Dante’s Broken Faith: The Sin of the Second Circle*

Dante, se tu nell’amorosa spera
com’io credo, dimori . . .

Boccaccio, Rime 102

Preliminaries

We now distinguish between Dante, the poet of the Divine Comedy, and Dante, the ‘pilgrim’ in the Divine Comedy. Our critical terms are alliterative, mnemonic, and they reflect an inveterate and justified habit of reading that makes us doctrinally wary of seeing a poet in his poem as anything more than a persona, or mask. Yet the Commedia resists this reading. More than any other long poem in the European epic tradition it seems to proclaim that the poet of the poem is the poet in the poem. We begin our reading of the poem with the first words of the Inferno:

Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura . . .

This is the poem which Dante presented to Can Grande della Scala; it began with an Incipit and the name of its author. “Here begins the Commedia of Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by birth but not in character.” And in this same letter he insists on the reality of the experience his poem commemorates. In the poem itself and at the summit of the Mount of Purgatory, Beatrice names the poet who had been recognized only as a Florentine up to that point. Here, Dante records her “Dante”—“out of necessity”—that is, as a part of his history of the experience of a week in the middle of his life (Purg. 30.55).

And the way announced in the opening of the Inferno is clearly no longer the way of our life, for at this point of the Commedia it has narrowed to become a path that only Dante can take. At this
moment on top of the Mount of Purgatory Dante has left both Virgil and Statius behind. As Singleton puts it in his commentary to this passage: “Dante’s confession to Beatrice, mainly made indirectly through her charges in this canto and the next, is a personal confession.” Then, there is the remarkable presence of Dante’s early lyric poetry in the *Commedia*. Beginning with Francesca’s adaptation of his “amore e ’l cor gentil sono una cosa” (*Vita Nuova* 20) for her short lyric history of her own love for Paolo (“Amor ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende,” *Inf*. 5.100–107), the “pilgrim” of the *Commedia* confronts the poetry of the poet of the *Commedia*, as the poet integrates his own early life into his poem. The *Vita Nuova* is new in the *Commedia*.

A reading of the *Commedia* from its first line to Dante’s encounter with Cunizza and Folco of Marseilles (*Paradiso* 9) discloses a mode of writing that can only be called confessional, since it is in fact a version of the confession that Beatrice demands of Dante and that Dante gives at the end of the *Purgatorio*—tua confession (31.6). The confession Beatrice hears then is the confession Dante has already uttered in a faint and nearly inaudible voice in his description of the second circle of Hell. He has prepared for it by his choice of the words *selva oscura* at the beginning of the *Inferno*. From this muted allusion to the relation between Aeneas and Dido, which is unintelligible at the beginning of the poem, his reader can follow his confession of his own infidelity to Beatrice, down into the second circle of the *Inferno*, up the Mount of Purgatory to the terrace of the amorous (cantos 25 and 26) to his meeting with Beatrice at the end of the *Purgatorio*; and from there ascend to the sphere of Venus and the valediction to this personal theme in the parting words of Folco of Marseilles in *Paradiso* 9, where the sin of the second circle is remembered, even as it is forgotten in a parting smile (*Par*. 9.103–105). Let us hear this confession, which is both that of the pilgrim in the *Commedia* and the maker of the *Commedia*.

The Second Circle

We descend from these general considerations into the *Inferno* itself and into the second circle. The scene is so familiar that it needs to be recalled. In the second circle we have left the quiet and the light of Limbo, and here we discover the monstrous Minos. He judges the
damned souls, and his tail, as it coils around his own body, indicates to which circle of the narrowing funnel of Hell the damned soul must descend (5.4–12). The spirits condemned to the second circle are driven by a hellish storm that allows them no rest ("la buffera infernal che mai non resta," 31) and that is the expression of their inner passions. They are driven by a "ruin," which remains unexplained, but which intensifies their tumult (34–36). Dante recognizes these lost spirits as the carnal sinners, and their movements are described by two bird similes, one of which will have a long life in the poem. They are compared first to starlings, caught in the winds of winter, then to cranes driven south in a long line across the skies, trailing their grief in their flight (40–42).

It is Virgil who picks out for Dante a group of seven sinners (58–78), but significantly it is Dante whose attraction is captured by a pair of spirits "that go together and seem so light on the wind" (73–75). They respond to Dante’s call "as doves summoned by desire" (83), and one of them, Francesca, relates her story to Dante, first in a poem of eight lines (100–107, reproduced in the Annex to this essay), and then at greater length (121–138). And in response Dante falls, "as a dead body falls" ("come corpo morto cade," 142). This is the scene of the second circle and canto 5 of the Inferno in outline.

What an outline does not reveal is Dante’s significant patterning of details and the submerged contexts of Francesca’s short lyric “Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende” (100–107). It is remarkable that Dante understands unaided that he has come to a place where the carnal sinners are punished. His word is intesi—not so much "I learned" as "I understood" (37). He has come to this conclusion himself, with no help from his master, Virgil. This new independence seems to cohere with other details that relate Dante intimately with the peccator carnali (38). He recognizes Francesca with the same spontaneity. This spirit tells him no more than that she comes “from that shore where the Po descends to find peace with its followers” (98–99). Then she delivers her short lyric. With no more to go on than this, Dante can call her “Francesca” (116). These simple narrative gestures, the words intesi and Francesca, identify the sin and one of the sinners of the second circle of Hell, and they seem to identify the poet with the sin of the second circle.

The sin punished here is that of lust, lussuria. The sinners driven
about this circle are those "who make their reason subject to their desire" (38–39). In Andrea Orcagna’s Trionfo della Morte they march under the banner LUSSURIA. Yet in Dante’s Inferno they seem to conform to a sin more specific than that of lust. Both Virgil and Dante pick out two groups from among the “more than a thousand” spirits that rage by (67–68). Virgil’s choice of seven sinners and Dante’s choice of two are individual, yet both are informed by the same principle of choice, that of Dante the poet of the Commedia. This choice appears to be that of the poet within the Commedia, but it is finally the significant choice of the poet of the Commedia. The individual choices of Virgil and Dante and their differing foci of attention and interest remind us that the experience of the Inferno is not that of a single perspective; it is bifocal. Here, in canto 5, it is Virgil who picks out the “ancient” figures, who could have been lost from sight; and it is Dante who, by his presence in Hell, draws attention to his contemporaries, and, ultimately, to himself.

Virgil’s list of carnal sinners is a distinctive one. He describes seven figures, four women first, Semiramis, Dido, Cleopatra, and Helen, and then three men, Achilles, Paris, and Tristan. One of the remarkable things about this Virgilian catalogue of the lussuriosi is that it departs so widely from the catalogue of “those whom unbending love consumed with its cruel wasting” which Virgil gives in Aeneid 6.442–451. The two Virgilian catalogues share only one figure in common, Dido:

hic, quos durus amor crudeli tabe peredit,
secreti celant calles et myrtea circum
silva tegit; curae non ipsa in morte relinquunt.
his Phaedram Procrimque locis maestamque Eriphylem,
cruelis nati monstrantem vulnera, cernit,
Euadnenque et Pasiphaën; his Laodamia
it comes et iuvenis quondam, nunc femina, Caeneus
rursus et in veterem fato revoluta figuram.
inter quas Phoenissa recens a volnere Dido
errabat Silva in magna. . . .

If Jacques Perret is right about this seemingly random list of women, there is a principle by which they are all brought into a meaningful association. Innocent or guilty, the seven women who are named in the Aeneid before Dido are all “as it were, parts of Dido’s destiny.” The first spirit Virgil points to in the second circle
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of Dante's *Inferno* is Semiramis. Virgil's description of this legendary queen seems to come out of the pages of Orosius, where we read: "[Nino] mortuo Samiramis uxor successit. . . . haec, libidine ardens, sanguinem sitiens, inter incessabilia et supra et homicidia, cum omnes quos regi accessitos, meretricie habitos concubitu oblectasset, occideret." Semiramis shares something in common with Dido and the others in Virgil's list of seven: with the possible exception of Achilles, her lust was adulterous. As Dido "broke faith with the ashes of Sycaeus" ("ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo," 62, from *Aeneid* 4.552, "non servata fides cineri promissa Sycaeo"), so Semiramis broke faith with the ashes of Ninus. All of the sinners Virgil describes or names did more than simply submit their reason to their passions; the loves of Cleopatra, Helen, Paris, and Tristan were all—and notoriously—adulterous. Only Achilles seems to stand a little apart from this group (5.65–66). He "fought to the end with love." It is perhaps his end, transfixed by the Trojan Deiphobus in an ambush, that explains his presence in this group. But Achilles' end recalls his beginning and his seduction of Deidamia on Scyros—whom he abandoned on Scyros, pregnant with his child, at the urging of Ulysses—a crime that is recalled as one of Ulysses' fraudulent sins in *Inferno* 26.62. If Dante had this sin of the young Achilles in mind, he had the name for it in Statius' *Achilleid*; it is the commune nefas of the innocent and abandoned Deidamia and the cunning and lustful Achilles. But Achilles has still another function in canto 5 of the *Inferno*; in the manner of his dying and in the passion that led him to his death, he prepares for the encounter with Paolo and Francesca.

Dante's two carnal sinners were a contemporary legend for their adulterous love, although in her narrative Francesca makes no mention of her husband, Gianciotto. But her seemingly innocent reading of the Old French romance of *Lancelot du Lac* brings still another adulterous relation into Dante's nearly subliminal pattern, that of Lancelot and Guinevere. Dante's contribution to this pattern is not only the contribution of Dante the poet of the *Commedia*; within his poem he falls "as a dead body falls" (5.142), and as he does he seems to include himself, much as he had included himself in the company of the poets of Limbo, in the restless company of the carnal sinners. In the opening of the next canto he speaks of his "pity for the two kinsfolk" ("pietà d'ai due cognati," *Inf.* 6.2). In his pity and in his
own broken faith he seems related to the two *cognati*.

**Francesca’s Poem**

Most of the sinners of the second circle can be described as the "knights and ladies of ancient times" (71), but Paolo and Francesca are Dante’s contemporaries and they seem to belong to a world quite different from that of the others contained in the second circle. For them, as for Dante, there is a strange lull in the infernal storm, which is said at first to give the carnal sinners no rest ("che mai non resta," 5.31). Incredibly, this storm seems to fall silent for the encounter between Dante and Francesca ("mentre che ’l vento, come fa, ci tace," 5.96). Dante, Paolo, and Francesca occupy a lull and, it would seem, a privileged position in Hell. Far from blaspheming God (5.36), Francesca speaks of Him as the king of the universe, and she addresses Dante with a courtesy never found again in the *Inferno*. If his meeting with Paolo and Francesca seems to take place in another world it is because it comes from another world—a world that entered the *Commedia* first with Beatrice’s courteous address to Virgil in *Inferno* 2.58: "O anima cortese mantovana." This is the world of poetry, courtly devotion, and the *Vita Nuova*.10

The hellish winds of Hell do not drive Francesca to Dante. She and Paolo leave Dido’s flock, as doves called by desire (5.82–84):

\[
\text{Quali colombe dal disio chiamate} \\
\text{con l’ali alzate e ferme al dolce nido} \\
\text{vegnon per l’aere, dal voler portate.}
\]

Perhaps the salient detail of this encounter is the elective affinity of Dante for Francesca and of Francesca for Dante (as is evident in her address to him, 88, "O animal grazioso e benigno"). She first tells Dante of the place of her birth and of the love that brought her to her death. Her poem of eight lines is in the *terza rima* of the entire *Commedia*, but her poetry takes us back to Dante’s early lyric poetry and the poetry of the Duecento. Francesca’s poem, "Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende"—"Love, which is quickly kindled in the noble heart"—has its own integrity in that it can be excerpted from its context in canto 5 of the *Inferno* as I have done (in the Annex to this essay). In no other poem of the *stilnovisti* is the word *Amor* repeated with the deliberate insistence of Francesca’s poem.

But the last two lines of her lyric declare it to be a part of Hell
and not of the love poetry of Dante’s own age. For her language assimilates love to death:¹¹

Amor condusse noi ad una morte.
Caina attende chi a vita ci spense. (106–107)

In her association of love and the noble heart, *amor* and *il cor gentil*, Francesca has begun a movement in the *Commedia* in which we can follow the gradual assimilation of Dante’s earlier lyric poetry into the poem promised at the end of the *Vita Nuova*.¹² In these lines we discover Dante in Dante, and we see more clearly why Dante is so attracted to Paolo and Francesca. The poem from Dante’s *Vita Nuova* which connects with this encounter in the *Commedia* is the sonnet “Amore e ’l cor gentil sono una cosa” in chapter 20. The image of the noble heart as kindling at love’s flame is not present in the earlier lyric, but the reciprocal attraction of Paolo and Francesca finds its equivalent statement in this same sonnet from the *Vita Nuova*:

Bieltate appare in saggia donna pui,
che piace a li occhi si, che dentro al core
nasce un disio de la cosa piacente;
e tanto dura talora in costui,¹³
che fa svegliar lo spirito d’Amore.
E simil face in donna omo valente. (9–14)

The movement from potency to act is present in both Francesca’s inconclusive poem and in Dante’s earlier metaphysical statement of love’s passionate logic. And in Francesca’s striking and courtly “Amor, ch’ a nullo amato amar perdona” there is an echo of this doctrine and of Dante’s courtly manner of expressing the relation between love and the noble heart:

Falli natura quand’è amorosa,
Amor per sire e ’l cor per sua magione. (5–6)

For Francesca, Love is her seigneur, but ultimately not her Lord. Dante’s “Amore e ’l cor gentil” is one of the submerged contexts of canto 5 of the *Inferno*. But, since this sonnet itself responds to still another text, there is still another poem that needs to be drawn to the surface before the depths of this canto can be appreciated. Beneath Francesca’s language to Dante is the language of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* and beneath the language of the *Vita Nuova* is the lyric of a poet Dante will encounter on the terrace of the lustful on the Mount of
This is Guido Guinizzelli, whose poetic manifesto "Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore" (reproduced in the Annex to this essay) informs both Francesca’s poem and some of the details of its context in the Inferno. Dante’s reflections on love in chapter 20 of the Vita Nuova are in direct response to Guinizzelli. Dante opens his poem with an affirmation of the truth of his predecessor’s poetry—"as the philosopher posits in his poem" ("si come il saggio in suo dittare pone," 2). The element of wisdom is completely absent from Francesca’s poem. In Guinizzelli we find a conception of love that radiates through both the Vita Nuova and Francesca’s poem in the Commedia. This is his concrete image of the abstract relation between potency and act: "the fire of love is kindled in the noble heart / as potency in a precious stone" ("foco d’amore in gentil cor s’apprende / come vertute in petra preziosa," 11–12). And here, in Guinizzelli’s poem, we discover too the origin of the simile by which Paolo and Francesca are introduced into the Commedia—"as doves called by desire":

Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore
come l’ausello in selva a la verdura. (1–2)

This conception of a natural place of rest enters the world of the Commedia, as we have seen in the simile which compares the manner in which the two storm-tossed spirits respond to Dante’s call "as doves called by desire . . . come to their sweet nest" (5.82–83). The nest, with its promise of home and rest, is the expression of the conception compressed in Guinizzelli’s choice of the verb rempaira—"repair", or in the original sense of the word repatriare—to return home, to one’s own country. Such a promise is illusory in Hell. It is only a part of the lull Dante has created in the second circle of his Inferno, a lull in which Francesca can speak of the Po as descending to have peace with the streams that follow his course (5.98–99). It is this lull that brings Dante, the poet of the Commedia into his poem. Yet in describing this Dante with accuracy it is difficult to choose between Dante the "poet" and Dante the "pilgrim." In truth, this Dante, who enters the Commedia in canto 5 of the Inferno is neither; rather he is a confessional figure, caught between his past and present, and still attracted by his past and the amatory world of Francesca’s poetry. Francesca’s poetry takes us back—"of necessity"—to the poetry and
experience of the author of the *Vita Nuova* and, indeed, beyond that
to the poetry of Guinizelli. But the two poems of its submerged
context, Dante's and Guinizelli's, make for an essential contrast.
Both insist on wisdom and Guinizelli's poem points to the heavens
in a way Francesca's does not. We come to realize that the lull in
the "eternal storm" of the second circle was just that—a lull. But
we come to realize too that the poet of the *Commedia* has created
this lull for the poet in the *Commedia* and that by this gesture he is
creating a confessional figure that speaks by signs and gestures, as
Dante the Pilgrim will when he has reached Beatrice and his day of
judgement in *Purgatorio* 31.14–15. The signs and gestures are those
of the poet of the *Commedia* as well.

Dante's call to Paolo and Francesca reminds us of still another call,
and it returns us to the first of the bird similes of the *Commedia*.
Dante has left it for his reader to turn back to the language describing
the souls of the damned as they take wing over the dark waters of
Acheron (3.116–117):

> gittansi di quel lito ad una ad una,
> per cenni come augel per suo richiamo.

It also prepares for the moment at the base of the Mount Purgatory
when the stern figure of Cato scatters the spirits who had gathered
to listen to Casella sing Dante's "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona"
(*Purg.* 2.112). They scatter like doves—"come ... li colombi"
(2.124–133). These doves reassert the connection between amorous
instinct and poetry that we find in the second circle. In Purgatory,
these doves are scattered by a new care, and this care can be ex-
pressed by still another bird simile. It is the language Virgil chooses
when he speaks to Dante of the lure (*richiamo*) by which God attracts
mankind to him: "The heavens call to you and circle around you,
displaying to you their eternal splendors, and your eyes gaze only
on the earth: wherefore He smites you who sees all" (*Purg.* 14.148–
151). The last lines of Francesca's poem reveal no consciousness
of sin nor any sense of how close the words *Amor* and *morte* are
in Italian (106–107). In this canto Francesca nowhere confesses her
sin; she only speaks of fratricide and the punishment that awaits her
lover's murderer. But throughout this canto Dante seems to have
begun to utter the faint words of a personal confession. His sin is
not lust simple; it is adultery.
Other Women

When Francesca has told Dante the very partial story of her love and death, he falls, "as a dead body falls" ("e caddi, come corpo morto cade," 5.142). This fall is part of a cadence that is initiated with Dante’s loss of consciousness at the threshold to Hell (3.136), and continues as he stands before Satan in a state of suspended animation (Inf. 34.22–25); we are reminded of it in the Purgatorio by the earthquake that announces Statius’ release from the terrace of Avaritia and Dante’s sense that the Mount of Purgatory itself was falling (Purg. 31.89), and the cadence closes as Dante collapses before Beatrice: "caddi vinto" (Purg. 31.89). His collapse, first at the inner threshold of the second circle of Hell, and then on the Mount of Purgatory, defines the progress of the major statement of the most important of the confessional themes of the Commedia—that of Dante’s broken faith.

So far, we have discovered and related a number of the pieces that seem to constitute, in Goethe’s phrase, "the fragments of a great confession." There is that strange lull in the hellish storm of the second circle, which seems to exempt Dante and Francesca from the laws of Hell. Then there is Virgil’s distinctive list of seven carnal sinners. This list is distinctive for its tacit definition of the sin of the second circle as love adulterous rather than lust simple. Although she figures second in this list, Dido defines its character; she broke faith with the ashes of her dead husband (5.62). And we discover her in the second circle and not in the wood of the suicides. It is meaningful too that in Bernard Silvestris’ commentary to Book 4 of the Aeneid the relation between Dido and Aeneas can be described as follows: "Aeneas goes hunting. Driven by storms into a cave, he dallies with Dido and there commits adultery." Then, there is Dante’s encounter with Francesca that brings two more adulterous relations into a circle that focuses on a relation that seems to have concerned Dante more than the sin of lust. Paolo and Francesca come to him "from the flock of Dido" (5.84), and Francesca’s poem introduces the very personal world of the Vita Nuova into the Commedia. And, finally, there is Dante’s fall, a gesture that recurs as he encounters Beatrice on top of the Mount of Purgatory.

Here, in canto 31 of the Purgatorio, a recognition of consciousness of a waywardness (riconoscenza, 88) overwhelms the pilgrim on the
mountain. And it is at this point that Beatrice demands a confession of him as he stands on the other side of the river of Lethe—*tua confession* (6). Significantly, Dante, in his shame and confusion, cannot give voice to his confession. His lips form the acknowledgement that the eyes—and the eyes of his reader—are needed to see. It is only from this vantage and this moment of articulate silence that we realize what has given the carnal sinners of the second circle of the *Inferno* their distinctive physiognomy; and why it is that Paolo and Francesca come to Dante from “the flock where Dido is” (*Inf.* 5.85). All the spirits of this circle have been adulterers. All have, literally, given themselves “to another.” Now it appears that Dante too has broken faith and given himself to another or to others. Were he to be damned for this sin, he too would belong to “the flock where Dido is.” His sin of adultery explains why it is he should recall Dido’s words of confession to her sister Anna as he confronts an indignant Beatrice. In the *Aeneid*, Dido recognized her old love for Sychaeus in her new passion for Aeneas (4.20–23):

Anna, fatebor enim, miseri post fata Sychaei coniugis et sparsos fraterna caede Penates solus hic inflexit sensus animumque labantem impulit. adgnosco veteris vestigia flammeae.

And, as he returns to her on the Mount of Purgatory, Dante recognizes that warmth of his ancient love for Beatrice—“conosco i segni de l’antica fiamma” (30.48).

That this flame had grown dim in him is painfully clear from Beatrice’s description of the life he has led since her death (*Purg.* 30.121–126):

Alcun tempo il sostenni col mio volto: mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui, meco il menava in dritta parte voltò. Si tosto come in su la soglia fui di mia seconda etade e mutai vita, questi si tolse a me, e diessi altrui.

When Beatrice says that “this one took himself from me and gave himself to others” (30.126), she is not describing the kind of adultery we are most familiar with. She was married at the time of her death, and not long after Dante was to marry Gemma Donati. Dante’s was a Pauline adultery of the heart and the imagination, but for Dante
it was the most serious kind of adultery or "alienation." Beatrice’s accusation that Dante gave himself to others can be interpreted allegorically, and, indeed, when Dante comes to confess that he had become estranged from Beatrice for a period of ten years, he speaks vaguely of the distraction of "present things" ("le presenti cose," Purg. 31.34). But Beatrice, who does not share Dante’s oppressive feeling of guilt, speaks of the "advantages displayed on the brows of others" (31.29). And she says plainly that a young woman or "other novelty" should not have kept him weighted to the earth (31.59).

In the Vita Nuova itself, Dante is not silent about the attractions of other women. Four sections of this book of memory record a struggle between his heart and his reason as he found himself drawn to another woman after Beatrice’s death. There is also the evidence of his Rime Petrose, the revealing dream of the Siren in Purgatorio 19.17–33, and the brutal word uttered by Bonagiunta in Purgatorio 24.37, "Gentucca," to suggest that when Beatrice speaks of Dante’s giving himself altrui, she has more than one person in mind. One of Dante’s biographers speaks kindly of Dante’s "alleged amours." But the important thing to remember is that Dante, and by Dante I mean Dante the poet, was his own accuser, that his sin was adultery, not real but imagined, and that this "adultery" explains the principle that has brought together the sinners punished in the second circle of the Inferno. What is finally important to Dante’s confessional mode of writing is not the truth of his confession (its Wahrheit), but the art of his poetry (his Dichtung). It is an art, to take a phrase from Dante himself, that reveals itself in Hell—and in Purgatory; and it even reveals itself in Heaven. It is an art that Dante seems to describe himself (in Inf. 19.10–12):

O somma sapienza, quanta è l’arte
che mostri in cielo, in terra e nel mal mondo,
e quanto giusto tua virtù comparte!

Epilogue in Heaven

There is one massive obstacle to this interpretation of the nearly inaudible confession of Inferno 5. This is Dante’s explicit statement to Beatrice in the Purgatorio that he has no memory of ever having become estranged from his first love (33.91–93):

Ond’io rispuosi lei: "Non mi ricorda
Furthermore, the astrai nymphs of the Terrestrial Paradise had called Dante “your faithful one” (Purg. 31.134), it would seem with justice. Even the Virgin Mary had called Dante “il tuo fedele” as she addressed Lucia in Inferno 2.98. But Dante’s statement to Beatrice that his conscience is clear comes after he has drunk from the river Lethe and crossed over Eunoe, and Beatrice’s response to Dante seems the appropriate response to a sinner like Dante (Purg. 33.94–99):

“E se tu ricordar non te ne puoi”
sorridendo rispuose, “or ti rammenta
come bevesti di Letè ancoi;
e se dal fummo foco s’argomenta
cotesta oblivion chiaro conchiude
colpa ne la tua voglia altrove attenta.”

It is very much in keeping with the character of this poem that we should see the smoke in Hell and the clear flame at the top of the Mount of Purgatory.

Dante’s confession is not complete with his profession of forgetfulness at the end of the Purgatorio. For Beatrice’s smiling response points to a moment in the Paradiso when the sin of the second circle is recalled even as it is forgotten and forgiven, with a smile. Dante’s confession concludes only with canto 9 of the Paradiso, and exactly where one would expect to find such a confession of weakness—in the sphere of Venus. Here the themes which have been strictly associated with Dante’s confession are reasserted for the last time in the poem. Poetry and its inspiration in the experience of love have been a part of Dante’s confession; Francesca’s “Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende,” is a reference to Dante’s own “Amore e ’l cor gentil sono una cosa,” and Dante, in citing Dante, is bringing himself into the world of the second circle. We discover poetry again on the last of the terraces of the Mount of Purgatory, where the ardor of Guido Guinizelli and Arnault Daniel is refined in penitential fire. Here, as in canto 2 of the Purgatorio, we are reminded of Dante’s own early poetry (Purg. 26.106–108). And the cranes of the second circle have migrated to the terrace of Luxuria (Purg. 26.43–46).

In the Paradiso we discover poetry once again in the sphere of Venus, as Charles Martel pronounces the first lines of Dante’s “Voi
che ‘ntendendo il terzo ciel movete’ (Par. 8.37). In canto 9, the poet, Folco of Marseilles, recalls our supressed theme even as he speaks of the forgetfulness of sin in heaven. And finally Dido returns to the poem for a last appearance in the sphere of Venus. She is recalled, seemingly by accident, as Dante reflects on the error of pagan and poetic conceptions of the goddess Venus (7.1–9). And she is recalled for the last time as Folco confesses the stamp of Venus on his own character (9.97–99):

ché più non arse la figlia di Belo,
noiando e a Sicheo e a Creusa,
di me, infin che si convenne al pelo.

In heaven, Folco’s amorousness is not a matter for remorse, and his smile is meant to remind us of the smile of Beatrice in the Purgatorio (Par. 9.103–105; cf. Purg. 33.95):

Non però qui si pente, ma si ride,
non de la colpa, ch’a mente non torna,
ma del valor ch’ordinò e provide.

The great power that ordained and provided for the theme which we have followed from the second circle of Hell to the last terrace of the Mount of Purgatory and the meeting with Beatrice and from there to the sphere of Venus is Dante’s, and the last word of canto 9 of the Paradiso seals Dante’s long confession of his broken faith. Adultery—avoltero—is a word pronounced only once in the Divine Comedy, and it is pronounced here.

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Annex: Three Poems

1. Francesca’s Poem (Inferno 5.100–107):

Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende,
prese costui de la bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e ’l modo ancor m’offende.
Amor, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona,
me prese del costui piacer si forte,
che, come vedi, ancor non m’abbandona.
Amor condusse noi ad una morte.
Caina attende che a vita ci spense . . .

2. From *Vita Nuova* 20 (no. 34 in Foster and Boyde, *Dante's Lyric Poetry*):

Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa,
   si come il saggio in suo dittare pone,
   e così esser l'un sanza l'altro osa
   com'alma razional sanza ragione.
Falli natura quand'è amorosa,
   Amor per sire e 'l cor per la sua magione,
   dentro la qual dormendo si riposa
   tal volta poca e tal lunga stagione.
Bieltate appare in saggia donna pui,
   che piace a li occhi si, che dentro al core
   nasce un disio de la cosa piacente;
   e tanto dura talora in costui,
   che fa svegliar lo spirito d'Amore.
   E simil face in donna omo valente.


Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore
   come l'ausello in selva a la verdura;
   né fe' amor anti che gentil core,
   né gentil cor anti ch'amor, natura:
   ch'adesso con' fu 'l sole,
   sì tosto lo splendore lucente,
   né fu davanti 'l sole;
   e prende amore in gentilezza loco
   così propriamente
   come calore in clarità di foco.

Foco d'amore in gentil cor s'apprende
   come vertute in petra preziosa
   che de la stella valor no i discende
   anti che 'l sol la faccia gentil cosa;
   poi che n'ha tratto fôre
   per sua forza lo sol ciò che li è vile,
   stella li dà valore:
   così lo cor ch'e fatto da natura
   asletto, pur, gentile,
   donna a guisa di stella lo 'nnamora.
NOTES

* I would like to thank William Arrowsmith for his helping me see the forest of Dante’s dark wood through its trees and Amilcare Iannucci who provided much needed guidance through the thickets of Dante criticism; and also the Classics Department of Vassar College who provided the occasion for my Blegen lectures on Dante.

1 The distinction between poet and pilgrim is equally familiar to the reader of Chaucer, who must distinguish between Geoffrey Chaucer, the poet of the Canterbury Tales and “Geoffrey” of the “I” of the pilgrim and narrator in the Canterbury Tales. George Lyman Kittredge 45–48 approached this distinction in addressing the problem of the poet of and dreamer in the The Book of the Duchess when he stated “the dreamer is as much a part of the fiction of the Book of the Duchess as the Merchant or the Pardoner or the Host is a part of the fiction in the Canterbury Tales.” But one can take a step further and describe the “I” of the Canterbury Tales as itself a persona, as do Robert C. Elliott 4 and many of Chaucer’s critics since Kittredge. In following the confessional theme of Dante’s “broken faith” in the Commedia I am in tacit disagreement with Spitzer and Contini.

2 The presentation copy of the Paradiso begins by declaring the identity of its author, Dante Alighieri. “Libri titulus est: ‘Incipit Comedia Dantis Alagherii, florentini natione, non moribus’” (Epistle 13.10). Yet Dante does have something to say about his character as he insists on the reality of the experience he is recording by asserting that he has forgotten it. And if his reader carps at Dante’s deserving such an experience, let him read the Book of Daniel: “Si vero in dispositionem elevationis tante propter peccatum loquentis oblatarent, legant Danielem” [2. 3–5] (Epistle 13.28). Dante here acknowledges the sinfulness of the poet of the Commedia.

3 Singleton, Purgatorio: Commentary 743.

4 The selva oscura of the beginning of the poem points in many directions, but clearly one of these is to the great and infernal wood in which Aeneas encounters Dido after he had abandoned her in Carthage (“errabat Silva in magna,” Aeneid 6.451). Aeneas’ dim recognition of her (“agnovitque per umbras / obscuram,” 452–453) also struck Dante and it is recalled in Inferno 15.17–19.

5 “Les compagnes de Didon” 251.

6 Adversum paganos 1.4.4.7–8, as quoted in Singleton, Inferno: Commentary, 78.

7 In Dictys’ Ephemeris 4.2, we have the medieval account of Achilles’ end in his fatal attraction for Polyxena which led into the ambush where he was twice transfixed by Deiphobus’ sword.

8 Cf. Statius, Achilleid 1.669 and 536–674 for the version of the seduction and abandonment that was authoritative for Dante. Deidamia is recalled in Purgatorio 9.34–39 (an allusion to the beginning of the story of Achilles on
Scyros), and later in *Purgatorio* 22.114 (where we discover that she is in Limbo).

9 Avalle’s study of “... De Fole Amor” helps put the two “modern” characters of the list of the *peccator carnali* of *Inferno* 5 into their proper perspective. That is, Lancelot and Tristan participate in what he argues is the pattern for “les contes d’adultère”. (Lancelot is added to this list by Francesca in *Inferno* 5.128.) But it is Boccaccio (in his comments on *Inferno* 5) and not the narrative of Dante that conforms to Avalle’s pattern. So far as Dante is involved in the sin of the second circle, I will argue that he himself is the informer (*lauzengier*) against his own adultery.

10 The relation—or affinity—between Beatrice’s language to Virgil in *Inferno* 2 and the language of Francesca in *Inferno* 5 is well characterized by Teodolinda Barolini 7–12. But the contrasts are as significant: “*Inferno* V represents one possible outcome for the love lyric; *Inferno* II points ahead to the other” (12).

11 For the assimilation of the words *amore* and *morte* in their medieval context, cf. Avalle 118.

12 Francesca’s poem does not figure in the list of *autocitazioni* offered by Contini, *Un’idea* 38 n. 1 (who cites, inevitably, *Purgatorio* 2.112, 26.51, and *Paradiso* 8.37—poems that surely fit into a pattern as they are reassembled in the *Commedia*). His study of Dante not as the familiar pilgrim but as a poet within his *Commedia* is crucial to my argument, except that he excludes from consideration the *Paradiso*, as I would not. Barolini 31–84 retracts his steps, with fewer detours and with greater direction, and in conclusion formulates a challenging statement of how Dante’s autobiography is subservient to the teleological plan of his *Commedia* (84). But of his confessional mode, there is not a word said.

13 Francesca’s reference to Paolo as *costui* is an indication of his physical and moral nearness to her, as Poggioli saw 331; but it also echoes the language of the *Vita Nuova*, precisely in verse 12 of this poem.


15 In the translation of Schreiber and Maresca 24.

16 As does Michele Barbi 97 among others of Dante’s apologists, of whom Dante was the first but least sincere.

17 Toynbee 71, like many of Dante’s apologists before Beatrice and like many of his translators, would like to take the *altroi* of *Purgatorio* 31.126 as referring to a single person. Paolini 207–224 cannot imagine the possibility of a Pauline adultery of the heart, and wavers between the personal and allegorical interpretation of this episode. Whatever the interpretation taken, it must consider this “confessional” passage in terms of the architectonic context provided by Singleton in his “The Pattern at the Center.” Beatrice has appeared in judgement, like Christ at his second coming.

18 One would expect to find it here, since the correspondences of the circle of the *lussuriosi* in the *Inferno*, the terrace of *Luxuria* in the *Purgatorio*,...
and the sphere of Venus in the Paradiso are the most convincing vindication of Amilcare Iannucci’s critical principle of letting Dante serve as his own commentator in the Commedia and allowing him to direct our reading through the parallel episodes of the Commedia (especially 316).

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Poggioli, R. “Tragedy or Romance? A Reading of the Paolo and Francesca Episode in Dante’s Inferno.” PMLA 72 (1957): 313–58.

