or, as Dante calls them in his *Banquet*, allegories of the poets. The reading contract Dante proposes rests on a series of coordinated strategies. They include his many addresses to readers, in which the poet invites them to trust his tale-telling (most notably to believe the account of his encounter with Geryon, the most unbelievable of his infernal creatures, in *Inf.* XVII); his striking reports of having been assigned the role of truth-teller by divine investiture (the most explicit of which he secures from Cacciaguida, one of the blessed souls he encounters in *Par.* XV); and his quite scandalous protestations of authority on eschatological matters (as when, in *Pur.* XXIX, he settles the score between an Old Testament writer, Ezekiel, and a New Testament one, John, stating that the author of Revelation agrees with him—and not the other way around). What is at stake in the vindication of truthfulness in Dante's writing is nothing less than the authority of the poem. Hence, the reading pact that binds the poem's audience and its author is also a reading method. For Dante's text to function properly—and to function better than its classical antecedents, by conveying a meaning that is not undermined by the fictionality of

its vehicle—readers need to both accept the narrative context of the text as true and explore it expecting a meaningful experience. Dante certainly asks a lot of his readers, but those from a Christian background are not fully unprepared to respond. In allowing the poem to exist at the intersection of the double truth of the text, they engage in interpretive habits that they have developed when approaching pages in the Bible. In Christian hermeneutics, after all, Scripture relates facts that are assumed to be authentically historical *and* morally significant. This “figural” way of reading texts carries Dante’s claim to simultaneous narrative authenticity and allegorical meaningfulness. Dante’s daring definition of his work as “the sacred poem to which heaven and earth have so set hand” (*Par.* XXV) rests on this paradoxical assumption.

ETHICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The *Comedy* is also unabashedly autobiographical. The personal ingredient contributes to the poem’s narrative on three levels. First, there is the identity of the author and protagonist. Dante’s decision to write an autobiographical epic, conflating author and character—*auctor* and *actor*, in medieval terminology—involves a revisitation of his mythopoetic past. Several elements of that past are imported into the poem, especially the figure of Beatrice. Second, there is the insistence on contemporary and local reality that can be detected in many areas of the poem, usually in the form of often obscure references made to Florentine, Italian, and Pan-European historical characters and political questions that dot the narrative. Dante’s vernacular poem talks to a precise audience, whose horizon of interest is determined by the coordinates of place and time they inhabit and for whom these references have real currency. Finally, there is the ethical message entrusted to the text, one that Dante addresses to his audience, mindful of his reader’s sphere of action. A case in point may be the many prophecies scattered through the *Comedy*, which, unlike their counterparts in the *Aeneid*, have to do much more with the immediate present than with the long-ranging future.

Let us start with the protagonist. What elements of Dante's persona are reflected in the text? The *Comedy* clarifies several points in Dante's biography, beginning with the coordinates of space and time in which Dante exists. Whereas readers must wait until *Purgatorio* XXX to be given the name of the poem's protagonist, they can deduce that he is a Florentine already from his interactions with some souls in the *Inferno*. Ciaccio, a Florentine hanger-on who appears among the gluttons in canto VI, Farinata and Cavalcante, two prominent figures from the recent past of the same city, who share the same sepulchre among the heretics in canto X, and Brunetto Latini, a former teacher of Dante, who appears among the sodomites in canto XV—all these, together with a wide number of other penitents and blessed souls, such as two members of the Donati family in *Purgatorio* XXIII and *Paradiso* II, as well as a noble ancestor, Cacciaguida, appearing in the heaven of Mars, recognize Dante as their neighbor. The *Comedy* also clearly establishes Dante's credentials as a man both of action and of study: in *Inferno* XXI and XXII and then again in *Purgatorio* V, during his meeting with Buonconte da Montefeltro, the poem recalls Dante's past as a combatant in the Guelf army at the siege of Caprona and the battle of Campaldino, respectively. The protagonist is also given credentials as a vernacular poet, who has distinguished himself in writing about love and a specific woman called Beatrice. Dante's qualifications as versifier are recalled at several points during his journey, especially in the stretch of cantos between *Purgatorio* XXIV and XXVI, when Dante meets some copractitioners of vernacular poetry, including the obscure Bonagiunta from Lucca, the more famous Guido Guinizzelli from Bologna, and the world-class master of the poetic craft Arnaut Daniel. Through these dialogues with some literary figures from his contemporary library, Dante establishes a canon of vernacular writers that he treats as his immediate precursors and peers. In other sections of the poem, he will also indirectly address his position in larger canonical structures: that of classical authors in *Inferno* and of biblical authors in *Paradiso*. The poem also explicitly quotes three of Dante's earlier canzoni, in contexts as varied as an encounter with

Casella, a musician and friend from Florence who has just arrived on the shores of the island in *Purgatorio* I; a definition of Dante's current poetics in a dialogue with the colleague Bonagiunta; and a revisitation of a question of angelology in *Paradiso* VIII during a conversation with Charles Martel, a member of the Angevin royal family with whom Dante was acquainted. However, it is as early as *Inferno* II that the poem establishes Dante as a poet, specifically the poet of Beatrice. Given the role this figure plays in the poem, some considerations about her presence in Dante's poetry are in order.

When Dante began writing the *Comedy*, he had very little means to assert his authority as a poet. His curriculum vitae included a single published work, the *New Life*, a short book collecting a compact and retrospectively coherent sample of his lyric poetry: thirty-one poems, including sonnets, ballads, and canzoni, interspersed with narrative and analytical commentary. The book revolved around the figure of Beatrice, a real young woman contemporary to Dante, with whom the poet wrote he had been in love since the age of nine and who had died in 1290. Beyond the radical novelty of containing an authorial self-commentary, the *New Life* was a stylistically and thematically traditional work. The poems collected in it essentially followed the rhetorical and stylistic modalities of medieval "courtly," especially Provençal, poetry, translated into the social setting of the Italian city. The central theme was the love the poet professed for a woman of great beauty and just as exceptional virtue, depicted in a rarefied social context through an idealizing style. This kind of poetry had existed, as Dante himself was keen to note in the book, for about 150 years and had been practiced by different "schools" of poetry, from the Provençal poets of the late eleventh century to the early thirteenth-century poets of the Sicilian court of Frederick II to a group of Dante's quasi-contemporary writers in central and northern Italy.

The love story narrated in the book is about as thin as imaginable. It comprises two meetings between Dante and Beatrice (first when they are age nine and then at eighteen), his falling in love with her (a sentiment whose psychological, intellectual, poetic, and

social phenomenology occupies most of the book), the discovery of the transcendental value of the woman he loves (not simply angel-like in her beauty and virtue but an actual manifestation of God), her death (and the attendant grief work that the poet performs), the temptation to find consolation in a new love for an unnamed “gracious lady” (a character who will recur in the next of Dante’s works, but with a striking new identity), and the final victory of his love for Beatrice, which is accompanied by a vision of her in the glory of heaven.

Ten years of silence, corresponding to the period of Dante’s most engaged and successful participation in the political life of his city, which saw him elected as one of the priors of the commune from June of 1300, followed the *New Life*. His next work, which Dante wrote after his foray into politics tragically failed and led to his exile from the city in 1302, is radically different and does not have Beatrice at its center. In her place, Dante has put a “gracious lady,” whom he now identifies with Lady Philosophy. The book, titled the *Banquet* (*Convivio*), was conceived as an ambitious commentary on fourteen canzoni, some of which Dante had already composed and some of which he planned to produce specifically for the project, each dedicated to one of the Aristotelian virtues. Once finished, the work was intended to be a monumental ethical-philosophical encyclopedia, through which Dante could vindicate his worth as an intellectual who seriously engaged with the political life of the community in which he lived. The target audience included his former fellow citizens of Florence, who had sent him into exile on trumped-up charges of barratry (aided and abetted by Pope Boniface VIII), as well as his new potential employers, the members of the ruling families in the northern Italian courts through which Dante had begun to wander, seeking refuge and means of subsistence. In the first, proemial book of the treatise, Dante candidly explains the reasons that he has decided to write a new work, defends his choice of the vernacular for a philosophical text, and establishes the relationship between the *New Life* and the *Banquet* as one of existential continuity accompanied by a radical change of priorities.

The poet-intellectual does not renege on his love for Beatrice but rather pushes it into the past to make room for the love of wisdom that he now pursues.

Dante never completed the project of the *Banquet*, leaving it with only four of the fifteen envisioned books written. It nonetheless left an essential mark on his intellectual biography. More importantly, the *Banquet* makes its presence felt in the *Comedy*, most distinctly in the roles in which the poem casts Beatrice. The poem is, in effect, a return to Beatrice as the center of Dante's poetry and a return of Beatrice after her partial eclipse by other matters in the *Banquet*. In the *Comedy*, Beatrice comes back as the agent of the salvific love that Dante renounced during his intellectual and moral crisis, not as a scorned lady but as a compassionate and stern judge of the poet. She also returns as a theologically informed and philosophically armed teacher, guiding the protagonist through the material heavens and into the Empyrean with the combined effects of the desire triggered in Dante by her progressively increasing beauty and the concurrent clarity of mind created by her increasingly deeper doctrinal explanation of reality. Familiarity with this textual background is essential to orienting the reader in the long episode staged in Eden, a place Dante decides to put at the top of the mountain of his Purgatory, in which Beatrice chides Dante for his erotic and intellectual infidelity, extorting the contrition and confession from him that are needed to enter Paradise (*Pur.* XXX-XXXII). It is also at the root of the poem's surprising and radical decision to cast the protagonist of Dante's lyrical past in the role of a powerful, demanding, and often ironic teacher for the protagonist. It is Beatrice who, among other doctrinal interventions, imparts a trenchant lecture on the metaphysical nature of the moon spots in *Paradiso* II to the protagonist, advances a corrective reading of Plato's *Timaeus* on the eschatological corollaries of astral determinism in *Paradiso* IV, demonstrates the mortality of the four elements in *Paradiso* VII, establishes the roots of time in the Primum Mobile in *Paradiso* XXVII, ranks the orders of angels in *Paradiso* XXVIII, and declares the nature of and reason for God's creation of the universe in *Paradiso* XXIX. The dazzling

curriculum of the unsilenced Beatrice could hardly be more vital and all-encompassing.

Dante's engagement with the contemporary world does not end with his self-portrait as poet and intellectual in the poem or his dynamic correlation to the character of Beatrice. Although it is a poem about the Christian afterlife, the *Comedy* keeps a steady focus on this life. Dante intended his poem to be a "militant" work, designed to perform an intervention in the society and culture of its time, and his eschatological gaze is deeply enmeshed with a political message for his readership. The ethical dimension of the text thus involves Dante's expression of a profound dissatisfaction with the present, a critical attitude that nonetheless does not preclude the hope for a future, radical renewal of political life. In Dante's view this new era was to be ushered in by a new equilibrium between what the Middle Ages considered the two universal powers: the Christian Church and the Holy Roman Empire. Dante saw the ills produced by disequilibrium as evident in all political communities: the violent struggles for power that opposed rival families in his city, the clashes between neighboring cities and coalitions, and the dynastic wars raging through Europe could all be mapped onto the dissensions between partisans of the pope and partisans of the emperor. The terms Dante uses to indicate these factions are traditional, Guef and Ghibelline, but the extent to which he interprets them as the organizing principles of a long-term historical view is distinctive.

Dante's diagnosis of the moral, political, and social ills of his time is simple: at a certain point in its history, which Dante identifies with the Donation of Constantine, the Church has overstepped its God-given mandate, which consists in leading humanity to spiritual happiness. It has done so principally by meddling in temporal affairs. By involving itself in the internecine wars and power struggles of cities, regions, and kingdoms alike, the Church has in effect become a party within Christianity. It has, in sum, betrayed its universal mission. The Church has also, and just as dangerously, come to hinder the empire from carrying out its temporal mission, as a legitimate and God-willed political body, to lead humanity toward

happiness in this world. In Dante's poem, the only remedy for these ills is seen in the imminent advent of a political leader, connected to imperial power, who can curb the Church's greed, corruption, and intrusions into all levels of political life. According to the poet, divine Providence, the same power that ordained a double guide for the double well-being of humanity, will put history back on its rightful course. Such is, at least, his hope, as entrusted to the various prophecies in the body of the poem. The mysterious "Hound" in *Inferno* I, the enigmatic "Five Hundred, Ten, and Five" in *Purgatorio* XXXIII, and the elusive "Storm which has been so long awaited" in *Paradiso* XXVII—all have an imperial focus, indicating the advent of an imperial resurgence and a total renovation of the world in a future that is not so far away.

The impending imperial revanche will also be another confirmation that the empire is truly "Holy," because it is willed by God, and legitimately "Roman," because it is the direct inheritor of the ancient empire that God had chosen as an integral component of the redemption of humankind. Dante fully reasons these points out in his Latin philosophical treatise *On Monarchy* (*De monarchia*), composed sometime between 1308 and 1318. However, several of its key ideas also emerge at various points in the *Comedy*. Dante's argument is that the Roman Empire—the one that Julius Caesar began by bringing down the Roman republic and of which Virgil sang in the *Aeneid*—had an essential, God-given role to play in the providential plan. First, it brought about a worldwide age of peace, the *Pax Augusta* established after the civil wars of the first century BCE, during which the Savior came into the world. The Roman Empire also served as an instrument in Christ's sacrifice, which was precipitated by a ruling of a Roman officer, Pontius Pilate, an institutional act of a universal power that provided the death of Jesus on the cross with a similarly universal value. In Dante's view, the "holy" nature of the Roman Empire extended throughout its history and into the present. Evidence for this continuity is the fact that the institution also fulfilled the divine mandate to support the Christian Church through the ages, as a series of great antique

and modern emperors “clearly” attested. Dante’s gallery of positive emperors from world history includes several imperial figures: the expected ones include Trajan, Constantine, Justinian, and Charlemagne; the less likely characters include Frederick II Hohenstaufen and Henry VII of Luxemburg, whom Dante sees, respectively, as the last example of and the last hope for an emperor interested in ruling Europe from a seat in Italy. Now Dante tasks the empire with once again establishing an age of universal peace—and through peace an opportunity for humanity to achieve earthly happiness. Dante reserves the similarly crucial but radically distinct supervision of the spiritual dimension of human existence on earth for the Church, but only after it has recovered its original evangelic poverty.

Thus, the visionary utopia Dante elaborates involves a world at peace, in which Church and empire have ceased to work as adversaries, and the supreme, philosophically inspired authority of the universal monarch puts a stop to all dissensions. Dante’s imperial vision aims to create a space in which, through peace, the collective human goal of pursuing knowledge is made possible and, through imperial oversight, all the otherwise competing local powers—be they cities or kingdoms—may exist in harmony. Three cantos in the *Comedy*—the sixth in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*—have traditionally been seen as particularly concerned with voicing Dante’s political complaint, but the political dimension of the poem extends to other areas as well. The many harangues against the corruption of the Church, the insistence on the exemplary value of Roman history, and the denigration of the factionalism endemic in contemporary Italian cities, as well as the expansionism typical of the contemporary French monarchy, are all recurrent themes in the poem that may be seen in this specific ethical-political light.

It is time to revisit the question from which we started and, now that some answers have been given, reconsider its formulation. When we ask what the *Comedy* is, we risk turning a blind eye to the multidimensional nature of the problem. This is not only because Dante’s poem is inevitably many things to many people, and different interpretive communities have formed around it over time, but espe-

cially because any one answer we may provide effectively erases the difference between the two natures that this work of literature has come to possess. For we might legitimately and perhaps necessarily say that the *Comedy* is both what the poem was intended to be when it was originally composed and circulated in the early decades of the fourteenth century and what that same text is today for readers of the twenty-first century who encounter it in new cultural coordinates. To approach the text, in other words, it is essential that we become aware that what the *Comedy* meant when Dante composed it and what it began to mean for its readers in the following seven centuries of its almost uninterrupted reception are not the same thing.

The distinction between these two sides of the poem's inceptive and receptive meaning is even more delicate, insofar as it is neither an idle question for Dante nor confined to the case of the *Comedy*. In general, when faced with the task of mediating a literary text from the past to new audiences, professional readers adopt two different reading strategies.

The first is to decide to underline the distance separating the world of the text and the world of its reception and invite new readers to go back, as much as possible, to the circumstances in which and for which it was originally written. The host of commentaries, essays, and monographs that attempt to elucidate what a text such as Dante's was intended to mean at the time of its writing are inspired and informed by this "philological" approach. The commentary by Charles Singleton that originally accompanied his version squarely placed itself in that reading camp. His extended treatment of the poem's sociopolitical and historical background, his richly documented discussions of the philosophical and theological issues into which Dante intervened, and his sustained attention to glossing the poem with Dantean statements drawn from his other works were designed to produce a sense of the meanings that Dante's first general and professional audiences were primed to draw from the poem.

In similarly general terms, and in contrast to this "readerly" approach, there exists an alternative "writerly" strategy of reading, which aspires to pull the text closer to the circumstances in which

ever-new readers find themselves. In tandem with, and to complement the work of Singleton's commentary, Singleton's English version of the poem did precisely that work. It moved the text closer to readers, attempting to remediate the differences in time, space, and linguistic and cultural habits that existed between the text and its audience, distances that would otherwise have condemned the poem to feel not only remote but also irrelevant. In Dante's case, aside from the possibility open to any text of being adopted and adapted into new cultural discourses, there were some eminent internal reasons inviting Singleton's "domesticating" approach. Dante's poem had been conceived from the start as what T. S. Eliot defined as a "classic": the poem programmatically addressed both its immediate audience and "those who shall call this time ancient" (*Par.* XVII.119–20). Dante's poem strategically addressed its contemporary audience in familiar language and within familiar cultural codes, but it did not consider its work finished there. Rather, it strategically opened itself to new, chronologically and spatially distant audiences and to their interrogation. It is a process in which Dante invited all readers to partake, both those whom he knew and those among whom he knew he would live on in the future. The conviction with which this new edition entrusts the poem's ever-new readers with the task of providing the text with meaning is essentially Dante's.

AN AMERICAN VOICE FOR DANTE

Nearly thirty years ago, in the midst of the torrid summer of 1995, a young version of me walked into the bookstore of the University of Notre Dame, in South Bend, Indiana, and invested \$24.95 of his graduate student's stipend to acquire a copy of this very edition. No detail in this personal anecdote is random. If I had come to America to study Dante, found myself on the first of the many beautiful campuses on which I was to spend most of my life, and picked up a copy of the *Comedy* with an English translation and commentary, it was because of Charles Singleton's work. As the

Italian poet and Nobel Laureate Eugenio Montale once snobbishly remarked, Charles Singleton was for me, too, “l’americano che ci spiegò Dante” (the American who explained Dante to us), and I had encountered Singleton’s voice before even setting foot in this country. I did so indirectly at first, in the critical examination and passionate defense of Singleton’s work by another Italian maestro, Gianfranco Contini, and then directly in Singleton’s *Elements of Structure* and *Journey to Beatrice*, whose Italian versions regularly featured in the reading lists for bachelor’s theses in Dante Studies at the University of Pisa. Singleton’s interpretive work had, indeed, proved it could teach quite a few things to an Italian reader who was about to become a student of Dante in the United States. But Singleton’s English version of the poem, which is also radically interpretive, taught me how to hear Dante’s voice in a new language.

Something I did not know when I made my purchase was that, during my time in the United States, I was also going to learn how to read Dante from several, variously Singletonian teachers—all insisting on the necessity of studying how Dante’s poem established itself as or, to put it another way, created the effect of being a transcription of reality. As an author of seminal works of criticism, Singleton invited the reader to interpret Dante within a metaliterary framework particularly apt for exploring the paradox that, as Singleton put it, “the fiction of the *Comedy* is that it is not fiction.” To any reader familiar with the vagaries of Dante scholarship, what I have set down in the previous pages betrays my interpretive debt to Singleton’s arguments, as they were developed by *Dantisti* and *Dantiste* of later generations. Understanding the roots and aims of Dante’s theological-allegorical mode of writing paved the way for me to appreciate Dante’s poetics of autopsy and objectivity. It was thanks to Singleton’s strategic formulation that I could finally see an alternative path, one that stretched beyond the limiting choice between Dante-the-poet and Dante-the-prophet—an ideological dichotomy if there ever was one—in which I was trained. And it was through that new lens that I was going to read and learn from generations of Dante readers who detect and articulate the basic principles of Dante’s poetic and prophetic realism

by focusing on the most technical literary, rhetorical, and narrative elements of the poem.

Singleton's endeavor to make Dante's realism a visible critical object did not stop with his essays from the mid-twentieth century: it continued quite distinctively in his version of the poem. Singleton's choice of prose as the privileged vehicle for that effect speaks to this point. As a prose rendering of a poetic organism, Singleton's version helps readers to appreciate Dante's poem as a work that moves them along with the plot. It allows the *Comedy* to emerge as particularly attentive to creating and managing narrative junctures, even in moments of apparently neutral, even flat, stage direction. By treating these narrative features on a par with the phonic and stylistic effects produced in the poetic original, Singleton's prose highlights their role in creating a narrative that is at once imaginatively visionary and true. For me Singleton's version succeeds in allowing the narrative bone-and-sinew elements of the poem to come to light and frees the reader from another very Italian dichotomy I grew up with—that of the “poetic” and “unpoetic” portions of the poem. For readers who approach Dante's text for the first time, without the burden of the memory of its original or the critical incrustations of its Italian commentaries, these supporting structures are not *in* the poem: they are the poem.

There is little possibility of, and no real gain in, attempting to separate the multilevel structural elements from the lyrical passages in the text. For one, not only is the *Comedy* equally memorable in all its parts; it also and more essentially is all its parts. There would not be a *Comedy*, that is, without the narrative surprises and twists in the succession of episodes that make Dante's poem as much an adventurous epic-chivalric tale as a theological work on the afterlife. If the protagonist advances through the many layers of a clearly structured environment, negotiating physical obstacles, narrowly escaping from antagonists, accepting provisional setbacks, and finally achieving his goals, this progression is not an accidental feature in the text. Whether the task at hand is escaping and exploiting the monstrous and inimical forces of Hell, progressively dispensing with the hindrances of earthly attachments in Purgatory, or ultimately

overcoming the difficulty of reconceptualizing the universe as we thought we knew it in Paradise, the form of the narrative quest is essential for the poem's effect. The protagonist could not take readers with him otherwise.

Likewise, the poem's reality effect does not exist because of rhetorical strategies that are deployed structurally: it consists of them. The calculated alternation between close-ups and panoramic shots, imbricated episodes and editorial ellipses—elements that have led critics to speak of Dante's cinematographic style—is inseparable from the variable viewpoints that the movable focus of Dante's narrative allows in the storytelling. These always partial and strategically oriented points of view are, in turn, coextensive with the characters' language. The constant trading of individually inflected or collaboratively defined keywords between the main characters (the protagonist and his guides and their various interlocutors), whether the blindly suffering denizens of Hell or the enlightened, jubilant souls in Heaven, does not only introduce a variety of social, local, and cultural idiolects: it produces the poem as we read it.

The same holds true for the more expository and didactical sections in the text, the many passages in which descriptive or dialogic accounts yield to extended stretches of argumentative text. The forms established by the discipline of dialectics, as in the many lessons the protagonist is given by his long-ranging or local guides; or the polemical-prophetic modules different characters adopt in their exuberant invectives against the moral and political corruption of life on earth; or even the set moments of mystical or oneiric excess, a state of consciousness intensely investigated in Purgatory and Paradise, are not passively imported into Dante's text but partake fully in the discursive construction of the world. Singleton's version ensures coplanar presence to all these discourses, preemptively defusing the false dilemma between appreciating lyrical or nonlyrical sections of the poem and treating them all, in the equalizing medium of prose, as equally poetic. Reading Singleton's version of the poem, in sum, produces a vivid sense of the original narrative thrust. And narrative is the operative word here.

(continued...)