The Chalice in Dante's *Paradiso**

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When Charles Singleton wished to defend Dante's *Commedia* against those who did not wish to take seriously its allegory, he said that "the fiction of the *Commedia*, is that it is not a fiction."¹ No one who traverses the landscapes of Hell and Purgatory, and the lights of Heaven, can ever remember merely material worlds without, in some sense, measuring their reality according to the report of Dante's words. Though Dante frequently says that his memory was inadequate,² his report of it seems privileged in the memories of his readers. One of Federigo di Montefeltro's early biographers felt it sufficient proof of someone's existence and importance that he had been mentioned by Dante, because this author footnotes so many in that fashion.³ A fifteenth-century annotator of the *Thebaid* of Statius reports that Statius was the only Christian "auctor" — his proof is Dante's witness.⁴ We all, I think, correct our memories of real experiences by Dante's normative images — we find moral as well as aesthetic profit in deciding when in Hell or Purgatory or Heaven to put our own friends and enemies, and the people of good or evil fame of our own day. All these responses are correct, I think, because "the fiction of the *Commedia* is that it is not a fiction" — because its images: its swamps, walls, gates, people, terraces, and metaphors, even its very words, are saturated not only with the verisimilitude which makes the *Commedia* an illustrator's delight, but more important with the cognitive power, that power to inform, to stimulate insight and the sense of having had insight, which we feel before any experience or memory of fact which we recognize as true.

As Dante himself tells us, his poem is an ethical treatise,⁵ and its final achievement is ethical: the will finds itself moving perfectly, under the rule of the love which moves the sun and other stars. But the way to that achievement is cognitive, through a vast journey of images which empty themselves upward, which are provisional one by one but entirely adequate as a series, and which often gain their full meaning not by being explained, but by being followed by what comes next or after. Thus we understand Farinata when we meet Cacciaguida; we understand the plight of those who have

lost the light of intellect when we ascend into the Heaven of his most light; we understand Dante's sick fascination with the dropsical falsifiers and counterfeiters (for he, after all, is a maker of the fiction that is not a fiction) when he spends his coin of faith in Paradise (XXIV.84). The strategy of the poem is not that Dante tells us, but that we see for ourselves, as he did — the geography is real, and explicates itself.

Heaven, however, is only an image. Its inhabitants tell us that what appears is an accommodation to Dante's powers. The astronomical heavens, of course, are real, as planets in orbits, but their reality is but heaven's accommodating fiction, behind which is the ineffable God. As Dante ascends the heavens, he meets, in the moon, in Mercury, and in the sun, various characters, who make for him a kind of climax in the dancing circles of the sages of philosophy and theology. Above this point we have the image first, and then its inhabitants. In this upper part of heaven, above the sun — that is, above the discursive knowledge of the philosophers — Dante's images as such carry a heavier weight than before, because we are above what can be strictly said, and must see what can be seen.

Let us take these images as a single whole — that is, let us look, not at the images in the poem, but at the image of the poem. First, at the bottom of the series, there is the cross in the circle of Mars — the cross on whose sacrifice all else stands. Above that is the band of the motto: *Diligite iustitiam* . . . We must imagine this motto on its band as forming a circle. The "M"'s become eagles — iconographically, of course, we will have both. Standing in this encircling band of inscription is the vertical of Saturn's ladder, at the top of which is the great ball of the heavens with its band of zodiac, and in particular the twins: Gemini. Above them is the great cup of the rose, in the company of angels, and above that, poised in space, is the divine emblem of the interlocked circles, containing the image of man. The result, taking all these icons as one picture, drawn in the literal words of a journey through space, is a chalice, with an elevated host above.⁶

That this stack of icons will compose a picture of a chalice is conceptually obvious; to construct its literal image in the mind is more difficult. Fortunately, there is a convenient medieval version of it. In Siena, in the middle of the thirteenth century, Pacino di Valentino, a goldsmith, invented a new kind of chalice.⁷ Traditionally, chalices had been rather squat, with large hemispherical cups, sometimes with handles. They could be decorated with incised or low relief ornament, some of it representational. The new Sienese chalice was taller, with a narrower and more parabolic

cup and without handles, and featured large numbers of iconographic enamels in medallions. It is clear from surviving examples that the enamels were made separately, so that it would have been possible to make substitutions, and to order a chalice with some particular iconographic program.

The fashion for this type of chalice spread quickly throughout Italy, and became the dominant form until long after Dante's time. The spread and acceptance of the fashion occurred, obviously, during Dante's impressionable years. The earliest surviving example is now in Assisi. It was commissioned by Nicholas IV for the basilica of St. Francis about 1290. Dante may well have seen it. This chalice has an elaborate iconographic program, executed in enamels, most of them still in place. Around the foot, the knop, the stem, and the cup, there are nine series of enamels, all but the lowest of which include eight medallions each. The bottom series, around the foot of the chalice, contains eight large and eight small medallions. The large ones represent the Crucifixion, the Virgin, St. Francis with the stigmata, St. Anthony or St. Bonaventure, the Virgin with child, Pope Nicholas IV, St. Claire, and St. John of the crucifixion. The smaller medallions alternating contain various beasts and an angel. The next series represents birds of prey, flying in attack postures. The third is a series of faces and angels, and includes what appears to be a winged bull. The fourth and fifth are again birds of prey. The sixth, a series of large circular medallions on the equator of the knop, are apostles and saints; one represents Christ blessing. The seventh and eighth are again birds of prey, and the ninth, which consists of petal-like shapes supporting the chalice cup, represents angels in various postures of praise. It is an enormously impressive object.

Its iconographic program is not, of course, the same as Dante's. But it is similar in crucial respects. It has the crucifixion and the angels in the right places, and it is full of eagles. More important, it has a formal complexity equal to that of this part of the *Commedia*.

Other surviving examples confirm this impression. All the chalices which I have seen or seen described have a medallion of Christ crucified on their bases, at the place which must correspond to Dante's cross in Mars. The two which I have seen personally have many medallions representing birds of prey, which may well be eagles, in various active postures. On one of them, now at Princeton, "the cup proper is set into a collar of six petals on which are incised seraphs with red enamelled wings."⁸ I have not seen any example with a zodiacal knop, but one exists which has a stem decorated with columns in a ladder-like fashion.⁹ The inscription

on the Assisi chalice mentions the donor and maker; this may be customary,¹⁰ but is of course not necessary.

I would not, of course, argue that Dante copied the *Paradiso* detail for detail from some then existing Sienese chalice. Rather, I would suggest merely that the major images of the poem from Mars up, if drawn in a single vertical set, do compose an image of a chalice. The chalice style new in Dante's day is impressive chiefly for its iconographic complexity — a complexity obviously analogous to that of Dante's poem. These two facts are a happy convergence, which lend external plausibility to an insight. Ultimately, of course, we may see the chalice only if the poem requires it. We may see the chalice if the Eucharist is an appropriate conclusion for such a poem as Dante's, and if Dante's doctrine of images is one with the Eucharist is, in medieval terms, "convenient."

That the Eucharist is appropriate we can learn from the Middle English *Pearl*, a poem simpler than Dante's but doctrinally congruent. There also a visionary poet confronts a blessed and loving lady in the environs of paradise. Like Dante, the dreamer of the *Pearl* comes to the end of the poem in desire, but the dreamer, seeking to satisfy desire, goes further than Dante takes his pilgrim, so that the narrative of the poem includes the departure from the dream and the return to this life. In this return, the dreamer is given the experience of Christ in the Mass, which "in þe forme of bred and wyn/ Þe preste vus schewe3 uch a daye" (1209-10). The same experience, of course, was Dante's once he left the poem, in the continuing Eucharistic celebration of the Church, as well as, perhaps, in the mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna.

Even more, I think, the Eucharist is "convenient" — it is an image which both confirms and fulfills the strategy of images which the *Commedia* enacts. This position, I realize, is controversial, because it is now fashionable to find Dante essentially pessimistic about language,¹¹ about signs and images, because both memory and the "alta fantasia" fail under the burden of final cognition, and because throughout the poem images admit their cognitive inadequacy in various ways.

No one can deny that Dante does reject a certain kind of poetic language — his quotations of his own poems in the *Commedia* constitute both a rejection of and an act of contrition for the idealizing language of *dolce stil nuovo*, and of the *Convivio*'s philosophic apostasy. These are expressed in images which are false because they do not keep their promises:

imagini di ben seguendo false,
che nulla promession rendono intera. (*Purg.*XXX.131-132)

But in repenting of these, Dante rejects one language in the act of achieving another.

One can argue this achievement from a host of passages. Of these, one of the most telling and literally clear is Dante's definition of language in *Paradiso* XXVI, in the context of his meeting with Adam. The crucial passage is Adam's definition of the fall:

Or, figliuol mio, non il gustar del legno
fu per sé la cagion di tanto essilio,
ma solamente il trapassar del segno. (115-117)

Singleton translates "il trapassar del segno" as "the overpassing of the bound."¹² Adam has, as it were, run a Stop sign. This, theologically, is what it must mean, but this translation ignores the pun. Absolutely, the fall is the trespass of signs — that is, acting on the desire for immediate rather than mediated knowledge. Language, of course, existed in Paradise. Adam made it and used it, as he says in this canto ("l'idioma ch'usai e che fei," l.114), and as Genesis confirms (2:20). If sin is the trespass of the sign, then innocence is the acceptance of the sign, in anticipation, of course, of the Logos who would have become the Incarnate sign even had there been no fall. If the sign was even wounded in the fall, it was so only by becoming mutable. —

ché l'uso d'i mortali è come fronda
in ramo, che sen va e altra vene. (*Par.*XXVI.137-138)

Yet even this image is corrected and redeemed by being a repetition of Dante's good image of love, earlier in the very same canto. His right love is the love of "le fronde onde s'infronda" (64) that garden which presumably is all of enduring creation, and this love corresponds to God's goodness because of the successful mediation of those leaves. Dante thus says, "Am'io cotanto/ quanto da lui a lor di bene è porto" (ll. 65-66). The tree image, the very image whose sign was trespassed, bears and sheds and bears again those linguistic leaves whose changing reflects mortality but still does not fail to communicate good.

Adam himself, who has explained all this to Dante, is a sign of signing. He appears covered with "la 'nvolgia" of light, but in spite of (or perhaps because of) this *involucrum* he, his meaning, and his intention are perfectly clear. Communication is perfect. Adam knows Dante's wish without Dante's speaking it, because Adam knows God, who is a perfect similitude of all things, including Dante's wish. Further, this is the canto in which Dante is examined

in love, whose teeth (l. 51) evoke Augustine's metaphor of the hermeneutic teeth of the Church in the *De doctrina Christiana*.¹³ Dante's examiner in love is the apostle John, the Evangelist of the Word made flesh. Dante's blindness, as the apostle clearly indicates, makes him a converted Saul to Beatrice as Ananias, and further expresses confidence in the flesh which, taken as image, can become the sight-giving Word. Unlike Honorius in the *Elucidarium*,¹⁴ Dante does not make linguistic mediation the defining feature of man's fallen condition, so much as one of the chief goods salvaged from his primeval innocence — the good, in fact, whose trespass was the Fall.

Dante's fiction is not a fiction, ultimately, because the people and things he encounters in it achieve the condition of language. They become — they can be taken as — words. This is what figuralism means. As material things, subject to history and mortality, none of them is perfect — not even the stars, for there shall be a new heaven and a new earth. But their imperfection and their mortality as things does not exist to deconstruct their power as words — just the reverse. It is the capacity of fallen flesh to become Word, under the divine preoccupation, which makes conceivable the salvation of fallen flesh. To be merely material is to be inadequate by definition. But this inadequacy, when the *alta fantasia* fails, leaves the mind struck ("mente fu percossa," l. 140) with insight, and the will perfectly moved. In the daily life of Dante's moral mortality, lived as it was within medieval Christian presumptions, which all of this *Commedia* of anagogy describes and interprets, it is not required, nor is it possible, fully to know and understand God. It is merely necessary to eat and drink his presence, in the sign which by medieval definition is what it represents but cannot fully resemble. All of the images of the heavens above the sun, drawn together at once upon a paper, picture but a simple cup. But that for Dante, by the necessary definition of faith, was enough.

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NOTES

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1. Charles Signleton, "The Irreducible Dove," *Comparative Literature*, 9 (1957), 129.

2. See especially Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, 1979), pp. 260-74.
3. Pierantonio Paltroni, *Commentari della vita et gesti dell'illustrissimo Federico Duca d'Urbino* (Urbino, 1966), pp. 41-3.
4. At *Thebaid* VI.936, "praemissa fides," the commentator says; "Hoc Statius, et hoc antequam fuisset Christianus, et nullus poetarum fuit Christianus nisi ipse, et idem Dantes ipsum ponit." Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale MS. II. II. 55, fol. 173.
5. The letter to Can Grande, in which this classification is stated, reflects the standard form and attitude of the literary *accessus*. Poems were normally classified as ethics by medieval critics.
6. I am happy to thank an undergraduate student, Jeanne Von Hof, for this insight.
7. Ippolito Machetti, "Orafi Senesi," *La Diana: Rassegna d'Arte e Vita Senese*, 4, fasc. 1 (1929), 5-110. This is the standard article on the subject; Pacino is dealt with on page nine. See also Charles Oman, "Some Sienese Chalices," *Apollo*, 81 (1965), 279-81, and Marvin J. Eisenberg, "A Late Fourteenth Century Italian Chalice," *Record of the Art Museum*, Princeton University, 10 (1951), 3-11.
8. Eisenberg, p. 7.
9. Alinari N. 52246: Perugia Gall. Naz. (early 14th c.).
10. Another chalice with the inscription "Picinus de Senis me fecit" is in the Museum at Lyons. Eisenberg, p. 10, n. 12.
11. Of this fashion, Mazzotta's *Dante, Poet of the Desert* is magisterially an example.
12. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, translated, with a commentary, by Charles Singleton, *Paradiso* I (Princeton, 1975), XXXVI.117, p. 297.
13. *De doct. Christ.* II.6.
14. Honorius distinguishes knowledge "per scientiam" and knowledge "per experientiam" — the first less direct than the second, and therefore presumably mediated through signs. Before the fall, men knew good "per experientiam" and evil "per scientiam" — after the fall, his condition was reversed. See the *Elucidarium* I.14, in Migne, P.L. CLXXII, 1119.