in the confusion between the two types of Love is not only the fact that the Dante addressed by Bonagiunta differs from the Dante of the Vita Nuova, but also that the poets Dante encounters in Purgatorio, starting from Bonagiunta, and including Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel, are there being punished because of their misguided poetics. As a result, one cannot construe any relation between Dante’s poetics and the embryo canto in the next canto 25, at least not on these bases.

My assessment of the second aspect of this work between Dante’s Commedia and Joyce’s Finnegans Wake will be briefer because I am not a Joyce scholar. I shall limit myself to some observations that I feel I can make and this concerns the intertextuality between the two via the link poetic-embryo in the Commedia and a similar process in Joyce: “One of the ways to analyze Joyce’s fiction as initiatory literature is to trace his reading and writing of Dante,” writes Fraser (96). She goes on to say: “What I will investigate in the Joyce panel of the diptych is the specific impact Dante’s concerns with intertextual initiation may have on Joyce’s literary production. Both Dante and Joyce tell the story of their own writing process” (96). Granted that on her way, the author will undoubtedly shed important light on key issues in both Dante and Joyce, for which she should be complimented, it is to be excluded that what we will learn is about “their own writing process.” At least not Dante’s, as I have indicated. Maybe Joyce’s, but this is also doubtful, especially when we consider that her reading of Dante does not support her claim.

This brings me to one more observation, before I conclude. Though I am a keen promoter of comparative studies, I am also aware of one important flaw in this type of exercise that assumes to find in the work of one author a similar process in the work of another. As in this case, the project fails because the theory is flawed from the start, even though there may be themes or imagery that the works of these two authors may have in common. To be sure Dante and Joyce may be compared in terms of poetics but in this case one would have to claim that Joyce is moved by a similar Love, which he probably was.

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An aged nun has died, apparently of a painful tumour. The sisters preparing her body for burial discover, to their confusion and horror, that the fatal malignancy is nothing but a self-applied bladder of pig’s entrails: “Freed from the body, it sat in the Sister’s hand, a sack of distended growth, oozing black liquid out of one side like rotting offal ... The sack slipped through her fingers and splatted onto the stones beneath, bursting apart on impact and sending a shower of liquid and gore across the floor. Inside the mess she could make out shapes now: black coils and gobbets of blood, intestines, organs-offal indeed” (xiv-xv). The nun’s naked body reveals a further mystery: the tattoo of a serpent coiling the length of her torso, with its tongue licking at the mouth of her sex. So goes the lurid prologue to this
historical romance, set in late fifteenth-century Florence. Readers with the stomach to continue find that it reverts to a more conventional narrative register: the first-person confession of this eccentric nun, as revealed in a manuscript discovered after her death.

The novel is a coming-of-age story of a young girl in Renaissance Florence. In 1492, at the death of Lorenzo de' Medici, Alessandra Cecchi is fourteen years old. It is a critical moment in the city's tumultuous history, marked by the rising influence of the Dominican monk Savonarola, the invasion of King Charles VIII on his way to Naples, and the resulting plague of syphilis (the mal francese). As the daughter of a wealthy cloth merchant, Alessandra must preserve her chastity and social station by making a rapid choice between marriage and the convent. Her decision to marry a wealthy scholar thirty years her senior opens the way to an unconventional life in which she tries, despite all the constraints on women in her society, to become a painter and to join in the movement of artistic renewal now remembered as the Renaissance.

In its focus on the visual arts as a mode of imaginative entry into the historical past, the novel develops a genre recently popularized by such writers as Susan Vreeland and Tracy Chevalier. Like many of these novelists, Dunant examines the historically marginalised relationship of women to the production of art. The heroines of such fictions often serve as model and muse to a male artist (in this case, the unnamed northern painter hired to decorate the family chapel). Most provocatively (if implausibly), Dunant imagines a woman who literally becomes his canvas.

Dunant apparently means to illustrate the degree to which women can be objectified in art and invent a flamboyant image for the creative reversal of this process. In fact the tattoo that Alessandra wears until her death implies a rewriting of the story of the Fall. Unlike the canonical image of the serpent in the Garden of Eden (pictured, in Masolino’s famous rendering in the Brancaccio chapel, with the face of a woman), Alessandra’s serpent is indelibly male.

As the fictional biography of an Italian female artist, this novel most explicitly recalls The Passion of Artemisia. Vreeland’s recent novelization of the life of the seventeenth-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi (itself adapted from Anna Banti’s 1947 novel). In many ways, Artemisia’s story was more complicated to tell: she did appear, however briefly, in the historical record and many of her most important paintings do survive—hence her biographers’ practical need to balance (in Manzoni’s terms) storia and invenzione. Dunant, whose heroine is entirely fictional, faces no such constraints. She does forfeit the marketing “hook” of a compelling visual association (like Artemisia’s Judith), but compensates by borrowing the title of Botticelli’s most famous work. This is initially puzzling because the painting hardly figures in the story (except as an example of the “pagan” works most threatened by Savonarola’s regime). Eventually we conclude that the title refers more generally to Alessandra’s gradual discovery of her sexuality and the related pleasures of erotic investment in her art.

This fast-paced and readable book culminates in several entertaining if vastly improbable revelations. As a fantasy of female empowerment whose heroine suc-
cessfully manoeuvres her way through a patriarchal culture, it addresses the concerns of contemporary readers. Though ultimately not a great painter, Alessandra Cecchi is an enterprising young woman who creatively negotiates a life between the available institutions of marriage and the convent. A popular audience is unlikely to object to the anachronistic focus on self-expression and sexual fulfilment. It is easy to imagine this novel accompanying (especially female) travellers to Florence, as George Eliot’s Romola once did—but these two portraits of Savonarola’s Florence could not be more different or more reflective of the cultures that produced them.

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In this book, Philip Sohn’s enterprise is to take a philological approach not to the problem of style, per se, but to the contingencies of writing about style among the main literary humanists writing on art during the Baroque period in Europe. What Sohm points out is that, in writing about style, writers inevitably disclose, through their choice of language (lexicon and metaphor) their own stylistic biases, even, one supposes, while quite overtly contradicting themselves in the substance of their actual discourse. Thus, what is revealed about the period definition of style is chiefly what can be derived from textual explication, by looking at the most important writers on the subject; Vasari (who saw style in Darwinian terms of evolution and perfection), Poussin, Boschini and Baldinucci. As Sohm so succinctly puts it, “All definitions have an agenda, even those staged with philological clarity and convention” (168). So it is with “style,” and all subsequent attempts to define, refine, and confine the vast categories of meaning the term itself embraces.

In the case of visual art, it would seem that the problem of defining artistic style has to do, on the one hand, with the insufficiency of language to describe precisely the visual and, on the other, with the tendency of language to define precisely that quality of ineffability in such a way as to make the definition almost always unequal to the experience of seeing. Perhaps Ernst Gombrich put it best in his essay on style when he pointed out that the frustration of developing a system of stylistic “morphology” is considerably hampered by the knowledge that “a style, like a language, can be learned to perfection by those who could never point to its rules” (*The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998, p. 163). On the other hand, as Sohm so succinctly puts it, style also “tells us what the artist cannot disclose” (15).

The explosion of style in the seventeenth century quite naturally demanded a new series of definitions, describing the way new art either fulfilled traditional cat-