Dante's Poetics of Love: Some Remarks about the *Commedia* and Its Vernacular Context

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Scholars have long noted the strong sense of continuity among the various works produced by Dante. The *Convivio*, for example, attaches itself to the *Vita Nuova* as the continuation of Dante's transition from Beatrice to the *donna gentile*; and the *Commedia* is generally associated with the vision of Beatrice to which Dante alludes at the end of the *Vita Nuova*. Throughout the *Commedia*, finally, Dante is recognized by many as the famous Florentine poet; the text contains innumerable references to his poetic practices and to his previous works, associating this body of texts as the work of an individual.

The effect of this program of references to Dante's poetic oeuvre and to his system of poetics is, first of all, to set up a picture of Dante's development as poet. In the course of the *Commedia*, Dante comments upon his various poetic works and reviews them from the new perspective of the *Commedia*, written — we are asked to believe — after the conversion experience it records. Secondly, the *Commedia* suggests an organic relationship between the succession of poetic texts, and the personal life and internal development of the man who produced them. The story of the *Commedia* — it must be stressed — is one of both personal and poetic conversion. The moral, intellectual, and spiritual growth of the poet-pilgrim is paralleled by the creation of the poetic language capable of recording and furthering the journey.

Giuseppe Mazzotta offers an excellent analysis of Dante's famous explication of the *dolce stil novo* in *Purgatorio* XXIV.¹ By associating this passage with the account of the generation of the human being in *Purgatorio* XXV, and with the description of the Trinity in *Paradiso* X, Mazzotta shows that, for Dante, poetic production operated analogously to the mystery of Divine Creation and, ultimately, the Incarnation. As Mazzotta states, the artistic

creation, for Dante, is not "a reified and self-contained heterocosm analogous to the real world and yet discontinuous from it . . . without a vital nexus with the Creator . . ." (p. 209). Rather, for Dante, the poetic creation springs directly from the trinitarian operation of the human mind. "Good" poetry is that which most clearly reflects the inner processes of its creation and, by extension, the divine Truth of which the creative mind is itself an analogy.

A similar process of review is applied, on a smaller scale, to the many other poets and scholars that Dante meets in the course of his journey. The state of these souls after death reflects not only the conduct of their personal lives, but also their poetic practices. It has been shown, for example, that the location of Priscian and Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* XV is due to their perversion of grammar and philosophy, their abuse of language.² Bertran de Born, author of virulent political *tensos*, is in the circle of the Makers of Discord; love poets, for the attachment to earthly things manifested in their works, are found among the gluttonous and the lustful. This succession of poets in the *Commedia*, along with the implicit and explicit commentary provided by the context in which Dante encounters them and the conversations he has with them, contributes to the definition of a vernacular lyric canon.

To attempt an exhaustive analysis of Dante's poetics and his critique of vernacular poetry would far exceed the scope of the present study. It will be my purpose here merely to examine select passages from the *Commedia* which serve as exemplary moments in Dante's comprehensive system. I do not pretend to offer final answers; I hope rather, through a suggestive reading of key passages, to raise some important issues that will shed a new light on Dante's understanding of vernacular love poetics.

Both autobiographical and poetic motifs are expressed in the recurring image of Dante as Pyramus; we can therefore begin our study with an examination of this figure.³ The comparison is explicitly stated in two passages of *Purgatorio*: Dante's passage through the wall of fire in canto XXVII and Beatrice's condemnation of Dante in canto XXXIII. In the first of these, Virgil attempts to coax the reticent Dante into the flames with the reminder that Beatrice awaits him on the other side of the wall. This has the desired effect:

Come al nome di Tisbe aperse il ciglio
 Piramo in su la morte, e riguardolla,
 allor che 'l gelso diventò vermiglio;

Così, la mia durezza fatta solla,
 mi volsi al savio duca, udendo il nome
 che nella mente sempre mi rampolla.
 Ond'ei crollò la fronte e disse: "Come!
 volenci star di qua?"; indi sorrise
 come al fanciul si fa ch'è vinto al pome. (*Purg.* XXVI. 37-45)⁴

In the second, Beatrice berates Dante, stating that he would understand the discourse and events of the Terrestrial Paradise if only he had not blinded himself intellectually:

E se stati non fossero acqua d'Elsa
 li pensier vani intorno a la tua mente,
 e'l piacer loro un Piramo a la gelsa

. . . .

Ma perch'io veggio te ne lo 'ntelletto
 fatto di pietra e, impietrato, tinto. . . . (*Purg.* XXXIII. 67-69; 73-74)

We recall that in Ovid's account,⁵ Pyramus, through a misreading of the signs, believed Thisbe to be dead; he fell into despair. His act of suicide resulted in the staining of the mulberries, so that, unbeknownst to himself, he created a monument to the tragic end of their love. Similarly, Dante misinterpreted Beatrice's physical death: failing to realize or appreciate her continuing spiritual life and immanent presence, he too fell into despair and, perhaps, a form of spiritual suicide. According to Beatrice, his poetic work during that period — primarily the *Convivio* and the *rime petrose* — was "Pyramus-like" in that it represented a misguided search for truth, a poetics of despair, of hardness and opacity, unable to transcend the veil of earthly life. Unlike Pyramus, however, Dante can be saved: his Thisbe returns before it is too late and effects his conversion and salvation.

The passage in *Purgatorio* XXXIII is framed by two corresponding passages in *Inferno* XXXIV and *Paradiso* XXXIII respectively. At the end of *Inferno*, Dante describes Satan as a figure with three faces, colored yellowish-white, red, and black. In a very suggestive study of this passage, Freccero has linked this progression of colors with that of the mulberry, whose process of ripening bears the record of Pyramus' suicide: from white to red to black.⁶ As Freccero demonstrates, the mulberry and its color changes were interpreted in the medieval exegetical tradition as the fall of the soul from purity into sin and death, and as the redemption of the soul washed in the spilled blood of Christ. The figure of Satan thus represents the drama of the Fall, in the specific form of a parody or perversion of the Crucifixion and the tri-une Godhead.

In the description of the beatific vision at the end of *Paradiso*, Dante portrays the Trinity as

. . . tre giri
di tre colori e d'una contenenza. . . . (Purg. XXXIII. 116-17)

Although the three colors are not specified, one cannot help thinking of the tri-colored Satan at the opposite pole of the cosmos and of the poem.⁷ Thus the image of Dante as Pyramus, his mind discolored like the blood-stained mulberries, is framed by two opposing interpretations of this figure, *in malo* and *in bono* respectively. At the end of *Purgatorio*, Dante stands at a mid-point: he has escaped falling into the realm of Satan, but has not yet begun his final ascent to God. The pivotal quality of the figure is interesting: Dante avoids the suicide of Pyramus-as-sinner, and instead imitates the death and resurrection of Pyramus-as-Christ. The opposing interpretations of the same figure underscore the distinction between suicide and sacrifice, between a despair that weighs the soul down and an *imitatio Christi* that abandons the world and leads the soul up to God. In poetic terms, we can say that Dante has overcome the negative aspects of his former poetics and is forging a new poetics of Redemption and Conversion.

A second possible example of a corrected "Pyramus" is offered in *Paradiso*, where Dante meets the troubadour Folquet de Marseilles. According to Folquet's *vida*, with which Dante was most likely familiar,⁸ Folquet wrote verses of love in honor of the wife of his principal benefactor, Barral de Marseilles. She, however, died, along with Barral and some of Folquet's other protectors. At this, says the *vida*, "per tristessa de la dompna e dels princes que vos ai ditz, abandonet lo mon. E rendet se a l'orden de Cistel . . ." Folquet, then, did that which Dante, according to Beatrice, should have done. Instead of despairing over the death of his lady, he rose above the world and adopted a spiritual life.

Although the Folquet of *Paradiso* IX does not include this information in the explanation of his life, there is in his account a suggestion of a conversion centered on the experience of love. Folquet uses three classical *exempla* to express the extent of his former passion: Dido, with her love for Aeneas; "quella Rodopea," i.e. Phyllis, with her love for Demophoon; and Alcides, i.e. Hercules, with his love for Iole. Dido, of course, is the standard example of untamed, destructive eros. Both she and Phyllis committed suicide upon losing their beloved. The third choice, however, is curious. Hercules did literally burn to death as a result of his love for Iole, but this was not a suicide; indeed, it was this that led to his

apotheosis and ascent to the heavens.⁹ The series of *exempla* thus progresses from the suicidal pyre of Dido to the deifying flames that, according to Ovid,¹⁰ stripped Hercules of his flesh and released the godlike spirit. This would seem to suggest that, in the course of his life, Folquet learned to transform carnal passion into a more ennobling form of love. He avoided the danger of despair at the death of his lady and, eventually, passed through the purging fires of Purgatory to ascend to his place in Heaven.

It is, however, a crucial point that Folquet ceased to write poetry after his conversion. Thus, although in some sense a model for Dante, he is nonetheless to be surpassed. There was never a question of Dante abandoning poetry; indeed, for him, poetry is an essential aspect of the conversion process. To see how Dante perceived the relationship between love poetry and spiritual death or salvation, and how his poetry offers a record of his poetic and spiritual development, we must return to his own story.

The passage through the wall of fire is a key moment in Dante's conversion, and the text here is extremely rich in resonances. I can do no more than to suggest some of the texts and issues that are brought into play.¹¹ That Dante is accompanied through the flames by Virgil and Statius — as is emphasized in the account of their re-positioning, so that Dante is framed by the two Latin poets — is of course an explicit reminder of the power of the poetic text to hide or to reveal the truth. As described in *Purgatorio* XXI-XXII, Statius, through his inspired mis-reading of Virgil, was able to see the truth hidden by the letter and so underwent first moral and then spiritual conversion. He continued, however, to hide the truth under a veil of paganism in his own poetry. Dante, in turn, through his equally inspired mis-reading of Statius, was able to discern the dynamics of this poetico-spiritual phenomenon. He offers himself as one who creates a poetics which is a self-conscious manifestation of truth and of the conversion process itself.

A second model of poetic conversion is offered in the implicit reference to Guittone d'Arezzo. The rhymes *nome/come/pome* (*Purg.* XXVII. 41-45) echo the opening rhymes of one of Guittone's sonnets:

A te, Montuccio, ed agli altri, il cui nomo
non già volontier molto agio 'n obrio,
a cui intendo che savoro ha 'l mi pomo,
che mena il piccioletto arboscel mio,
non diragio ora già quanto e como,
disioso, di voi agio desio;

ma dico tanto ben, che nel meo domo
con voi sovente gioi prendo e ricrio.

E poi de' pomi miei prender vi piace,
per Dio, da' venenosi or vi guardate,
li quali eo ritrattai come mortali;
ma quelli, che triaca io so verace,
contra essi e contr'ogne veleno usate,
a ciò che 'n vita siate eternali. (sonnet 237)¹²

While it can admittedly be dangerous to associate texts on the basis of shared rhymes,¹³ the context here supports the association. The Guittone text is a post-conversion sonnet in which he warns his readers away from his pre-conversion love poetry. The *pomi* in question are his poems; he instructs his audience to watch out for the "poisoned" ones, which are deadly, and to select instead the (newer) ones which point the way to eternal life.

As is well-known, Guittone's conversion marked a turning-point in his poetic career; for him, as for Folquet, it meant a rejection of love poetry, which he now regarded as amoral and fraudulent.¹⁴ For Dante, conversion similarly meant a scrutiny of his previous works. However, the result was not a uniform rejection. In Dante's text, the *pome* which tempts him into the flames, thereby ensuring his salvation, is none other than Beatrice herself. In other words, Dante — far from abandoning love poetry — is saved by the Christ-like lady celebrated in the *Vita Nuova*. By returning with new insights to the poetics of his youth, Dante creates a redeemed love poetry, a complete sublimation of the erotic in the mystical. The implied point in the association of texts — that Guittone's poetry lacked the substance to afford him a similar possibility — is no doubt part of the general criticism, made explicit in cantos XXIV and XXVI, of Guittone's poetics.¹⁵

A further possible resonance in *Purgatorio* XXVII is with the *canzone* "Avvegna ched el m'aggia più per tempo,"¹⁶ written by Cino da Pistoia for Dante as consolation for the death of Beatrice.¹⁷ Cino counsels Dante to remember Beatrice's presence in Heaven, telling him to throw off the despair that blinds him and weighs him down, to focus on his internal vision of her holy beauty, and to prepare for the day when he will join her in Paradise. In effect, Cino advises Dante to keep faith with his own poetic celebration of Beatrice, to preserve and expand on his early poeticization of his beloved. He reminds Dante that Beatrice has always "belonged" in Heaven, with lines clearly referential to Dante's own statements in "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore."¹⁸ Far from despairing over Beatrice's presence in Heaven, Dante should strive to follow her there, since, by his own implication, she is his

"Christ," his inspiration and salvation. The *Commedia*, in this respect, can be seen as Dante's response to this advice.

As a consolatory poem, "Avvegna ched el m'aggia" can be compared to the passage in *Purgatorio* II, in which "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona" is offered as consolation. Dante here reminds Casella of the soothing power of his "amoroso canto," requesting:

di ciò ti piaccia consolare alquanto
l'anima mia, che, con la sua persona
venendo qui, è affannata tanto! (*Purg.* II. 109-11)

In these words there is perhaps an echo of Cino's statement:

O omo saggio, perché si distretto
vi tien così l'affannoso pensiero?
Per suo onor vi chero
ch'a l'egra mente prendiate conforto. . . . (vv. 35-38)

The differences, of course, are striking: for Casella's song is one devoted to the *donna gentile*, who, by Dante's own explicit statement, replaced Beatrice as the subject of his poetry. "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona" is thus viewed, from the new perspective of the *Commedia*, as a setback rather than an advance in Dante's poetic and spiritual development.¹⁹ Cino's song, on the other hand, is completely in keeping with the *Commedia*. It resembles, in fact, Cato's rebuke to the souls enthralled by Casella's song:

Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio
ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto. (*Purg.* II. 122-23)

These words, of course, echo those of St. Paul in Colossians 3: 9-10, as has been noted by others. At the same time, however, the text reverberates with Cino's "rebuke" to Dante:

Spogliatevi di questa vesta grama,
da che voi sete per ragion richesto;
ché l'omo per dolor more e dispera.
Com voi' vedresti poi la bella cera
se v'accogliesse morte in disperanza? (vv. 46-50)

Purgatorio II re-enacts Dante's sense of defeat and his turning away from Beatrice in the *Convivio*, an error from which he has been recalled. *Purgatorio* XXVII dramatizes the re-discovery of Beatrice in the context of moral and spiritual conversion. This conversion, in turn, is presented as the logical consequence of the

poetic experiments begun in the *Vita Nuova* and here carried to their full potential.

The mistaken despair over the supposed death of the beloved, and the revivifying powers of the beloved's name, are not the only motifs borrowed from the Pyramus story in *Purgatorio* XXVII. Clearly, the wall of fire separating Dante and Beatrice is a version of the wall separating Pyramus and Thisbe. A paradox of this latter wall was that, while physically separating the lovers by denying bodily passage or visual contact, it yet afforded them their means of communication by virtue of its *fissus*. Part of Dante's process of overcoming the Pyramus model is his success in penetrating the series of walls that stand between him and Beatrice, and of which the wall of fire is the last. This passage carries echoes of two other wall-crossings earlier in the *Commedia*: the entrance to Purgatory proper in *Purgatorio* IX, and the entrance to the City of Dis in *Inferno* IX.

It is in *Inferno* that Dante experiences the greatest difficulty in finding a way through the wall. As in *Purgatorio* XXVII, there is a threat of hardness or petrification. In *Inferno* IX, it is the Medusa who will make the pilgrim "di smalto" (v. 52); in *Purgatorio* XXVII, it is his own behavior, described as "fermo" (v. 33), "fermo e duro" (v. 34), "la mia durezza" (v. 40). This "hardness" can figure despair or stubborn refusal, both of which indicate a loss of faith and a consequent inability to advance into a state of grace; as has been noted, petrification is associated in *Purgatorio* XXXIII with the intellectual blindness brought on by Dante's despair at Beatrice's death and his subsequent abandonment of a poetics of Revelation for one of human Philosophy and desire. In both "wall" passages Dante fears, and must be reassured by Virgil, who tells him to remain "sicuro."²⁰ And in both passages some form of divine intervention is required to continue the journey: in *Inferno* IX in the form of the angel, and in *Purgatorio* XXVII through the invoked presence of Beatrice herself.

Freccero has analyzed the relationship between the Medusa of *Inferno* IX and Dante's own *donna pietra*, who also threatened him with petrification and death.²¹ As Freccero points out, this connection is underscored by the repetition of the rhymes *alto/assalto/smalto* of "Io son venuto al punto de la rota" (vv. 55, 58, 59) in *Inferno* IX, vv. 50, 52, 54. Thus the threat to turn Dante to stone is portrayed as a confrontation with his own poetic creation, the *petrose*, whose poetics of negativity, sexuality, and death must be transcended if he is to return again to Beatrice. Again, Dante's progression is both personal and poetic. He must undergo the internal spiritual conversion necessary to advance; concomitant with

this is the forging of a new poetic language whereby the conversion is made manifest and the journey is continued in a new register.²²

The wall in *Purgatorio* IX is the one most explicitly resembling that of Pyramus and Thisbe, with its gate which, at first sight, appeared to Dante as "un fesso che muro diparte" (*Purg.* IX. 75). Moreover, as Freccero has signalled, the colors of the three steps repeat those of Satan's three faces and of the stages of the mulberry.²³ Here, however, the darkness is that of contrition; the blood of Christ, which will not stain the soul but will cleanse it. Indeed the final "step" — the *soglia* on which the gatekeeper sits — is "pietra di diamante" (v. 105). This is not the lifeless stone into which Dante would have been turned by the Medusa, but rather the stone, firm in faith, on which the Church is founded. It is not opaque and dark but rather transparent and reflective, able to receive and show forth the light of God.

This passage, in comparison with *Inferno* IX, shows again a process of self-conscious revision. By enacting a corrected version of Pyramus — contrition rather than despair, self-transcendence rather than suicide — Dante, in effect, reverses the fatal progression of Pyramus' story and finds his way back to the wall, whose fissure now opens to let him pass. *Purgatorio* XXVII dramatizes yet a further step in this conversion process. Where the Medusa threatened to turn Dante to stone, it is through Beatrice that he feels "la mia durezza fatta solla" (*Purg.* XXVII. 40). Dante is now able to experience Beatrice as *mediatrix* and vehicle of Grace: his contemplation of her enables him to overcome the dangers of sexual and spiritual negativity.

Even the wall itself has become more penetrable, being made of immaterial flames rather than iron or stone. Dante compares the heat of the flames to boiling glass, using the rhymes *retro/vetro/metro* (*Purg.* XXVII. 47, 49, 51). This rhyme triplet appears once in each cantica of the *Commedia*, signalling a process of transformation centered on the word *vetro*. In *Inferno* XXXIV (vv. 8-12), *vetro* is the glassy ice in which the souls of the damned are trapped and frozen; it will be remembered that the closing cantos of *Inferno* are replete with imagery of ice, of petrification, of veiling and obstruction. There may also be a reference to "Io son venuto," in which the rhyme pair *vetro/retro* follows the series *alto/assalto/smalto* (vv. 60, 63), and where the *vetro* is again ice, an image of the coldness and hardness associated with the *donna pietra*. With the *bogliente vetro* of *Purgatorio* XXVII, the glassy ice is at last dematerialized, its hard surface made penetrable. When these rhymes reappear in *Paradiso* XXVIII (vv. 5, 7, 9), the *vetro*

has become a mirror whose reflectivity reveals a light, and is a figure for Beatrice's eyes with their reflection of the light of God. Thus the passage of *Purgatorio* XXVII represents an intermediary position in the progression from a state of obstruction and opacity to one of reflectivity and revelation, paralleled by the transition from the *donna pietra* to Beatrice. Poetically, we could say it represents a passage from the hard, lifeless impenetrability of the Letter to the life-giving, revelatory power of the Spirit.²⁴

There are important differences between the dynamics of *Inferno* IX and *Purgatorio* XXVII respectively. In the *Inferno* passage, the danger is represented as external. It is the Furies who forbid Dante's passage, the Medusa who will turn him to stone; the wall is truly impenetrable, the gate solidly locked. Salvation likewise comes through an external force, the angel whose presence is required to open the gate. In the *Purgatorio* passage, on the other hand, the obstruction is all internal: there is no external danger except in the pilgrim's own imagination. Dante's *durezza* is self-imposed; it is he who refuses to proceed. Similarly, salvation is the result of an inner conversion: Beatrice is not present herself to lead Dante through the flames, but appears only by virtue of her name, "che nella mente sempre mi rampolla" (*Purg.* XXVII. 42). In *Inferno* IX, Dante was dazzled and nearly destroyed by the surface appearances that went beyond his comprehension. He had to cover his eyes to keep from losing himself in them; the reader, in turn, is admonished not to be caught up in the surface imagery of the text, but to discern the *dottrina*, the Spirit hidden beneath the Letter. In *Purgatorio* XXVII, the surface imagery of the mythical figures has been stripped away; it is now clear that the problem is one of internal confusion and conversion. *Purgatorio* XXVII offers a key to the interpretation of *Inferno* IX, helping to make manifest the *dottrina* of its verses. We now see that it is Dante's fixation on the physical world of surface appearances, his literal "reading" of the flames, that impedes his progress. He must learn to see through the "wall" to the spiritual realm beyond: hence the angel's admonition.

. . . intrate in esso,
ed al cantar di là non siate sorde" . . . (*Purg.* XXVII. 11-12)

and hence Virgil's reminder, "tra Beatrice e te è questo muro" (*Purg.* XXVII. 36). By focussing his attention on the song of the angel and the eyes of Beatrice, Dante accomplishes his passage from the realm of temporality to that of eternity.

We can go even further by again comparing Beatrice to the Medusa/*donna pietra*. The threat of the Medusa is a dazzling, excessive beauty that turns men to stone by the power of obsessive fascination.²⁵ The *donna pietra* likewise bewitches and petrifies the Dante of the *petrose* with her combination of excessive beauty and complete unattainability. It is very interesting to compare the description of the *donna pietra* with Dante's statements about Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*. In particular, a passage from "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" is apt:

Dico, qual vuol gentil donna parere
vada con lei, che quando va per via,
gitta nei cor villani Amore un gelo,
per che onne lor pensero agghiaccia e pere;
e qual soffrisse di starla a vedere
diverria nobil cosa, o si morria.
E quando trova alcun che digno sia
di veder lei, quei prova sua vertute,
ché li avvien, ciò che li dona, in salute,
e sì l'umilia, ch'ogni offesa oblia. (vv. 31-40)²⁶

Beatrice actually does have an effect quite similar to that ascribed to the *donna pietra* when beheld by those of "villainous heart" — presumably, those who look upon her lustfully. She also resembles the *donna pietra* in being of unearthly beauty, in the flower of youth, and sexually unattainable. The danger portrayed in the *petrose* and again in *Inferno* IX is the danger, inherent in all love poetry, of an inability to transcend the surface appearances of physical beauty and sexual desire. For those who know how to "read" her, Beatrice can be a means to Grace and Salvation. For those who do not, she is as deadly as the Medusa herself. Depending on the beholder, she can be the Letter that kills, or the Spirit that gives life.

The importance of opening one's mind to the light of faith, of reading in the Spirit rather than in the Letter, is dramatized with respect to Dante's own development as poet and pilgrim in *Inferno* IX; the drama is continued in a famous passage of *Inferno* X with regard to that of another love poet, Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti. As has been remarked,²⁷ the conversation between Dante and Cavalcante, Guido's father, is a classic instance of non-communication, ending in a complete dissolution of the dialogue. Neither of the interlocutors has any comprehension of what the other is saying. Cavalcante thinks Dante has told him that Guido is not present because he is dead; Dante in turn thinks Cavalcante is inquiring into the motivation for his journey, and is totally bewildered by Cavalcante's reactions.

The problem here is the radically different perspective from which each party enters the dialogue. Dante, the Christian poet whose reliance on Divine Grace has just been so dramatically brought home, interprets Cavalcante's question "in spiritu." He assumes Cavalcante knows the answer to his literal question — "Where is my son?" — and launches into an explanation of the spiritual dimension of his journey. Cavalcante, however, is one who denies the immortality of the soul and, hence, any possibility of transcendence. He is the reader "in littera" *par excellence*. As such, he is unable to "read" Dante's reply to him: the words themselves are an obstacle that he cannot penetrate. As has often been noted, the rhymes *nome/come/lome (lume)* (*Inf.* X. 65, 67, 69) echo those of Guido's "Donna me prega" (vv. 16-19). This suggests an association between the failed communication of *Inferno* X, and Guido's poetics.

Ironically, the mistaken supposition by Cavalcante of his son's death would be true if reinterpreted allegorically: Dante seems to be suggesting that Guido *is* spiritually dead, and that this in fact does account for his absence. To make Dante's journey is, in effect, to write the *Commedia*. Guido, however, wrote "Donna me prega," a purely philosophical exposition of love which presents love as a negative passion totally lacking in spiritual dimension. Furthermore, the Averroist doctrine expounded in "Donna me prega" damns Guido along with his father as one who denies immortality, and for whom any transcendence of the Letter — in all senses — is therefore impossible.²⁸ Perhaps the final irony is that if Guido were really dead, he would have joined his father already.

We may perhaps get an idea of what Dante and Guido's journey would have been like, had Cavalcante been correct in his original supposition, from an early sonnet addressed by Dante to Guido:

Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io
fossimo presi per incantamento
e messi in un vassel ch'ad ogni vento
per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio,
sì che fortuna od altro tempo rio
non ci potesse dare impedimento,
anzi, vivendo sempre in un talento,
di stare insieme crescesse 'l disio.

E monna Vanna e monna Lagia poi
con quella ch'è sul numer de la trenta
con noi ponesse il buono incantatore:
e quivì ragionar sempre d'amore,
e ciascuna di lor fosse contenta,
sì come i' credo che saremmo noi.

This poem contains numerous resonances with *Inferno* IX-X. That Dante's fantasy is specifically one to be fulfilled through magic is significant in light of the numerous allusions to magic and witchcraft in *Inferno* IX.²⁹ These can be associated with the dangers, to which love poetry is subject, of idolatry and madness. The boat, moreover, is to move according to the fancy of its passengers. There is no external guidance and, presumably, no ultimate goal; the idea is simply to remain in a state of suspension. The wish to be completely removed from reality in the company only of love poets and their ladies represents an unnatural dissociation of love poetry from any larger, informative context. The experience is polarized into two extremes of pure sensuality, and free-spinning philosophical speculation.

It is not surprising that the lady Dante chooses for himself is not Beatrice; this is hardly her sort of journey. Indeed, if anything, it resembles the voyage described by Ulysses in *Inferno* XXVI. Ulysses also travelled without external guidance, relying solely on his own powers for direction; and his too was a journey in which societal and familial responsibilities were abdicated in favor of an endless and unfulfillable search for sense experience.

It is clearly this sort of journey that Cavalcante has in mind with his words,

Se per questo cieco
carcere vai per altezza d'ingegno . . . (*Inf.* X 58-59)

and which he would naturally expect Guido to be a part of. It is equally clear that this is precisely not the journey Dante is making. The allusions to his poetic exchange with Guido and to Guido's poetry are an implicit condemnation of Cavalcantian poetics and of that phase in Dante's own career, which he now supersedes.³⁰ The poetry of the *Commedia* is not mere intellectual amusement and technical virtuosity, nor is it a celebration of sensuality. Rather, the text points emphatically beyond itself to the metaphysical and mystical truths that shape and guide it.

The conversation with Cavalcante in *Inferno* X contains verbal echoes of another sonnet addressed to Guido Cavalcanti, Cino da Pistoia's "Qua' son le cose vostre ch'io vi tolgo." Here Cino defends himself against charges, presumably made by Guido in a sonnet now lost, that he has stolen from Guido's poetry:

Qua' son le cose vostre ch'io vi tolgo,
Guido, che fate di me sì vil ladro?
Certo bel motto volentier ricolgo:
ma funne vostre mai nessun leggiadro?

Guardate ben, chéd ogni carta volgo:
se dite il vero, i' non sarò bugiadro.
Queste cosette mie, dov'io le sciolgo,
ben le sa Amor, innanzi a cui le squadro.

Ciò è palese, ch'io non sono artista,
né cuopro mia ignoranza con disdegno,
ancor che 'l mondo guardi pur la vista;
ma sono un uom cotal di basso 'ngegno
che voi piangendo, tant' ho l'alma trista,
per un cor, lasso, ch'è fuor d'esto regno.³¹

As Contini points out,³² this poem, for the deference it grants Cavalcanti, is essentially an articulation of differences between the two poets. Cino rejects the notion that his poetry is merely verbal artifice, a reflection of the poetry of others. His poetry is highly personal and grows out of his intimate relationship with Amor. It is perhaps in this sense that he is not an *artista*, that is, an artificer, creator of verbal systems pleasing to the intellect. The final sestet is most explicitly echoed in *Inferno* X, with its repetition of the rhymes *disdegnol'ingegno*.³³ Cino does not content himself with the surface appearances of this world, disdaining knowledge of what lies beyond and placing his faith in his own intellectual powers — the accusation which, by implication, he levels at Guido, and which Dante further develops in *Inferno* X. His poetry is the direct expression of his innermost experience; one which, moreover, leads him to look beyond his immediate condition, keeping faith — like Dante in the *Commedia* — with an absent beloved. Ultimately, Guido's belief that Cino has "stolen" from him derives from a mistaken reading of Cino's verses, one, again, in Letter rather than in Spirit: he has focussed only on verbal echoes at the surface and failed to discern the underlying dimension that makes Cino's poetry unique. By bringing this text into play, Dante expands his picture of Guido as an Idolator of the Letter. As in *Purgatorio* XXVII, with its implicit criticism of Guittone d'Arezzo, Cino is the submerged positive example, allied with Dante in opposition to the negative example, of vernacular love poetics.³⁴

These passages in the *Commedia* reflect Dante's intense consciousness of an Italian-Provençal lyric tradition. Dante clearly perceives each poet as an individual, each interpreting the tradition in his own way and contributing through the formation of his personal style, to the ever-changing face of vernacular poetics. His treatment of these various poets and their interactions further reflects the existence, in thirteenth-century Italy, of a self-conscious community of vernacular poets. The numerous sonnet exchanges that survive today bear witness to the use of poetry as

a medium of communication, a practice well-established by Dante's time. Just as the individual corpus records the experience of a specific poetic ego, so the total body of Italian lyric represents a poetic world in which the various personae coexist and interact.

This "poetic world" coheres through a shared acceptance of the premises of the lyric text, that is, through a granting of existential reality to the experience portrayed therein. Again, the dynamics are analogous to those operating within the individual corpus. Guittone, for example, uses the pivotal experience of his mid-life conversion as a means of uniting his poetic output. Texts now assume a chronological position relative to this central moment. Guittone's later poetry, through its review of his earlier poetry from the new post-conversion vantage point, assures the continuity of voice throughout the corpus. "A te, Montuccio," for example, clearly identifies its speaker as the author of the popular love lyrics. The "I" of such post-conversion poems presents itself as a voice with a past; we are asked to accept the body of love lyrics as the personal and poetic history of this author/persona.

We have already seen similar phenomena in the works of one poet with regard to another. Cino's "Avvegna ched el m'aggia," by taking the *Vita Nuova* as its frame of reference, posits for that text an empirical reality. The protagonist of the *Vita Nuova* is revealed to be no mere textual figment, but someone to whom a *canzone* can be addressed from outside the closed system of Dante's own lyric poetry and first-person commentary. A similar effect is created by the *canzone* "Ben aggia l'amoroso e dolce core,"³⁵ an anonymous reply to "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" which purports to speak for the said *donne*. Here, the ladies are presented as grateful to Dante for addressing his *canzone* to them. They acknowledge as correct his portrayal of their desire to follow after his noble lady:

che ben è stato bon conoscidore,
poi quella dov'è fermo lo disire
nostro per donna volerla seguire,
perché di noi ciascuna fa saccente,
ha conosciuta sì perfettamente
e 'nclinatosi a lei col core umile. . . . (vv. 5-10)

The *donne* go on to express the hope that the lover will be accepted and requited by the lady that he has so honored. Again, we are granted an outside perspective on the protagonist of "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" and of the *Vita Nuova* in general. The private, self-contained lyric world — experienced, sung, narrated, and explained by a single voice — opens up into a

heterocosm inhabited by many voices, and constituted by the resulting plurality of perspectives offered on a core "reality." The multiplication of examples could continue, recalling many well-known instances of poetic exchange, in which the participants, through their various agreements and disputes, collaborate in creating, sustaining, and refining a shared poetic diction; a shared system of values; a shared reality which allows for a certain range of experience.

The lyric manuscripts produced in Italy during the thirteenth century reflect the various ways in which this poetic tradition was given written form. The Provençal *chansonniers*, with their collections of *vidas* and *razos*, identify a given corpus of songs as the product of a specific poetic ego; the general body of troubadour lyric is further situated in a clearly delineated historical and geographical framework.³⁶ In the *canzoniere* Vaticano lat. 3793, poets are arranged in a chronological and geographical order, explicitly creating a picture of vernacular lyric through its historical development in different regions of Italy.³⁷ The *canzoniere* Laurenziano-Rediano 9, containing primarily the works of Guittone d'Arezzo, shows the development of a single poetic oeuvre.³⁸ The *canzoniere* Banco-Rari 217, finally, is described by Moleta as a representative sampling of Italian lyric — possibly designed for presentation to someone not previously familiar with the material — in which the emphasis is on the aspect of vernacular lyric as an expression of secular, aristocratic ideals.³⁹ Critics have noted the influence of Provençal *vidas* and *razos* on the *Vita Nuova*, as well as that of Guittone's sonnet sequences: Dante poeticizes the roles of compiler and commentator to produce a book charting his early emotional and poetic development.⁴⁰ Similarly — if on a much grander scale — the *Commedia*, with its program of implicit and explicit references to the careers of Dante and other poets and to their relationships among one another, presents a picture of the complex world of vernacular lyric.

In incorporating this "world" into his text, Dante also transposes it into a new register. Pluralistic in voice and perspective though it may be, this shared reality remains in itself a poetic one, consisting ultimately of texts grounded only in each other. A given poem can be anchored in the transcendent reality of its author's corpus, which in turn participates in the larger context of the poetic tradition of which it is a part. In what external reality, however, does this tradition itself participate, to what does it ultimately refer? Dante answers this dilemma by integrating the poetic world into the all-embracing, all-transcending context of Cosmos and Eternity. As we have seen, the effect is to ground

vernacular texts in an empirical and absolute reality, with respect to which their truth or falsehood can be measured.

The phenomenon of a "poetic reality," created and sustained only by texts, suggests a reification of the written word, a tyranny of the Letter. It could be argued that the cast of characters and their respective roles remain constant only because we are still in a textual frame of reference, a sort of "land of poetry" which is constituted by texts and exists in a state of isolation from the "real world." As has been seen, Dante confronts this danger in the *Commedia* and takes care to establish the all-important spiritual dimension of the poetic text, the bridge from the closed textual world to transcendent reality.

Indeed, the *Commedia*, even in its most concrete existence as a verbal artifact, continues to point beyond itself to the Divine Creation in which it participates. This has been admirably demonstrated by Charles Singleton in his study of the symmetrical patterning of cantos and *terzine* around the midpoint of the *Commedia*.⁴¹ As Singleton shows through numerological analysis, the number seven is multiply expressed at this point: in the number of the central line (*Purg.* XVII. 70); in the number of *terzine* forming the central core of the text (twenty-five on either side of the midpoint, a number whose digits add up to seven); in the series of seven cantos constituting the full central block of the text (*Purg.* XIV-XX); and in the number of lines in the cantos framing this central block (151 lines in each, another number whose digits add up to seven). As Singleton points out, the number seven is traditionally the number of Creation. Its manifestation as a structural principle at the heart of the *Commedia* stresses the poem's intrinsic nature as a microcosm and the poet's work as an imitation of God's.

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NOTES

- 1 Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 192-226.
- 2 See André Pézard, *Dante sous la pluie de feu (Enfer, chant XV)* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1950); Richard Kay, *Dante's Swift and Strong: Essays on Inferno XV* (Lawrence: The Regent Press of Kansas, 1978).
- 3 For a discussion of Dante's knowledge and use of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 202-32. For a brief treatment of Pyramus in *Purgatorio*, see Francis Fergusson, *Dante's Drama of the Mind: A Modern Reading of the 'Purgatorio'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 167.

- 4 All references to the *Commedia* are to the edition of the Società Dantesca a cura di G. Petrocchi (Milano: Mondadori, 1966).
- 5 The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is recounted by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, IV, vv. 55-166.
- 6 John Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," *Modern Language Notes*, 80 (1965), 11-26.
- 7 Freccero (p. 15) offers a passage from Ubertino da Casale's *Arbor Vitae* describing Christ as the *tricoloratum vexillum in candor, nigredo, and rubor*.
- 8 Among the surviving manuscripts containing Folquet's *vida* are four which were copied in Italy during the thirteenth century. For the text, and more complete information concerning manuscript tradition, see *Le Troubadour Folquet de Marseilles*, ed. Stanisaw Stroński (Cracow: Academie des Sciences, 1910), pp. 3-4.
- 9 One cannot, of course, be certain that Dante interpreted the myth of Hercules and Iole in this manner. Hercules was used as a positive example by Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy* (Bk. IV, Poem 7). The *Ovide moralisé* identifies the death of Hercules with the Passion of Christ and Iole with the Church (Bk. IX, vv. 873-1029); while probably not a source for Dante, this text is at least a contemporary reading.
- 10 See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IX, vv. 239-271.
- 11 For a general discussion of *Purgatorio* XXVII, see Gianfranco Contini, "Alcuni appunti su *Purgatorio* XXVII," *Varianti e altra linguistica: Una raccolta di saggi* (1938-1968) (Torino: Einaudi, 1970), pp. 459-76.
- 12 References to the poetry of Guittone d'Arezzo are taken from his *Rime*, ed. Francesco Egidi, *Scrittori d'Italia* 175 (Bari: Laterza, 1940).
- 13 The rhymes *pome/come/nome* do in fact appear elsewhere in the *Commedia*, in *Paradiso* XVI. 98-102, in Cacciaguida's description of the old Florence. I can discern no connection between this passage and *Purgatorio* XXVII or Guittone's poem; perhaps the difference is that the *pome* here is not actually an apple, but the pommel representing knighthood.
- 14 See the excellent study by Vincent Moleta, *The Early Poetry of Guittone d'Arezzo* (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1976).
- 15 See Giuseppe Bolognese, "Dante and Guittone Revisited," *Romanic Review*, 70 (1979), 172-84.
- 16 Printed in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova/Rime*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli (Milano: Mursia, 1978), xxvii.
- 17 Interestingly, "Avvegna ched el m'aggia" also contains the rhymes *nome/come* (vv. 8-9). Their location in the first stanza, and in contiguous lines, strengthens their possible power to refer to this poem. Admittedly, the rhyme pair *nome/come* is extremely common in the *Commedia* and elsewhere. However, the juxtaposition of these words in the first line of the Pyramus passage (*Purg.* XXVII. 37), as well as their repetition in rhyme position directly thereafter, does make them a key word pair for this passage. It is on the experience of hearing the beloved's *nome* that Dante's comparison with Pyramus is explicitly based, and through this experience that he overcomes his crisis. Perhaps, then, there is some justification for believing that Dante intended a verbal echo of Cino's *canzone*.
- 18 On the echoes of "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" in "Avvegna ched el m'aggia," see Mario Marti, *Con Dante fra i poeti del suo tempo* (Lecce: Milella, 1971), pp. 102-03.
- 19 See John Freccero, "Casella's Song," *Dante Studies*, 91 (1973), 73-80; Robert Hollander, "*Purgatorio* II: Cato's Rebuke and Dante's *Scoglio*," *Italica*, 52 (1975), 348-63. For other references to the *Convivio* in the *Commedia*, see Daniel J. Ransom, "*Panis Angelorum*: A Palinode in the *Paradiso*," *Dante Studies*, 95 (1977), 81-94; Rachel Jacoff, "The Post-Palinode Smile: *Paradiso* VIII and IX," to appear in *Dante Studies*, 99 (1981).
- 20 It may also be noteworthy that in both passages, and nowhere else in the *Commedia*, *sicuro* is in rhyme position with *muro* (*Inf.* IX. 26/30; *Purg.* XXVII. 32/36).

- 21 John Freccero, "Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit," *Yearbook of Italian Studies* (1972), 1-18.
- 22 In his fascinating study, "'Io son venuto': Seneca, Plato, and the Microcosm," *Dante Studies*, 93 (1975), 95-130, Robert Durling questions Freccero's conclusions about the "moral judgment" cast on the *petrose* by the *Commedia*. As Durling rightly argues, "'Io son venuto al punto de la rota,' then, is a microcosm of the *Commedia*. That Dante proudly inserts into the text of the *Inferno* so many references to the *petrose* should by no means be regarded as a disavowal of their poetics, for it is *in nuce* the poetics of the *Commedia* itself" (p. 119). However, as Durling also states, "'Io son venuto al punto de la rota' celebrates the negative phase of a passionate love. . . . The poem expresses not guilt but the fiery determination of the speaker to outlast the negative phase, to make the best of it, to conquer" (p. 114). It is precisely this negative aspect of erotic desire, a problem fundamental to the poetics of love, that Dante confronts and overcomes in the *Commedia*. That certain poetic experiments of the *petrose* were continued and brought to fulfillment in the *Commedia* need pose no contradiction to the argument that the *Commedia* represents an explicit critique of, and an advancement beyond, the *petrose*. Dante does not blanketly reject the *petrose* as literary constructs, any more than he naively re-enacts the *Vita Nuova* — a text which, for all its complexity and importance, can hardly be equated with the *Commedia*. Rather, he reviews his entire poetic oeuvre, relives it, and, in this sense, rewrites it. It is integral to the confessional poetics of the *Commedia* that, just as Dante the pilgrim must go through Hell and Purgatory before entering Heaven, so Dante the poet must work through and synthesize his previous poetic output in order to create his new poetics of theological allegory. In this regard see Gianfranco Contini, "Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*," *Varianti e altra linguistica*, especially p. 356.
- 23 Freccero, "The Sign of Satan," 20.
- 24 Marguerite Waller makes a similar point in her discussion of glass and mirrors in the *Commedia*, in *Petrarch's Poetics and Literary History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 98-104.
- 25 See Freccero, "Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit," 7-8.
- 26 All references to Dante's lyric poetry are to the edition by Chiappelli.
- 27 See the discussion by Mario Lucidi, "Ancora sul disdegno di Guido," *Cultura neolatina*, 14 (1954), 203-16.
- 28 See Bruno Nardi, *Dante e la cultura medievale* (Bari: Laterza, 1949), pp. 93-129.
- 29 See Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert*, pp. 286-88.
- 30 On Dante and Cavalcanti, see Gianfranco Contini, "Cavalcanti in Dante," *Varianti e altra linguistica*, pp. 432-45; Mario Marti, *Con Dante fra i poeti del suo tempo*, passim.
- 31 Printed in Gianfranco Contini, ed., *Poeti del Duecento*, vol. II (Milano/Napoli: Ricciardi, 1960), p. 639.
- 32 Contini, p. 639 (note to poem).
- 33 The third -*egno* rhyme is admittedly different in each poem. However, *Inferno* X is the only place in the *Commedia* where *ingegno* and *disdegno* rhyme, which makes it seem more likely that this is intended as a reference to Cino's poem.
- 34 The absence of explicit references to Cino in the *Commedia* has caused scholars to speculate a possible break between Dante and Cino, probably for political reasons. It is possible that such a break occurred after the writing of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, so that the explicit mention of Cino that these earlier, implicit scenes seem to be preparing us for, was never written. See Mario Marti, *Con Dante fra i poeti*, pp. 110-12.
- 35 Ed. Chiappelli, XV.
- 36 On the diffusion of troubadour manuscripts in Italy, see Antonio Viscardi, "La poesia trobadorica e l'Italia," *Ricerche e Interpretazioni: Mediolatine e Romanze* (Milano/Varese: Istituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1970), pp. 345-82. On *vidas* and *razos*, see A.-H. Schutz, "Where Were the Provençal *Vidas* and *Razos* Written?" *Modern Philology*, 35 (1938), 225-32.

- 37 On Italian lyric manuscripts, see Bruno Panvini, "Studio sui manoscritti dell'antica lirica italiana," *Studi di filologia italiana*, II (1953), 5-135.
- 38 For a discussion of the Guittone manuscripts, see Claude Margueron, *Recherches sur Guittone d'Arezzo* (Paris, P.U.F., 1966), pp. 403-04.
- 39 See Vincent Moleta, "The Illuminated 'Canzoniere', Ms. Banco-Rari 217," *La Bibliofilia*, 78 (1976), 1-36.
- 40 See Vincent Moleta, "The *Vita Nuova* as a Lyric Narrative," *Forum Italicum*, 12 (1973), 369-90.
- 41 Charles Singleton, "The Poet's Number at the Center," *Modern Language Notes*, 80 (1965), 1-10. See also the questions raised by Richard J. Pegis, "Numerology and Probability in Dante," *Mediaeval Studies*, 29 (1967), 370-73; and the confirmation and expansion of Singleton's argument by J.L. Logan, "The Poet's Central Numbers," *Modern Language Notes*, 96 (1971), 95-98.