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Introduction

NOT LONG before his death in 1321 at age fifty-six, a usually tough-minded poet let down his guard and admitted to his trials:

If it should happen . . . If this sacred poem—
this work so shared by heaven and by earth
that it has made me lean through these long years—
can ever overcome the cruelty
that bars me from the fair [sheepfold] where I slept,
a lamb opposed to wolves that war on it . . .

*Se mai continga che 'l poema sacro
al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro,
vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
del bello ovile ov' io dormi' agnello,
nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra . . . (Par. 25.1–6)¹*

It never would happen. Florence, the poet's "fair sheepfold," refused to recall him from exile, and he never realized his dream of being crowned poet laureate in his beloved Baptistery of San Giovanni, the holy site where he and all Florentine citizens were christened. This poet, of course, was Dante, a name so resounding that the above story is familiar to countless readers throughout the world.

Dante's melancholic avowal in *Paradiso* 25 of taking on a project as demanding as the work he called his *Comedia*—the adjective “Divina” was only added to the title centuries later in 1555 by an enterprising Venetian printer—distills the essence of his complicated personality.² His relationship with Florence wavered between primal love and ferocious hatred, and he could never overcome the feeling of defeat and heartache brought on by his exile in 1302. He was confident of his own abilities to the point of occasional arrogance and braggadocio: in Limbo, this still-unproven poet has the chutzpah to list himself as the “sesto tra cotanto senno,” “sixth among such intellects” (*Inf.* 4.102), a group of luminaries that includes Homer, Virgil, and Ovid. Dante believed he was on a mission from God: he called his work a “sacred poem” (*poema sacro*) and rightly anticipated that it would be the first epic to fuse secular and spiritual life into a seamless whole.

The confession scene in *Paradiso* 25 does more than take us inside Dante's obsessions and motivations: it also reveals that for the author of the *Commedia*, a 14,233-line work on the state of the soul after death written between about 1306 and 1321, the words *poetry* and *persona* were inseparable.³ Almost every verse of consequence that Dante authored in his life, from his adolescent poems about his muse Beatrice that would be anthologized in the *Vita nuova* (New life, c. 1292–95) to the concluding passages in *Paradiso* on the poet's three mediated visions of his Christian God (including his view of Christ as “nostra effige,” “our image,” in the Holy Trinity, *Par.* 33.131),⁴ centered in one way or another on Dante's own life experiences.⁵ He was not an “autobiographer” in our modern sense of the word. The interiority and self-analysis implied by that term, which did not appear in English until 1797, would have been wholly out of place in Dante's deeply religious world. As he stated in his philo-

sophical treatise *Il convivio* (The banquet, c. 1304–7) and implied in the *Commedia*, an author should write about one's name only out of necessity: to clear oneself from injustice, as Boethius had done in *De consolazione philosophiae* (The consolation of philosophy, c. 524), or to establish a model for Christians to follow, in the manner of Augustine in his groundbreaking *Confessiones* (Confessions, 397–400).⁶ Dante believed he was checking both of those boxes. To his dying breath, he considered the ban of exile levied against him unjust, and throughout his epic poem he wrote with the conviction of a religious prophet nominated—albeit *self*-nominated—to help humanity save their Christian souls.

The tendency, historically, has been for nonspecialist readers to focus more on Dante's damned than his blessed, a bias expressed memorably by Victor Hugo, who claimed, “[Dante] was somewhat at home in hell, but he is no longer so in heaven. He cannot recognize himself in angels. The human eye is perhaps not made for so much sun; and when the poem draws happiness, it becomes tedious.”⁷ There have been notable dissents to Hugo's opinion: as we will see, T. S. Eliot believed that the poetry of *Paradiso* was the greatest ever written, and Matthew Arnold located a “perfect” line of verse in the same canticle.⁸ But many today are likely to be sympathetic with Hugo as they take on the most explicitly religious—and doctrinal—part of Dante's poem, which Robert Hollander describes as the “most challenging” in all Dante, adding, “One finds few who will claim (or admit) that [*Paradiso*] is their favorite *cantica*.”⁹ Dante's spirituality has elicited conflicting reactions for centuries: what inspires one reader in his religious vision is just as likely to cause confusion or raise hackles in another. It can be difficult, at a distance of seven hundred years and with a writer as celebrated as Dante, to remember that his life was one of

dramatic bets. An intensely experimental writer, he took the enormous risk of writing his epic poem in a regional dialect, Tuscan, instead of the scholarly language of choice, Latin, because he was committed to forging a new literary tradition rooted in his native cultural soil. And he multiplied that risk by writing about *himself*, a struggling Florentine exile, when his epic predecessors had sung of such lofty themes as the Trojan War, the homecoming of Odysseus, and the founding of Rome. It is no wonder that his religious vision would turn out to be just as idiosyncratic and divisive as the poetic project that inspired it.

Yet it was precisely Dante's willingness to roll the literary dice, to endure peril and embrace uncertainty, that makes what he achieved so remarkable—and his religious vision so original. Using the same brio with which he translated his personal story into an epic poem, Dante rankled the conventionally religious with his extraordinary claim of having been given the beatific vision while still in the flesh. More than this, he granted himself this sublime privilege because of the alleged intercession of the muse he worshiped from afar, Beatrice, whom he transformed into an intimate associate of the exalted Virgin Mary as well as his patron saint, Saint Lucy of Syracuse, a martyr and champion of the blind and those who struggle with their eyesight (as Dante himself did). According to Joan M. Ferrante, Dante's cult of Beatrice also shaped his understanding of the relation between religion and gender:

It is a commonplace of Dante criticism that the poet's love for Beatrice leads him to God, literally within the poem and figuratively within his life. But it does a good deal more than that. It also leads him to see a feminine side in God, in the human race, and in himself.¹⁰

Adding fuel to the polemical fires surrounding his religious views, Dante also took every chance he could to excoriate the leaders of his church, lambasting one pope after another, from the “neutral” Celestine V in *Inferno* 3 to his perennial *bête noire*, Boniface VIII, in the canto of the Simonists, *Inferno* 19.¹¹ All told, no fewer than five popes are individually targeted for Dante’s hell. Not one to court the opinion of the crowd, Dante went straight to the top for affirmation of his attack on Church corruption: in *Paradiso* 27, Saint Peter, Christ’s apostle and founder of the Catholic Church, skewers Boniface VIII with these words:

“He who on earth usurps my place, my place,
my place that in the sight of God’s own Son
is vacant now, has made my burial ground
a sewer of blood, a sewer of stench, so that
the perverse one who fell from Heaven, here
above, can find contentment there below.”

*“Quelli ch’usurpa in terra il luogo mio,
il luogo mio, il luogo mio, che vaca
ne la presenza del Figliuol di Dio,
fatt’ ha del cimitero mio cloaca
del sangue e de la puzza; onde ’l perverso
che cadde di qua sù, là giù si placa.”* (22–27)

If ever there were an indicator of Dante’s own anger toward the Christian hierarchy, it was this repetition of “my place” (*luogo mio*) emerging in three surging beats from the mouth of Saint Peter.

The ongoing tension between Dante’s personal story and the Christian nature of his poem, the source of his religious vision’s originality as well as its divisiveness, has driven the reception

history of the *Commedia*. In an influential meditation from 1942, the scholar and seminarian Bruno Nardi asked simply but incisively, “Was Dante really a prophet?”¹² In Nardi’s view, the answer was an emphatic *yes*: “Now it seems to me that if we think with an unprejudiced mind of what the great inspired men and the seers of the Old Testament represented in the historical framework of the religion of Israel, Dante really continued its tradition and language, so as to deserve being considered a prophet as they were.”¹³ Nardi qualified his assertion, adding that many of Dante’s political predictions were inaccurate, which might tempt one to call him a “false” prophet. But in reality, he continued, like all “true” and “great” prophets, Dante managed to lift his poetry “beyond the events that were occurring beneath his eyes and show an eternal ideal of justice as the criterion for measuring the moral stature of men and the value of their actions. . . . The man who is used to giving ear to the low voices rising from the nether depth of consciousness and to fixing his gaze within the light shining in the innermost recesses of the soul is not dismayed if the external world shatters around him because he has found what is sufficient to him and cannot be taken from him: God.”¹⁴

Nardi’s rousing insight was a major moment in the religious afterlife of Dante’s epic not only because of what he said but also for the responses that he would elicit. Teodolinda Barolini remarked that Nardi’s words have led readers to the fundamental question of Dante’s poem: “How are we to respond to the poet’s insistence that he is telling us the truth?”¹⁵ Invoking Charles Singleton’s influential claim that “the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not a fiction,”¹⁶ Barolini notes how “Singleton’s heirs dig ever more deeply into the cultural and theological humus from which the *Commedia* grows [and] make the poet appear more and more a theologian, unleashing

a backlash from those who would have us remember that he is a poet.¹⁷ Looking to move past this critical impasse, Barolini proposes that “we read the *Commedia* less theologically and more practically,” so that we can paradoxically “detheologize our reading if we are to understand what makes the theology stick.”¹⁸

This dialogue between the religious and poetic strands in the *Commedia* has defined its centuries-long “biography” or after-life among readers. On the one hand, as Peter Hawkins writes, “That Dante’s *Commedia* is a religious poem, even a ‘divine’ one, seems to go without saying. Indeed, for the Christian West, it has come to set the gold standard for what such a work should be.”¹⁹ Yet, Hawkins counters, resistance to Dante’s religious message has been immediate and perennial: as early as 1327, the Dominican friar Guido Vernani dubbed Dante the “Devil’s vessel,” and in 1335, the Dominican superiors declared the *Commedia* off-limits to both impressionable novices and seasoned members of the order.²⁰ While Dante has gone on to become in our own times what Hawkins calls “court poet” of the Vatican, the idiosyncratic nature of his religious vision has continued to inspire as well as rankle readers.²¹ Harold Bloom spoke of Dante as “a ruthless visionary, passionately ambitious and desperately willful, whose poem triumphantly expresses his own unique personality.”²² Similarly, for James Miller, Dante negotiated the “contested border between Literature and Belief” and succeeded in making “a triumphantly orthodox poem out of his immediately transgressive experiences.”²³

In the aggregate, responses to the *Commedia* reveal how the poem thrives on its productive tensions: it promotes Virgil to the role of guide while denigrating his pagan age as one of “false and lying gods” (“dèi falsi e bugiardi,” *Inf.* 1.72); it excoriates individual popes while upholding the sanctity of the papacy

itself; and it promotes the virtues of humility and modesty while proclaiming Dante's own poetic superiority. Similarly, the intense religiosity of the poem has always been shadowed by its earthly concerns, as we see in these words from William Franke:

Dante stands in certain outstanding respects as the premier secularizing thinker and writer of the modern age. The concrete world of history and human individuality emerges from his work with unprecedented force and clarity. It emerges, moreover, as a revelation of an ultimate, eschatological reality of the other world translated into a symbolic language of the phenomena of this world realistically perceived and represented.²⁴

The "secular" Dante is most famously associated with the German philologist Erich Auerbach and his landmark study *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (Dante as poet of the secular world, 1929). Emphasizing the link between Dante's religious vision and personal experience, Auerbach notes that the two were ultimately symbiotic: "The content of the *Comedy* is a vision; but what is beheld in the vision is the truth as concrete reality, and hence it is both real and rational."²⁵

Auerbach's "realist" Dante has an illustrious genealogy, including the legendary critic Francesco De Sanctis, whose *Storia della letteratura italiana* (History of Italian literature, 1871–72) helped create a sense of common cultural identity in the newly formed Italian nation. De Sanctis began writing on *Inferno* 5 as early as 1854, and his realist interpretation of Dante culminated in his description of Francesca da Rimini, the star-crossed lover from the Circle of the Lustful in *Inferno* 5: "Francesca, as Dante conceived her, is more alive and real than she could ever be as presented by history."²⁶ De Sanctis claimed that the flesh-and-

blood Francesca piqued the reader's interest in a way that Dante's more generic and abstract muse Beatrice never could: "In this genial creation [Francesca] are contained the seeds of the finest creations of modern poetry, having at their center woman as released from metaphysics and mysticism and understood as a living person."²⁷ De Sanctis glossed over the harsh nature of Francesca's sin and damnation; what interested him was the vividness of her character and the force of her literary portrait. His sympathy for her is palpable throughout the essay—one feels as though, like Dante the protagonist, he was seduced by her winning words and gracious manners, leaving him with little patience for the stark Christian judgment that situates her in hell.

Not surprisingly, Dante's deeply personal approach to poetry and faith led him to an obsession over how his work would be read. The *Commedia* contains some twenty addresses to the reader, establishing an intimacy with his audience that was unprecedented.²⁸ If ever there were an epic poem with its own instructions for use, it was Dante's, with exhortations like "O you possessed of sturdy intellects, / observe the teaching that is hidden here / beneath the veil of verses so obscure" (*O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani, / mirate la dottrina che s'asconde / sotto 'l velame de li versi strani, Inf. 9.61–63*).²⁹ Scholars continue to debate whether or not Dante wrote the celebrated and controversial "Letter to Cangrande," with its injunction that Dante's poetry be read on four levels, the literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical or spiritual.³⁰ Though the question of authorship remains open, I agree with scholars who believe that what matters is that Dante *could have* written the "Letter to Cangrande": it squares with Dante's actual literary practice and the enormous semantic pressure he puts on the lines of his poem and their polyvalent meanings.

The celebrated opening of the *Commedia*—"When I had journeyed half of our life's way / I found myself within a shadowed forest" (*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, Inf.* 1.1–2)—illustrates the possibilities of interpretation inherent in Dante's writing. The lines are *literal* in that Dante, at the fictional date of the poem, 1300, is thirty-five years old, half of the biblical life as established in the Book of Isaiah 38:10. The moral, allegorical, and anagogical levels follow suit: Dante goes to hell, following in the footsteps of Jesus as narrated in Ephesians 4:9. And the supremely allegorical *selva oscura*, shadowed forest or dark wood, is hardly an actual woodland setting in Dante's Florence: it is rather the space of Christian error and sin, a hallowed trope in religious literature.³¹

The vertiginous amount of interpretation spun off by Dante's lines has made him one of the most commented-upon authors in history. From 1950 and to 1970 alone, nearly ten thousand articles were written on his work, and a recent guide from the Modern Language Association of America offers pedagogical advice for learning about Dante through music, gender, and different artistic media, among many other topics, and in a manual geared for audiences including high school seniors and incarcerated prisoners.³² Physical copies of the responses to Dante's work over the arc of seven centuries would fill a good-sized library. Yet the *Commedia* is hardly the mere province of scholars: numerous contemporary books and films employ imagery from Dante's afterlife, more than one hot sauce has the word *Inferno* emblazoned on it, and everything from the local motor vehicles outpost and megastore shopping aisles to online dating and passenger-jet seating has been compared to Dante's circles of hell. His ubiquity extends from the lowbrow and middle-brow to the loftiest altitudes of cultural expression. There is an *Inferno* video game with an improbably muscle-bound Dante

who rescues his beloved Beatrice after ceaseless mortal combat. His name appears on olive oils, wines, even a toilet paper ad. On the other end of the spectrum, one of the oldest cultural societies in the United States, the Dante Society of America, was founded in 1881 by such leading cultural figures as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Charles Eliot Norton, and James Russell Lowell, and early participants included Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, a translator of Dante's *Vita nuova*. T. S. Eliot, in typically oracular assessment, was perhaps not exaggerating when he said, "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them, there is no third."³³

One thing becomes clear to anyone who hopes to write a biography of Dante's magnum opus, *The Divine Comedy*, and its secular and spiritual impact: a chronological or geographical survey is out of the question, unless one plans to spend a lifetime compiling the oceanic amount of material and trying to convince one's editor to publish a work whose pages would perforce run into the tens if not hundreds of thousands. The recent decades in particular have seen a salubrious expansion of studies on Dante's far-reaching influence outside of the traditional Anglo-European context and into such areas as his presence among historically marginalized writers and the *Commedia's* impact in popular media forms outside of the literary and visual arts.³⁴ In full awareness of the necessarily selective and personal approach of my own attempt to account for Dante's afterlife—and of course cognizant that other authors tasked with this responsibility would have produced studies of a very different kind—I have chosen to remain largely within the confines of my own scholarly expertise in the history of Western literature and feature those paradigmatic moments in Dante's reception that coalesce into a narrative whose individual parts are often in dialogue with one another. In so doing, I have

tried to follow Dante's own intensely synthetic habits of mind and approach the afterlife of the *Commedia* as systematically as possible. As Jorge Luis Borges once said, it takes a modern novel hundreds of pages to lay bare the essence of a character, whereas for Dante a few dozen verses will do.³⁵ My hope is that this same drive for concision and synthesis can work for exploring his epic's afterlife.

Distilling the reception of the *Commedia* to its essence requires a form of rhetorical mapping that would have come natural to Dante, one of the most incisive interpreters of linguistic and literary form ever. As vast as the reception of Dante's epic has been, certain topoi or recurring elements emerge. Any invocation of the term *topos*,³⁶ which refers to a traditional or conventional literary or rhetorical theme or topic, recalls the practice developed by Ernst Robert Curtius in his landmark study *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (European literature and the Latin Middle Ages, 1948).³⁷ Curtius mapped out a system of the Latin works produced in the medieval period by discovering what literary motifs and forms were constantly repeated and reflective of patterns.³⁸ These tropes enabled him to construct a rhetorical "forest" from the individual "trees" of Latin medieval texts, a methodology that also works well for charting the afterlife of the *Commedia*.

My mention of literary trees and forests might suggest that I am invoking a practice similar to the provocative model developed by Franco Moretti and his notion of "distant reading," which takes a bird's-eye view of literature and uses statistics, graphs, and other indicators of literary production to create literary histories that dispense with the traditional practices of close reading.³⁹ I am emphatically not following Moretti, as the following pages will show. The Dantesque topoi that emerge from the centuries-long afterlife of his *Commedia* are all ones

that can be accessed only by the kind of careful interpretation of individual textual details that Moretti's model eschews. As we will see, these topoi include Dante as champion of the vernacular in early Italian literature, Dante as religious heretic during the Inquisition, Dante as literary hero for the Romantics, Dante as formal innovator for the Modernists, and Dante as religious visionary for modern-day popes, to name only some of his more prominent manifestations and to give a sense of their variety and expansiveness. In adducing this list, I make no pretense of offering a comprehensive or "quantitative" understanding of how and why the *Commedia* has been read since its appearance in the early 1300s. Instead, my focus will be on what seem to be the most consequential and representative elements of that literary afterlife, as represented by topoi whose looming presence and influence I believe justify their selection.

In seeking to choose the topoi that define the afterlife of Dante's *Commedia* and constitute its biography, Dante himself is once again our guide. By personalizing his epic to an unprecedented degree, and by interlacing instructions on how to read his poem within its dense fabric of verses and manifold references to everything from history and politics to theology and poetics among much else, Dante did more than shape the influence of his work: he helped create it. In reading responses to the *Commedia* as varied as Franco Sacchetti's stories about the hot-headed character Dante in his *Il trecentonovelle* (Three hundred tales, 1399) and Sandow Birk's edgy urban illustrations of *Inferno* (2003),⁴⁰ one can almost feel Dante's ghost smiling knowingly, unsurprised at the protean forms his work has inspired. Ultimately, the plurality of these responses validates Dante's decision to write a poem so challengingly "encyclopedic," to invoke Giuseppe Mazzotta's term, that it has engendered a corresponding interpretive and creative surplus.⁴¹

An episode from early in the *Commedia* suggests Dante's uncanny ability to anticipate and even encourage his own reception history. Around 1295, years before beginning his epic *Commedia*, Dante dedicated the *Vita nuova* to the man he called his "best friend" (*primo amico*), the supremely talented Guido Cavalcanti, a leader of the Sweet New Style, the poetic movement that nurtured the young Dante's writing and fused lyrical refinement and natural philosophy in writing about "angel women" (*donne angelicate*) like Beatrice. Astonishingly, just several years later in 1300 and in his capacity as one of Florence's six priors, the highest elected official in the city, Dante signed an edict banishing the radical Cavalcanti from the city. Cavalcanti died later that year, in August 1300, from malaria contracted abroad. Dante himself was exiled in 1302; when he began the *Commedia* around 1306, he handled his role in his best friend's demise with breathtaking defensiveness. The fictional date of *The Divine Comedy* is April 1300, so Guido still lives. In *Inferno* 10, where the sin of heresy is punished—"all those who say the soul dies with the body" (*che l'anima col corpo morta fanno*, 15)—Dante encounters Guido's Epicurean father, Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti, who burns for this same heretical philosophy associated with his son. "If it is your high intellect / that lets you journey here, through this blind prison [hell], / where is my son? Why is he not with you?" Guido's father asks (*Inf.* 10.58–60).⁴² Your son, Dante tells him, perhaps "did disdain" (*ebbe a disdegno*) Dante's guide through hell (Virgil, Beatrice, or God Himself; the pronoun referent "*cui*" in *Inf.* 10.63, "one" or "whom," is left unclear). Guido's father hears *ebbe a disdegno*, the absolute past (*passato remoto*) form "did disdain," and assumes that his son, like the verb, is in the past tense. He asks, "The sweet light does not strike against [Guido's] eyes?" (*non fiere li occhi suoi lo dolce lumen?*, *Inf.* 10.69). Dante hesitates in replying. This guilty heartbeat of a pause signals to Cavalcante

de' Cavalcanti that his son is dead, and so he falls into the broth of hell "and did not show himself again" (*e più non parve fora*, *Inf.* 10.72). Dante never referred, directly or indirectly, to his best friend's death again.

Seven centuries of scholarly inquiry have not yet revealed exactly to whom that mysterious pronoun *cui* refers. Many scholars have strong opinions as to the person in question, but ultimately only Dante himself knew.⁴³ The episode is just one of several in which it is impossible to know exactly what Dante means or refers to: Why does Ulysses in *Inferno* 26 forsake his long-lost Ithaca for "experience of the world"? Did Ugolino from *Inferno* 33 actually cannibalize his children? What does the Roman numeral "DXV" in *Purgatorio* 33 signify? The list goes on, leaving the reader to fill in some mighty blanks. Countless commentators have taken the Dantesque bait and done their best to answer on the poet's behalf. The result has been mountains of scholarship poking through clouds of speculation, in an atmosphere of heated debate that expands with each generation. The poet and Dante commentator extraordinaire Percy Bysshe Shelley described the situation best when he called great poetry like Dante's a "fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight."⁴⁴ It's no wonder that the essay in which these words appear, "A Defence of Poetry" (1821), devotes large sections to Dante and his "inexhaustible fountain of purity of sentiment and language."

Shelley did more than articulate a general theory of how certain literary works remain evergreen by captivating readers separated from their moments of composition by huge swaths of time and space. He specifically invoked the rhetoric of invention

and discovery that has helped generate many of the topoi associated with the afterlife of the *Commedia*:

Dante was the first religious reformer, and Luther surpassed him rather in the rudeness and acrimony, than in the boldness of his censures of papal usurpation. Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language, in itself music and persuasion, out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms.

The passage reveals two elements central to the biography of Dante's epic: its impact as a religious work *and* as a poetic text. Indeed, Shelley's point on the latter is startlingly accurate, for his claim that Dante's language fused "music and persuasion" rhymes with Dante's own assertion in his groundbreaking treatise on the Romance languages, *De vulgari eloquentia* (On eloquence in the vernacular, c. 1302–5), which argues that "poetry is rhetoric [persuasion] set to music."⁴⁵ This language of firsts adduced by Shelley resurfaces repeatedly in the afterlife of Dante's work and has conditioned the topoi associated with his originality.

The dialogue between poetic originality and religious doctrine is present from the start of the *Commedia*. In *Inferno* 1, Dante meets his initial guide, Virgil, who has been sent by the Virgin Mary, after Beatrice's appeal to her, to aid the lost pilgrim. The proverbial fame of Virgil's Latin epic poem, the *Aeneid*, would seem to make Dante's choice logical enough. But readers often forget just how unusual, even scandalous, Dante's decision was to select a pagan and nonbeliever as his guide through the first leg of the Christian afterlife. Virgil's secular brilliance made him an apt commentator on the issues of sin and transgression, crime and punishment, in *Inferno*—but so would have countless other Christian exemplars of literary genius, including ones who themselves wrote spiritual autobiographies or conversion narratives

like Dante's, especially Saint Augustine.⁴⁶ Yet Dante opts for Virgil primarily because he has a special affinity for his writing, which engendered the "long study and the intense love" (*lungo studio e 'l grande amore*, *Inf.* 1.83) that led him to the *Aeneid*.

As the pilgrim continues his spiritual journey beyond hell and into purgatory, the scandal of Virgil's presence only intensifies: at least the Latin poet's brilliant understanding of human error and transgression qualified him to comment on the issues of *Inferno*, but in the Christian spaces of *Purgatorio* he is truly in terra incognita, as his bizarre colloquy with the gatekeeper Cato reveals. When Dante and Virgil arrive in the second canticle, Virgil asks his fellow Roman to give his charge special treatment as they wend their way up the mountain of purgation, promising to put in a good word with Cato's wife, Marcia, whose spirit resides below in Virgil's Limbo:

"Allow our journey through your seven realms.
I shall thank her for kindness you bestow—
if you would let your name be named below."

*"Lasciane andar per li tuoi sette regni;
grazie riporterò di te a lei,
se d'esser mentovato là giù degni."* (*Purg.* 1.82–84)

The tactic is embarrassingly ineffective: the stern guardian Cato denies any interest in his unredeemed wife, reminding Virgil that after his Christian conversion he wishes to please an entirely different kind of woman, one on the other side of the "evil river" (*mal fiume*, 88) that now separates him, literally and figuratively, from Marcia:

"While I was there, within the other world,
Marcia so pleased my eyes," [Cato] then replied,
"each kindness she required, I satisfied.

Now that she dwells beyond the evil river,
she has no power to move me any longer,
such was the law decreed when I was freed.
But if a lady come from Heaven speeds
and helps you, as you say, there is no need
of flattery; it is enough, indeed,
to ask me for her sake.”

*“Marzia piacque tanto a li occhi miei
mentre ch’i’ fu’ di là,” diss’ elli allora,
“che quante grazie volse da me, fei.
Or che di là dal mal fiume dimora,
più muover non mi può, per quella legge
che fatta fu quando me n’usci’ fora.
Ma se donna del ciel ti muove e regge,
come tu di’, non c’è mestier lusinghe:
bastisi ben che per lei mi richegge.”* (85–93)

Cato’s rejection of Marcia in favor of Beatrice reveals a new spiritual worldview that is forever closed to the pagan Virgil, the once-redoubtable guide of hell who is increasingly ill at ease—and short on valuable advice—the higher he and Dante climb up Mount Purgatory.

Yet the intimacy between Dante and Virgil from *Inferno* 1 onward, up to Dante’s tearful realization in *Purgatorio* 30 that the Latin poet has left him, can make us forget that more than a millennium separated the two. All that distance, religious, chronological, and otherwise, collapses as Virgil is transformed, right on the page before us, into Dante’s beloved *duca* and *maestro*, leader and teacher, even his “sweetest father” (*dolcissimo padre*). Dante’s Virgil, in the manner of all literary interpretations and transformations, is highly individual, even eccentric. The Florentine poet was drawn to the Roman poet not just

because of his beautiful writing but also because he represented the sense of imperial mission Dante desperately craved for the Italian peninsula. Virgil was also the cultural embodiment of an epic style—and cultural prestige—that Dante wished to make his own. A similar mix of emotions and ambitions would motivate many readers and writers throughout history to choose Dante as their “guide” with a passion equal to the one that had drawn him to Virgil.

In embarking on the early chapters of the *Commedia*'s reception, we should remember the poet's opening words in the *Vita nuova*: “In my Book of Memory, in the early part where there is little to be read, there comes a chapter with the rubric: *Here begins the new life*” (*In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria dinanzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la quale dice: Incipit vita nova*).⁴⁷ It is no stretch to say that much of the *Commedia* that followed decades later would be a variation on these interlacing motifs of memory, spiritual rebirth, and the literary construction of the writer's life.⁴⁸ Dante goes on to write in the *Vita nuova*, “It is my intention to copy into this little book the words I find written under that chapter—if not all of them, at least the essence of their meaning” (*Sotto la quale rubrica io trovo scritte le parole le quali è mio intendimento d'assemblare in questo libello; e se non tutte, almeno la loro sentenza*).⁴⁹ And so it must be with a life, a *vita*, of Dante's *Commedia*. The extensive quantity of the reception history makes writing all of the words written in response to Dante's work impossible; the best one can hope for, in the spirit of the *Vita nuova*, are representative chapters that capture the essence of Dante's meaning.

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