This essay proposes a reading of the second part of *Paradiso* 18 (70-117), in which the writing performance by the blessed souls of the just culminates in the metamorphosis of the M of the fifth word (“l’emme del vocabol quinto,” 94) into the image of an eagle. The complexity of this allegory warrants an analysis based on twentieth-century linguistic and literary theorization—Saussure, Benjamin, McLuhan, Steiner—a theorization on which Dante’s text, in turn, sheds light. We also suggest that the well-known meditation on language in St. Augustine’s *Confessions* 4.10 was, either consciously or unconsciously, present to Dante when he conceived the celestial pageant of the Heaven of Jupiter. While pointing to this dependence on St. Augustine, we intend to show how the dynamics of Dante’s allegory in *Paradiso* 18 decidedly points to his departure from the source. Indeed, Dante adapts St. Augustine’s passage to fit into a celebration of human language, of the Imperial idea, and of the literary tradition he is continuing. Far from veering towards Augustinian asceticism as he ascends the heavenly spheres, Dante expresses his unflinching devotion to his literary medium as well as to his political vision by means of the celestial writing culminating in the metamorphosis of the eagle. This image, both for its unusual form of manifestation—a metamorphosis—and for its polysemous symbolism, is the key to the whole allegory in *Paradiso* 18. The eagle derives its signifying power from the numerous passages in Dante where it represents not only God’s Grace, but also the prowess of writing and the Empire. Our analysis will show how Dante’s use of allegory in the Heaven of Jupiter is meant to demonstrate (116) the universal validity of his interwoven beliefs—his faith in God, in his mission as a writer, in his political vision.

Our linguistic analysis, centered on the word-image juxtaposition and the advantages of writing, also sheds light on the textual function of 1) the first tercet of the canto (“Già si godea solo del suo verbo / quello specchio beato,” 1-3); 2) the invocation to the muse (“O diva pegasea,” 82-87); and 3) the final invective against the corrupted pope (“Ma tu che sol per cancellare scrivi,” 118-36) —passages, especially the latter two, Dante readers traditionally find dishomogeneous or irrelevant in the economy of canto 18. This essay is di-
vided into two parts, dealing respectively with the metalinguistic (I) and the metaliterary and historical implications of the allegory (II).

Language

We will first address the dynamics of the writing performance enacted by the souls of the just, focusing on the single letters into which they arrange themselves before forming the eagle.

As soon as Dante ascends into the Heaven of Jupiter, a tercet announces that the pilgrim’s and the reader’s attention will be engaged by an allegorical pageant concerning “nostra favella” (“our speech,” 73). Here Dante is certainly celebrating human language in having God Himself writing in Latin, one of the human idioms. The poet, however, is also scrutinizing the limitations of language with respect to images, as these are felt to be a closer analogue than words to the ineffable reality of beatitude. Indeed painting metaphors describe, in this area of Paradiso, the mode of communication between the blessed and God, as in Cacciaguida’s explanation of his own capability of predicting the future:

“For the contingency which does not extend beyond the volume of your material world, is all depicted in the Eternal Vision [...] Therefrom, even as sweet harmony comes from an organ to the ear, comes to my sight the time that is in store for you.”

and in canto 18, while Dante is comparing images and writing, God’s art and human art:

“DILIGITE JUSTITIAM” primai fur verbo e nome di tutto il dipinto; (Paradiso 18.91-92)

DILIGITE JUSTITIAM were the first verb and substantive of all the design;
He who there paints has none to guide Him, but he himself does guide, and from Him is recognized that virtue which shapes nests.

The very opening tercet of canto 18 (in which Cacciaguida has just fallen in silent contemplation after the revelation of Dante’s painful future and the glory of the Commedia at the end of canto 17) clearly hinges on the word/image comparison:

> Già si godea solo del suo verbo, 
> quello specchio beato, e io gustava
> lo mio, temprando col dolce l’acerbo.  
> (Paradiso 18.1-3)

Already that blessed mirror was enjoying only its own thoughts, and I was tasting mine, tempering the bitter with the sweet.

In these lines Denise Heilbronn-Gaines calls attention to the juxtaposition between “verbo” on the one hand and “temprando” and “dolce” on the other. In her view, this juxtaposition paves the way to the “thematic developments of the sixth sphere,” “the importance of language for the salvation of mankind,” and music as metaphor for the hierarchically ordered cosmos. She observes that the “gradual shift of emphasis from hearing to sight, from auditive to visual representation” prepares the reader “for the consideration of language as writing rather than speech” (Heilbronne-Gaines 266-69 passim). The alternation of singing and silence does provide emphasis in the writing performance, but the sound and vision juxtaposition is subsumed within the main one, that between human language – both written and spoken – and visual images.

Lucia Battaglia Ricci reads the canto as “an exhaustive exploration of the communication modes between men and God,” and remarks how appropriate it is that “the canto begins by staging the effects of an exceptional form of communication: the contemplation of the Divine Word by a blessed soul (i.e. the ‘conceptus mentis interior’ in St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas) and the successive verbal communication of the truths, learned in this way, to the viator ad Deum” (26-27). Battaglia Ricci thus emphasizes the use of theological concepts, pointing out the gap between Dante’s blessed ancestor Cacciaguida who shares in the angels’ prerogative of enjoying the Word by mirroring it, and Dante-the protagonist who, like the author and his readers, “tastes” words.
Considering the opening tercet of canto 18 stylistically, we can add that "verbo" is the common object of two elegantly interlaced synaesthesias - "specchiare il verbo/gustare il verbo" - pushing vision and speech towards two opposite extremes, as human language is made more sensuous by the choice of the gustative synaesthesia, with respect to the less corporeal visual medium conveyed by the mirror refraction. This implicit comparison between words and images reaches its most explicit form in the writing performance by the souls of the just, which shows how the first and foremost limitation of language is its temporality. The sequential appearance of the single letters against the silver backcloth of the Heaven of Jupiter forces the protagonist to take mental note of each in order to reconstitute the whole sentence. The verb, the noun, and the rest of the words turn out to be the first line of Solomon's Book of Wisdom - "Diligite justitiam qui judicatis terram." This writing performance by the souls of the just dramatizes what Ferdinand de Saussure calls "Principle 2 [of the linguistic sign]: the Linear Nature of the Signifier:"

The signifier, being auditory, is unfolded solely in time, from which it gets the following characteristics: (a) it represents a span and (b) the span is measurable in a single dimension; it is a line. While Principle 2 is obvious, apparently linguists have always neglected to state it, doubtless because they found it too simple; nevertheless its consequences are incalculable. Its importance equals that of Principle I; the whole mechanism of language depends upon it. [...] In contrast to visual signifiers (nautical signals, etc.) which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time. Their elements are presented in succession; they form a chain. This feature becomes readily apparent when they are represented in writing and the spatial line of graphic marks is substituted for succession in time. (Saussure 70)

Anticipating Saussure in locating language's cognitive dimension in temporality is Augustine, who "inaugurated what we may call the semiological consciousness of the Christian West" (Vance 20). In particular the famous passage in Confessions 4.10 – in which St. Augustine poignantly remarks upon the perishable nature of "things of beauty" and human speech alike – might have been in Dante's mind while conceiving how the celestial pageant should look from the protagonist's point of view:

“L’emme del vocabol quinto”

These things of beauty would have no existence at all unless they were from you. They rise and set; in their rising they begin, as it were, to exist. They develop so as to reach their perfection, and after that they grow old and die; not all grow old but all die. So, when they rise and reach their way into existence, the quicker they are to grow into being, the more they hurry toward ceasing to be. That is their law. So much you have given them, namely to be parts of a structure in which the parts are not all in existence at the same time; instead by fading and by replacing each other, they all together constitute the universe of which they are parts. Our own speech too, which is constructed out of meaningful sounds, follows the same principles. There could never be a complete sentence unless one word, as soon as the syllables had been sounded, ceased to be in order to make room for the next. In these things let my soul praise you.7 [Translation by R. Warner]

The writing performance of the souls illustrates indeed the rise and fall of each single letter necessary to form a complete sentence. However, Dante’s transcription alleviates for the reader the disadvantage of the sequential verbal message by highlighting that message through the capitalization of the whole verse on the page, with the result that it sticks out, for us, like a whole “dipinto” (92).

The pageant seems meant to counter first the tragically perishable nature of verba that volani (rise and set, in Augustinian terms) by having them dictated to an attentive scriba; then the epilogue of the pageant appears to counter the fragmentary nature, and the dullness, of alphabetical scripta, by transforming the last letter into an image. While St. Augustine’s attitude towards the fleeting nature of both things of beauty and words involves passive observation and resignation, Dante’s faith in the value of writing and the strengths of textuality informs, in our view, the whole passage.8 As John Ahern remarks, Dante “made far more powerful use of textuality than did his contemporaries, and was acutely conscious of the novelty of his cultural situation,” in an epoch that was still dominated by the “mesmerizing power of sound or voice” in the oral poetic performance (223). Ahern also shows how Dante even theorized the advantages of textuality: in De Vulgari Eloquentia 2.8.5-6, the poet “without quite seeing the full implication [...] defines poetry in purely textual or ‘grammatical’ terms as ‘the words lying on the page with no performer’” (224).9 The lines of the writing performance contain in fact all the elements of Medieval reading practice. The fact that gramatica had become the basis for the study of the Bible (McLuhan, quoting Marrou, 99) can be seen in Dante’s presentation of the Biblical motto in terms of “verbo,” “nome” (92), “le parti” (90). The numbering of vowels and consonants (“cinque volte sette vocali e consonanti,” 88-89; “vocabol quinto,” 94) does not only have numerological implications but is also part of a mnemonic technique central to scribal and oral culture (McLuhan 108-9). In addition, the metamorphosis of the letter M into the image of an eagle is the illumination completing the forging, under the reader’s eyes, of a typical Medieval manuscript’s page, consisting of text (Biblical sen-
tence), illumination (the eagle), and glosses (Dante’s commentary of the page-
ant). All the techniques that enabled the Medieval reader to remember and
even memorize the text are clearly present in Dante’s passage. Indeed, Dante
creates a long-lasting artifact – the capitalized Biblical motto as “dipinto,” the
only occurrence of capitalization of a whole sentence in the Commedia – which
is a metonymy of his composing the whole poem. These allusions to the
physicality and composite nature of the act of writing and reading must have
been intuitive for Dante’s contemporary audience, whereas they are easily
missed by a typographically trained readership. All the more, once detected,
they warrant the metalinguistic analysis of the passage in which we will engage
further on.

In connection with these considerations on the temporality of human lan-
guage, we focus now on the major means by which Dante creates suspense
before reporting the whole sentence-message on the page of his poem: the in-
vocation to the Muse (“O diva pegasea”) occurring between the appearance
of the first three single letters and Dante’s reading and “notation” of the whole
sentence (82-87). Every Dante commentator remarks the frequency, in lines 73
through 93, of the temporal indicators marking the succession of the letters,
appearing one by one to Dante: (“or… or… or…;” “Prima… poi;” “primai…
sezai”). What has not been noticed is that the invocation to the pagan Muse,
the last of six invocations of this type in the whole Commedia (Hollander 32),
contributes to emphasizing the temporality of language dramatized by the writ-
ing performance. “Diva pegasea” is, most commentators agree, a singular for
a plural addressing the whole group of the nine Muses, similarly called
“Pegasides” by Ovid (Heroides 15.27; Giacalone’s commentary). The effect
of this adjective, recalling Pegasus’s kicking that caused the outflowing of the
spring Hyppocrene from the sides of mount Helicon, is first of all to “metamor-
phose” the muse into the horse, an anticipation of the crucial metamorphosis
of this canto, that of the M into the eagle. Secondly, by evoking this well known
mythological episode through the epithet “pegasea” Dante chooses to make us
visualize the inspiration-giving power of the muses as a fountain. By making
the reader envision the flowing of a stream, the image subliminally evoked in
the invocation parallels the string of graphems that are streaming forth to form
a sentence in a human idiom. However, as on the one hand Dante conjures up
the image of the stream of words with a view to the limitation of human lan-
guage, its temporality, the poet is also celebrating the power of human lan-
guage by solemnly ritualizing its outflowing. The stream-of-words subliminal
image cross-references with Virgil’s epithet in the proemial canto: “fonte / che
spandi di parlar si largo fiume” (“fount which pours forth so broad a stream of
speech,” Inferno 1.79-80). More importantly, the position of the invocation –
placed as it is between the appearance of the first three letters, D-I-L, and the
notation/transcription of the whole Biblical sentence – conveys a fundamental
Christian meaning in this metalinguistic allegory. Silvio Pasquazi convinc-
ingly connects D-I-L to Adam's explanations on language to Dante in *Paradiso* 26: these three letters would stand for the three historical nouns of God (Pasquazi 323). This is all the more the case because human language is arbitrarily changeable; indeed Adam explains that human speech changes “seesso che v'abbella” (132), so the word that makes human speech make sense is God's name. George Steiner points out that, however changeable that signifier can be, it signals an immutable presence:

[... ] any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, [... ] any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence. (Steiner 3)

In Dante's allegory God's name is equated to the source of meaning since it is the beginning of the sentence and since the subsequent flowing of the stream of letters of the whole sentence is ritualized by the invocation. God is indeed the Origin, “l'eterna fontana,” (“the eternal fountain”), as in *Paradiso* 31.93.13

By the time the sentence is complete on the page, the Biblical Sapiential imperative has obtained as much an incantatory effect as it could get in the realm of writing. In his metalinguistic allegory Dante is re-enacting and sacralizing the civilization's crucial passage from the auditory medium to the written one (it is, after all, the epochal metamorphosis of language); as he tries to cope with the loss of evocative power that the word suffers in that passage Dante exploits in full the advantages of the written medium. The invocation also serves as a ritualization of this epochal transition from oral culture to textuality:

I suggest that it was only when the written, and still more the printed, word appeared on the scene that the stage was set for words to lose their magic powers and vulnerabilities. (McLuhan quoting Carothers, 19)

A simple period (lacking in the Bible, at any rate) or even an exclamation mark seems to be an impossible outcome for such a highlighting of the Biblical imperative addressed to the rulers of the earth. This is all the more the case since the final letter (instead of the initial one, as it was customary in illuminated manuscripts of Dante's time) is transformed into the image of an eagle. Walter Benjamin's reflections on the dynamics of allegory in the German baroque drama provide a first general explanation for what may be at work in Dante's verbal iconism:

[... ] For sacred script always takes the form of certain complexes of words which ultimately constitute, or aspire to become, one single and inalterable complex. So it is that alphabetical script, as a combination of atoms of writing, is the farthest removed from the script of sacred complexes. These latter take the form of hieroglyphics. The desire to
guarantee the sacred character of any script – there will always be a conflict between the sacred and profane comprehensibility – leads to complexes, to hieroglyphics. This is what happens in the baroque. Both externally and stylistically – in the extreme form of the typographical arrangement and in the use of highly charged metaphors – the written word tends towards the visual. (Benjamin 175-76)

Benjamin’s remarks help us understand one of the deep-seated motives for Dante’s inventio of the letter turning into an icon: the aspiration that a message conceived as sacred become a) unalterable and b) more immediate in communicating itself to the reader/pupil. However, unlike the poems of the so-called English metaphysical poets – shaped, for example, as an altar on the page (the title being The Altar by George Herbert) – Dante’s verbal iconism does not concern an exclusively religious, metaphysical truth; it rather entails a historical and political one, as both the letter and the icon are highly charged with secular connotations as well as with sacred ones. Furthermore, Dante’s operation is oxymoronic:14 on the one hand, the capitalization of the Biblical motto, in its function of countering the fragmenting and consuming effect of time, is a form of linguistic iconism, as Dante himself underlines – “dipinto” (92) – the words of the motto tending towards the drawing.15 On the other hand, paradoxically, the visualization of the eagle’s icon unfolding from the last letter of the writing relies solely on the reader’s capacity to reconstruct the image from the poet’s verbal description (only commentators put the drawing in their glosses).16 The oxymoronic nature of Dante’s metalinguistic allegory results in the glorification of human language despite its disadvantages with respect to the visual medium. Furthermore, the eagle itself is bound to disappear. After having made its powerful appearance and lingered in the reader’s eyes for three cantos, the eagle yields the stage to other icons. It is exactly the transitory nature of the eagle – “one of the most memorable figures of Western literature” – in Dante’s Christian epics that prompts Jorge Luis Borges to compare this Dantean invention with the Persian Simurg, a “sacred complex” of Oriental religious literature:

The Eagle is a transitory symbol, as the letters had been before, and those who form it [the souls of the just] do not cease to be what they are; the ubiquitous Simurg is inextricable. Behind the Eagle is the personal God of Israel and Rome; behind the magic Simurg is pantheism. (Borges 368) [Our translation]

The eagle is indeed the second in the sequence of the three symbolic icons leading to the Empyrean Rose: the cross in the Heaven of Mars, the eagle in the Heaven of Jupiter, the ladder in the Heaven of Saturn. It is then legitimate to pose the question of the rationale for the eagle appearing in the Paradiso after the cross and before the ladder. With Fredi Chiappelli, we read the cross primarily as the redemption Christ brought to humankind (therefore the meaning of the cross being emphasised is that of the palingenetic value of Christ rather
than its sacrificial value). It is only after the redemptive intervention of Christ — the appearance of the Cross in Paradiso — that the meaning of human signs is restored, making it possible to envision justice in society — the eagle — and the ascent of the single individual to God — the ladder. We can therefore read the eagle and the ladder as signifying respectively the consequences of redemption on the collective and individual level.

History and Literature: the Eagle

We will consider now the historical and metaliterary implications of the eagle.

In recent years the political meaning of the eagle in the Heaven of Jupiter has been either discarded, or underestimated, or even ignored. We agree with those who, taking into account the polysemous nature of the Dantean symbol, are convinced that the eagle accommodates, among the others, the meaning of "historical justice" and that of "eternal justice" (Pasquazi 325). The historical meaning must not be underestimated considering that the icon of the eagle unfolds from "the M of the fifth word." This word, TERRAM, acquires a tremendous emphasis by having its final letter "illuminated" by the image of the eagle and the eagle, in turn, receives its worldly, political meaning by taking shape from that word and that letter, this latter also traditionally interpreted as meaning "mundo" and "monarchia" (Pasquazi 327). Dante himself interprets the eagle in these terms: it appears to him as "'l segno del mondo e de' suoi duci," Paradiso 20.8 ("the ensign of the world and of its rulers").

In such an elaborate allegory, the number five, appearing in its ordinal form to designate the last word of the Biblical sentence ("vocabol quinto"), must also convey a meaning of its own. First of all, it is a numerological cross-reference with Beatrice’s prophecy in Purgatorio 33 ("cinquecento diece e cinque," 43), the political nature of which is reinforced by the passage in Convivio 4.7.14-15, where the number five is taken to represent the perfection of the ideal rational human being (Scott 206-207). Secondly, the eagle unfolding from the fifth letter can be associated with the Phoenix’s resurrection from its ashes after five hundred years, appearing in Inferno 24.106-8. This latter canto represents in fact the “parallel episode” to Paradiso 18, as we will see further on. Therefore numerology seems to contribute to lend the eagle its earthly meaning, since the association of the number five with the plenitude that human beings can achieve through human means points to the beatitudo huius vitae, to which the Emperor, a figura Christi, can lead humankind.

As for the metaliterary significance of the eagle, we must recall the two major occurrences of this symbol in connection with the prowess of writing in Dante’s macrotext. In their light, the eagle of the central canto of Paradiso will clearly acquire metaliterary connotations. The first occurrence is in De Vulgari Eloquentia, where Dante speaks about the lofty themes treated in the sublime
style, warns whoever wants to compose in it, and defines the few capable of achieving the sublime:

et quando pure héc trīa cantāre intendit, vel que ad ea directe ac pur secundtūr, prius Elicone potatus, tensis fidibus ad supremum, secure plectrum tum movere incipiat. [...] Et hii sunt quos Poeta Eneidorum sexto Dei dilectos et ab ardente virtute sublimatos ad ethera deorumque filios vocat, quanquam figurāte loquatur. Et ideo confutetur illorum stultitia qui, arte scientiaque immunes, de solo ingenio cōndentes ad summe canenda prorumput, et a tanta presumptuositāte desistant; et si anseres natura vel desidiae sunt, nolint astripetam aquilam imitari. (*De Vulgari Eloquentia* 2.4.9-11)

when one intends to sing on these pure and simple themes or wants to express what derives from them directly and immediately, that one must drink of the Helicone fountain, tend the chords of his lyra and only then start to safely handle the plectrum. [...] These are the ones that the Poet in the sixth book of *Aeneid* defines as those who reach the heavens by their ardent virtue, the children of the Gods, which means the chosen by God, in his allegorical speech. Therefore one must condemn the stupidity of those who, trusting solely in their minds, neglect the arts and sciences and undertake lightly to sing about the highest things: they should desist from such a great presumptuousness; if they are geese either by nature or by laziness they should not imitate the eagle that strives towards the stars. [Our translation]

The eagle here is associated with the poets of the sublime style, Virgil first of all. These poets are the chosen of God, as Dante remarks, in the *Aeneid* figuratively interpreted.

The second occurrence is in *Inferno* 4, where Dante meets the famous poets of pagan antiquity, all of them belonging to the “school” of Homer:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Così vid’i adunar la bella scola} \\
\text{di quel segnor de l’altissimo canto} \\
\text{che sovra li altri com’aquila vola.} \quad (94-96)
\end{align*}
\]

Thus I saw assembled the fair school of
that lord of highest song who, like an eagle,
soars above the rest.

In both these quotations the eagle stands for the high style in writing, indicated in the epic genre. Since in *Paradiso* 18 the eagle is the final outcome and completion of the Biblical motto, the allegory conveys the fusion of the Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition with Virgilian epics into a work of Christian epic, the *Commedia*. Then in the icon of the heavenly eagle engendered by the Biblical sentence Dante is also designating his righteous writing, worthy issue of all the literary traditions alluded to in the allegory: the Biblical, the Virgilian, the Ovidian tradition.
This latter, too, is in fact present in the complex allegory of Paradiso 18. If one considers the form of the eagle’s appearance, the allusion is to the narrative procedure that Dante learned from Ovid: metamorphosis. This becomes evident once we consider the “parallel episode” of Paradiso 18, Inferno 24-25, where the metamorphosis is not only powerfully exploited for the memorable contrapasso – whereby thieves are transformed into snakes and back again into human form as serpents bite humans – but is also highlighted by an explicit metaliterary comment from the author, who boasts about his superiority with respect to his literary predecessors:

Taccia Lucano omai là dov’e’ tocca
del misero Sabello e di Nasidio
e attenda a udir quel ch’or si scocca.

Taccia di Cadmo e d’Aretusa Ovidio,
ché se quello in serpente e quella in fonte
converte poetando, io non lo ’nvidio;
ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte
non trasmutò se ch’ampendue le forme
a cambiari lor matera fosser pronte. (Inferno 25.94-102)

Let Lucan now be silent, where he tells
of the wretched Sabellus and of Nasidius
and let him wait to hear what now comes forth.
Concerning Cadmo and Aretusa let Ovid be silent
for if he, poetizing, converts the one
into a serpent, the other into a fountain,
I envy him not; for two natures, front to front
he never so transmuted that both forms were prompt
to exchange their substance.

The characteristic that makes Inferno 24 parallel to Paradiso 18 is the appearance of singled-out graphems on the page, possibly capitalized, as the Anonimo Fiorentino suggests. Thus Dante compares the rapidity of a double metamorphosis of a thief to the rapid gesture of a scriba tracing the simplest letters on a page:

Né O sì tosto mai né I si scrisse
com’el s’accese e arse, e cener tutto
convenne che cascando divenisse;
e poi che fu a terra sì distrutto,
là polver si raccolse per sé stessa
e ’n quel medesmo ritornò di butto. (Inferno 24.100-105)

and never was o or i written so fast
as he took fire and burned, and must sink down
all turned to ashes; and when he was thus destroyed
on the ground, the dust drew together of itself and at
once resumed the former shape.

The "fulfillment" of the metatextual simile of Inferno 24 is achieved in Paradiso 18, in the transformation of the M of the fifth word into an eagle. In the light of the parallel episode of Inferno 24-25, the eagle of Paradiso 18 clearly acquires an Ovidian echo. It is through the procedure of metamorphosis that Ovid, one of Dante’s crucial models, is thus brought within the picture of the metaliterary allegory. If we read Paradiso 18 with the boast of Inferno 25 in mind, the eagle appears all the more to be Dante’s assertion of his own poetic value as a worthy heir capable indeed of perfecting the classical tradition.²⁶

Conclusion

Dante’s mission in the world, announced by his ancestor Cacciaguida in Paradiso 17, constitutes a real shift from Dante’s classical predecessors. Unlike Aeneas and Scipio, soldiers and rulers, Dante will change the world by his “parola brusca,” “voce,” “grido” – his “harsh speech,” “voice,” “cry” (Schnapp 232, 237). Dante’s lines vibrate with the urgency of action. Let us think of his need for the effectiveness of writing expressed in the “versi brevi” of Paradiso 18.87, meant to beat the destructive race of time. Dante’s own writing emulates, through conciseness, the sentences for the unjust princes recorded in God’s book:

la sua scrittura fia ter he mozze
che noteranno malto in parvo loco. (Paradiso 19.134-35)

the writing for him shall be in contractions
that will note much in little space.

Dante’s metalinguistic allegory in the Heaven of Jupiter shows his unflinchingly constructive/creative tension towards the temporal dimensions of language, literature, and history.

Given the novelty, with respect to his classical predecessors, of turning speech into action, this mission affiliates Dante more with prophets than with martyrs in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Let us consider Dante’s textual treatment of the two Johns, the author of the Apocalypse, and the martyr John the Baptist. The conclusion of canto 18 (lines 130-36), a passage that Dantesian criticism generally finds difficult to connect to the rest of the canto – shows how the deeds of John the Baptist can be misappropriated. This John was a martyr who did not have a chance to write a book, rather witnessed his belief through his vox clamantis in deserto and ultimate sacrifice.²⁷ Pope John XXII,
addressed in Dante's invective as "you who write only to cancel" (130), feels entitled to distort the Baptist's life and martyrdom. As far as the greedy pope is concerned, the Baptist is just the image minted on the golden florin. In the conclusion of his allegory of history, language, and literature, Dante makes us envision Pope John XXII as an idle writer through a metaphor for the practice of issuing and revoking excommunications:

Ma tu che sol per cancellare scrivi,
pensa che Pietro e Paulo, che moriro
per la vigna che guasti, ancor son vivi.
Ben puoi tu dire: "l' ho fermo 'l disiro
si a colui che volle viver solo
e che per salti fu tratto al martiro." (Paradiso 18.130-35)

But you who write only to cancel, bethink you that, you, that Peter and Paul who died for the vineyard that you are laying waste, are still alive. Though you indeed may say: "I have my desire so set on him who willed to live alone and who, for a dance, was dragged to martyrdom."

The writing metaphor juxtaposes the immoral writing activity of the corrupt pope to Dante's own poetic-prophetic enterprise – making the vision manifest ("tutta tua vision fa manifesta," Paradiso 17.128). Symmetry of position enhances the contrast between the image of the idle writer in the conclusion of canto 18 and the poet's glorifying portrait with the beneficial effect of his "grido" in the conclusion of canto 17. After foretelling the bitterness of exile and the mortal risks awaiting Dante, Cacciaguida announces the great importance of Dante's poem for the world, giving Dante's Commedia a place in God's Plan. Cacciaguida exhorts his descendant to write his poem so as to whip and shake the unjust princes of the Earth. "Writing" and "book," however, are never explicitly mentioned by Cacciaguida, as he belongs to an oral culture. What is clear in his revelation is the prophetic nature of Dante's words for the world. The association of Dante with the prophets arises, however, from the texture of the images employed (a reference to the wind of Revelations 6.13, Schnapp 237), and the digestive metaphor in particular finally hints at the written nature of Dante's work. The effect of Dante's "parola brusca" is a variation on "the little book" in Revelations 10.1-10: the "libello" is sweet to taste, bitter after the digestion. Whether bitter or not, after provoking an initial aversion, Dante's book will be a vital nourishment for humankind: its undoubtedly beneficial content is emphasised.

After the intense focus in the close of canto 17 on the effect of Dante's poetical work in the historical arena, it is not surprising that in canto 18 the poet conceives a piece of allegory hinging on the mechanism of the weapon at his disposal – human language – and on the commemoration of the great traditions he is continuing – the Biblical, the Virgilian, the Ovidian. Dante probes his
medium of expression and celebrates Christian epics all the more, since his written work will be like action in history.\(^\text{30}\)

By locking together in rhyme “segni/ingegni/regni” (80-84), the last invocation to a pagan deity in the Commedia is more than a simple reprise by Dante of a classical topos; it poignantly seals the Christian poet’s abiding faith in the possibility for human beings to be creative in history, to create durable (“longevi”), however temporal, realities of earthly happiness by an illuminated use of “segni” and “ingegni.” The invocation’s rhyme contains in a nutshell the triple object of the allegorical pageant: an allegory of language (“segni”), of arts and sciences’ prowess (“ingegni”), and of history (“regni”). At the end Dante can safely summarize the meaning of the allegorical pageant (technically a “demonstration”) he just witnessed in the Heaven of Jupiter, and be grateful to the anonymous individual souls that performed it:

O dolce stella, quali e quante gemme
mi dimostraro che nostra giustizia
effetto sia del ciel che tu ingemme!

O sweet star, how many and how bright
were the gems which made it plain to me that
our justice is the effect of the heaven which
you engem!

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**NOTES**

1 We are grateful to the readers of our paper, Pier Massimo Forni, Amilcare A. Iannucci, and Stephen Nichols Jr., for their comments on the various stages of this work. It is understood that any errors that remain are entirely our own.

2 Lino Pertile has recently suggested that the celestial writing of Paradiso 18 is primarily an autobiographical allegory of consolation (43). It seems to us that his reading does not make full justice of the complexity of Dante’s allegory.

3 All quotations of Divina Commedia are from the edition established by Giorgio Petrocchi. The English translation is by Charles Singleton. We provide in the appendix the lines of Paradiso 18 which will be the core of our analysis.

4 The “strong platonic tone” of these latter lines has been recently remarked by Riccardo Scrviano (39, n. 26).

5 Battaglia Ricci’s informative and thoughtful reading of Paradiso 18 provides many insights on the Biblical, literary, and iconographic sources for Dante’s allegory in the Heaven of Jupiter. The English of the above quotation from her essay is our own.

6 Consider Dante’s treatise on language: “Cum igitur angeli ad pandendas gloriosas eorum conceptiones habeant promptissimam atque ineffabiliem sufficientiam intellectus, qua vel alter alteri totaliter innotescit per se, vel saltim per illud fulgentissimum Speculum in quo cuncti representantur pulcherrimi atque avidissimi speculantur, nullo signo locutionis indiguisse videntur,” De Vulgari Eloquentia 1.2.3; and already above, in Paradiso 15.61-63 in Caccia-guida’s words: “ché i minori e i grandi / di questa vita miran ne lo specchio / in che, prima che
pensi, il pensier pandi." For a mirror imagery "concordance," see Miller. For a brief discussion of the word/image juxtaposition in Dante's Paradiso see also Ferrante.

7 This passage from St. Augustine's Confessions has been deemed generally relevant to Dante's dialectics between eternity and history in the Commedia by Freccero (216); for a thorough discussion of Freccero's use of quotations from Augustine, especially on language, see Cioffi's essay (68-80). Other relevant passages on the temporality of language are in Confessions 11 where St. Augustine discusses the nature of time with respect to eternity, often referring to language as a means to measure time. Among the "moderns," Stanley Fish's celebrated method of teaching literature also seems to rely on St. Augustine and Saussure when he explains: "The basis of my [method] is a consideration of the temporal flow of the reading experience and it is assumed that the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance [...] The temporal flow of the reading experience is central and even controlling [for the formation of meaning]. It literally locates with the help of the reader the object of analysis" (27, 62).

8 Our reading of Paradiso 18 is in line with Steven Botterill's view that certain contemporary critics have put too much emphasis on the "ineffability topos" in the Commedia. The aim of these critics is to demonstrate Dante's scepticism about human language and the effectiveness of poetry. Botterill sets out to refute this thesis and concludes: "The recognition of Paradiso's ultimate insufficiency does not preclude it from exerting an authority of its own, or from serving as a celebration, rather than a repudiation, of the language of poetry" (178).

9 Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida cannot conceive anything else but oral poetry, as it is obvious when he describes the renown of the famous crusaders of the Heaven of Mars as "gran voce" (Paradiso 18.32). Ahem's observation that the acrostics in the Comedy bear witness to its having been conceived for careful readership applies to the allegory hinging on verbal iconism of canto 18 (228).

10 For iconographic sources of Dante's eagle in the Heaven of Jupiter see Battaglia Ricci 18-19.

11 Pertime suggests instead that the celestial writing is intended as a memento of the Bible, whose importance powerful people have supposedly neglected (40).

12 The invocation has also another obvious function, as it brings together language, literature, and history, as we will consider in our conclusions.

13 See also Purgatorio 28.121-26: "l'acqua che vedi non surge di vena / che ristori vapor che gel converta, / come fiume ch'acquista e perde luna; / ma esce di fontana salda e certa, / che tanto dal voler di Dio riprende, / quant'ella versa da due parti aperta." The image of God as a fountain is also in St. Augustine's Confessions 13.31, a reprise of evangelical passages: "Verbum autem Deus fons vitae aeternae est et non praeeterit." While Augustine's fountain is static, Dante's fountain/God flows unhindered into the human world.

14 The oxymoron as literary expression of paradox is of course central to the poetic of the Commedia, the pivotal paradox being that of free will within predestination: "liberi soggiacete" (Purgatorio 16.80).

15 For an exhaustive discussion of verbal iconism as juxtaposition of the linear code of language and the simultaneous code of images see Dogana 50-53.

16 Colish has observed that in the purgatorial instance of God's art (Purgatorio 10.73-95), Dante expresses his inversion of Horace's dictum ut pictura poesis by defining the sculptures as "visible parlare" (330) and by providing "captioning" for those sculpted stories (the Annunciation to Mary, David's dance in front of the Ark, Emperor Trajan's clemence). In Paradiso 18 Dante seems to revisit Horace's dictum with a more complex variatio of the comparison between icons and words.

17 "It is from this point [Paradiso 14] that abstract forms begin to be exceeded by meanings. The essential truths [of the individual's resurrection in the flesh] demand concrete imagery. Once the final state of the blessed after Doomsday has been described - the new human person infused with light - reflections on the history of humankind can resume. The tale indeed resumes with the appearance of a figure which, though still geometrical, carries a primordial meaning: the cross. [...] Under the auspices of this primordial sign the re-integration of meanings to appearances resumes, and the poet can linger to consider the meaning of his own per-
sonal destiny, in the celebrated encounter with his ancestor Cacciaguida. This character interprets the interlacement of past and future of a civilization which has determined and determines the moral choices of an individual in history (Chiappelli 115-116; the English is our own). On the contrary, Jeffrey Schnapp continually underlines the sacrificial meaning of the cross appearing in the Heaven of Mars: “the Martial cantos finally propose only the consolation of self-sacrifice in imitation of Christ’s cross, the consolation of a literary cry” (238; see also 99).

18 Chierici concludes his thorough review of the interpretations of the Dantean Eagle given through the centuries by decidedly refusing any political meaning attached to this symbol. He suggests instead that the eagle represents exclusively “Cristo risorto e giustificante” (145).

19 Pertile hints at the meaning of the eagle in Paradiso 18 when he remarks that the Biblical motto consacrates the principle of the eternal and providential justice, “la Monarchia universale, che si incarna a sua volta simbolicamente nell’Aquila, dispensiera di giustizia” (40).

20 It is striking that Schnapp’s engaging reading of the center of Paradiso – although historically and politically oriented – does not take into consideration the sequence of icons, in which the cross is followed by the eagle.

21 See the exemplary reading of the eagle symbol in Purgatorio 9 by Scott (131-137).

22 The eagle bears obvious political connotations also for the context from which it develops – the Biblical motto is addressed to the rulers of the earth – and for the cross-references the reader is forced to make with all the previous occurrences of the eagle in the Commedia where Dante has used this symbol to signify the Roman Empire. The political meaning of the eagle is reinforced by its having been conceived as a living organism made of the souls of the just as well as by the fact that two out of the five souls featuring in the eagle’s eye are Roman Emperors. All these souls, speaking with one voice about the imperscrutable ways of God’s justice in cantos 19 and 20, enact the harmonious concert of wills that Dante conceived as possible under the auspices of the Universal Empire.

23 Dante’s technique of the “episodio parallelo” has been so defined and illustrated by Iannucci in a seminal study on the Commedia (1984; 85-114).

24 Dante’s boast is motivated not only by his poetic pride, but also by his belief in the superiority of the Christian point of view with respect to the classical authors: “Le metamorfosi di Dante sono più elaborate che quelle di Ovidio, più terribili di quelle di Lucano. Esse sono, comunque, superiori soprattutto a causa del loro significato. Le sue immagini – Dante afferma – rivelano la giustizia di Dio. Esse mettono in guardia il suo uditorio cristiano contro il peccato” (Iannucci 1993; 34).

25 Other common traits of the two passages are: numerology (the number five of both the “fifth word” and the “five hundred years” of the phoenix), mythical ornithology (the eagle and the phoenix), and the changing color of a human face to express shame (the woman who becomes pale in the simile of Paradiso, and Vanni Fucci blushing for shame on meeting Dante in Inferno).

26 As for Dante’s attitude towards the classical tradition, Picone observes: “The essential function of the canon of auctores in the Commedia seems therefore to be that of demonstrating the incompleteness of the classical world – the absence of full meaning which can only be granted by the Christian world.” (1997; 61). “Per Dante gli auctores rivestono veramente una funzione analoga (benché limitatamente al campo dell’esercizio poetico) a quella esercitata dai profeti veterotestamentari. La loro parola infatti si pone, nella realtà dei fatti artistici, in uno stesso rapporto di annuncio/completamento, di figura/inveramento, nei confronti della parola dei poeti moderni. Insomma [...] Dante proietta sul canone degli auctores la griglia interpretativa e giustificativa della tipologia biblica” (1993; 115).

27 In this connection, see also the passage in Vita Nuova 24 where Dante somehow disparagingly compares John the Baptist with Cavalcanti’s beloved, whose role is limited to preceding and announcing Christ/Beatrice.

28 “Coscienza fusca / o de la propria o de l’altrui vergogna / pur sentirà la tua parola brusca. / Ma non di men, rimossa ogne menzogna, / tutta tua vision fa manifesta; / e lascia pur grattar dov’è
Among the many references to the writing of the prophets in Judeo-Christian tradition, the digestive metaphor from John’s *Revelations* noticed by Mineo (258-59) is very indicative of Dante’s strong association of his writing with the Apocalypse.

Commenting on Dante’s treatment of the classical poets of the “bella scola” in *Inferno* 4, Iannucci remarks: “Da questa prospettiva [ideologica] egli li ha già sorpassati. La sua posizione nel gruppo lo suggerisce. Il suo poema completà e sorpasserà i loro, soprattutto nel contenuto, guidato come esso è, da una trazione analogica” (“Dante” 29).

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Io vidi in quella giovial facella
lo sfavillar de l’amor che lì era
segnare a lì occhi miei nostra favella.
E come augelli surti di riviera
quasi congratulando a lor pasture,
fan no di sé or tonda or lunga schiera,
sì dentro ai lumi sante creature
volitando cantavano, e faciensi
or D, or I, or L in sue figure.
Prima, cantando, a sua nota moviensi;
poi, diventando l’un di questi segni,
un poco s’arrestavano e taciensi.
O diva pegasea, che lì ’ngegni

APPENDIX

Io vidi in quella giovial facella
lo sfavillar de l’amor che lì era
segnare a lì occhi miei nostra favella.
fai gloriosi e rendili longevi, ed essi teco le cittadi e i regni, illustrami di te, sì ch’io rilevi le lor figure come io le ho concette: paia tua possa in questi versi brevi! Mostrarsi dunque in cinque volte sette vocali e consonanti: e io notai le parti si come mi parver dette. “DILIGITE IUSTITIAM”, primai fu verbo e nome di tutto ’l dipinto; “QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM” fur sezzai. Poscia ne l’emme del vocabol quinto rimasero ordinate; sì che Giove pareva argento lì d’oro distinto. E vidi scendere altre luci dove era il colmo dell’emme; e ìi quetarsi cantando, credo, il ben che a se le move. Poi, come nel percuoter de’ ciocchi arsi surgono innumerabili faville, onde li stolti sogliono augurarsi, resurger parver quindi più di mille luci, e salir, qual assai e qual poco sì come il sol che l’accende sortille; e quietata ciascuna in suo loco, la testa e ’l collo d’una aguglia vidi rappresentare a quel distinto foco. Quei che dipinge lì non ha chi ’l guidi; ma esso guida, e da lui si rammenta quella virtù che è forma per li nidi. L’altra beatitudo, che contenta pareva prima di ingigliarsi all’emme, con poco moto seguitò la ’mprenta. O dolce stella, quali e quante gemme mi dimostraro che nostra giustizia effetto sia del ciel che tu ingemme!

I saw in that torch of Jove the sparkling of the love that was there, trace out our speech to my eyes; and as birds, risen from the shore, as if rejoicing together at their pasture, make of themselves now a round flock, now some other shape, so within the lights holy creatures were singing as they flew, and in their figures made of themselves now D, now I, now L. At first, as they sang, they moved to their own notes; then, as they became one of these characters, they stopped a little and were silent.
O divine Pegasea, who gives glory unto men of genius and render them long-lived, as they, through you, the cities and the kingdoms, il-

lumine me with yourself that I may set forth their shapes, as I have them in conception; let your power appear in these brief lines. They displayed themselves then, in five times seven vowels and consonants; and I took note of the parts as they appeared in utterance to me. DILIGITE IUSTITIAM were the first verb and substantive of all the de-
sign; QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM were the last. Then, ordered in the M of the fifth word they stayed, so that Jove seemed silver in that place, pricked out with gold; and I saw other lights descending where the top of the M was, and become quiet there, singing, I believe, the Good that draws them to Itself. Then, as on the striking of burning logs there rise innumerable sparks, wherefrom the fool-

ish are wont to draw auguries, so thence there seemed to rise again more than a thousand lights, and mount, some much, some little, even as the Sun which kindles them allotted them; and when each had rested in its place, I saw the head and the neck of an eagle represented by that patterned fire.

He who there paints has none to guide Him, but He Himself does guide, and from Him is recognized that virtue which shapes nests. The rest of the blessed spirits, which had first seemed content to form a lily on the M, with a slight motion completed the design. O sweet star, how many and how bright were the gems which made it plain to me that our justice is the effect of the heaven which you engem!