

ARACHNE, ARGUS, AND ST. JOHN:
TRANSGRESSIVE ART IN DANTE AND OVID

Teodolinda Barolini

In lieu of the traditional portrayal of Dante as an ingenuous and filial devotee of his classical forerunners, American critics have recently proposed a less benign poet who deliberately revises the work of even his most beloved precursors. The paradigm that has emerged from this recent critical interest in Dante's relations with his classical precursors, not to mention his relations with precursors in general, is a spiral-like configuration of confiscation and correction, whereby Dante avails himself of the genius of classical antiquity while at the same time revising it in such a way as to demonstrate its defects and limitations, in a word, its non-Christianity. Thus, the *Commedia's* classical intertextuality works to make palpable, by contrast to the shadows of Limbo, the bright — and especially the truthful — new world of the Christian dispensation. While, in the case of Virgil, this paradigm operates both with respect to the text of the *Aeneid* and with respect to the Virgilian persona Dante constructs for his poem, in the case of Ovid such practices are almost exclusively textual, directed at the *Metamorphoses* rather than at an Ovidian persona who appears only briefly in Limbo.¹ They are also much more overt; Dante never uses vis-à-vis Virgil the harsh and strident tone with which in *Inferno* XXV he silences the poet of the *Metamorphoses*, announcing that he has bested him in the art of poetic transformation:

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 sì ch'amendue le forme
a cambiar lor matera fosser pronte.

(*Inf.* XXV. 97-102)²

Let Ovid be silent regarding Cadmus and Arethusa, for — if he in poetizing converts the one into a serpent and the other into a fountain — I do not envy him, since he never transmuted two natures front to front so that both forms were ready to change their substance.

This critique, which implicitly defines pagan metamorphosis as repetitive, non-regenerative, and dead-ended, and contrasts it to Christian metamorphosis, conversion in this life and rebirth in the next, handily exemplifies Dante's treatment of Ovid within the *Commedia*.³ If in this essay I distance myself somewhat from this model of a revisionistic or corrective poet, it is not because I do not believe that it is frequently the operative paradigm or because I am recanting the readings put forth in my earlier work. Rather, I am concerned that our insistence on Dante's corrections of classical antiquity, which began as an attempt to replace impressionistic critical enthusiasms with a more rigorous assessment of the poem's intertextuality, now risks binding the text's paradoxes in a straightjacket of medieval orthodoxy that is every bit as confining and impoverishingly unilateral.⁴ My view of a *dialectical* Dante has deepened to the point that I consider it imperative to demonstrate both sides of the equation: not just the corrections that make Dante appear so orthodox, but also the emulations that make him so radical.

We must be careful not to settle too complacently into an *in malo/in bono* approach, remembering that Dante is a supremely dialectical poet, who always preserves both horns of whatever dilemma he is confronting. With respect to classical antiquity, and especially the poets he defies theological protocol to celebrate as "la bella scola" in his Limbo, Dante displays a fervor of appreciation that is an integral component of his prehumanistic *forma mentis* and of his entire poem, and that cannot simply be discounted later on, from heaven's privileged perspective, as an outgrown infernal commodity. Limbo is indeed a place of shadow in comparison to the dazzlement of paradise, but we should never underestimate the significance of the light that Dante assigns to the "honorable folk" of the noble castle, the special dispensation he

imagines — having already imagined, against all precedent, that they belong in Limbo at all — that their honored names have won for them in heaven. The tranquil and undramatic pace of *Inferno* IV should not cause us to overlook the melodramatic and theologically willful nature of the canto's implied poetic choices, its suppression of unbaptized infants (for whom, if for anyone, theologians declared their sympathies) in favor of pagan poets and philosophers.⁵ While it is true, as scholars of the Renaissance never tire of pointing out, that Dante places Aristotle and the others in hell, it is also true, and much more relevant to Dante's contemporaries, and thus to Dante himself, that he places them in Limbo. My point is that, although the poem is replete with "corrections" of Ovid, one should not therefore leap to the assumption that Dante is correcting out of existence the enormous tribute implied by the heterodoxy of *Inferno* IV.⁶ That tribute exists, and is one horn of an unresolved dialectic that we must handle with care, lest we smooth over the tensions that, precisely by impairing the stability of the mighty edifice, provide us an unmatched source of insight into its construction.

As it happens, *Inferno* XXV amply illustrates such tensions; its strong dose of what Auerbach calls Dante's "tensely dramatic relationship to his own work"⁷ has fostered a recent critical debate focused on Dante's poetic pride. In 1973 Richard Terdiman framed the issue in terms of Dante's "problematical virtuosity"; noting that his "extreme pride in his craftsmanship, which seems to force its way into the poem here in the Seventh Bolgia, posed a serious moral problem within Dante's system of belief, and necessarily requires a correction," Terdiman suggests that such correction comes later in the poem, with Oderisi's critique of artistic pride in *Purgatorio* XI and with the allegedly non-virtuosic simplicity of the *Paradiso*'s Beatrician poetry.⁸ Although he posits sufficient self-awareness on Dante's part to mandate a correction, his essential argument is that Dante is in the grip of historical forces; in this respect, he echoes Auerbach, who had argued that Dante's very success in figuring reality poses a danger to the divine order he wishes to celebrate.⁹ Taking issue with Terdiman's assumption that the poetic pride of canto XXV is "spontaneous and unconscious," Peter Hawkins proposes a fully conscious poet, whose error in the *bolgia* of the thieves is "both deliberate and heuristic," part of a plan that includes the juxtaposition of this *bolgia* with Ulysses: "In Cantos XXIV-XXV Dante deliberately loosens the grip on his genius and in his subsequent flight shows the tendency in

all poets to become a Phaeton, an Icarus, a Ulysses."¹⁰ With respect to subsequent correction, Hawkins turns to Oderisi, to *Purgatorio* XXIV's demonstration of a non-Ulyssean "willingness to fly 'di retro al dittator,' " and to the "redeemed *poesis*" of the *Paradiso*. It is interesting that, for all their differences, both critics approvingly cite the lesson Dante learns from Oderisi; on the terrace of pride, they tell us, the artistic hubris displayed earlier in the poem is deflated. In challenging this view, I will begin by looking at Dante's Ovid-like handling of the mythological figure most associated with artistic pride, Arachne.

Arachne is first invoked in the context of a description of Geryon, who in many ways sets the stage for our discourse; he is a monster derived from classical mythology whose patently fictional characteristics Dante first heightens and then uses as the stake on which to gamble the veracity of his poem:

Sempre a quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna
 de l'uom chiuder le labbra fin ch'el puote,
 però che senza colpa fa vergogna;
 ma qui tacer nol posso; e per le note
 di questa comedia, lettor, ti giuro,
 s'elle non sien di lunga grazia vòte,
 ch'i' vidi per quell' aere grosso e scuro
 venir notando una figura in suso,
 maravigliosa ad ogne cor sicuro . . .
 (*Inf.* XVI. 124-32)

To that truth which has the face of a lie a man should always close his lips as long as he can, since without fault it brings him shame, but here I cannot be silent; and by the notes of this comedy, reader, I swear to you — so may they not be empty of long grace — that I saw through that dense and dark air a figure come swimming upward, a cause for marvel to even the most secure of hearts. . . .

In this context, already brimming with artistic self-consciousness, the poet introduces the Lydian weaver, comparing the designs on Geryon's flanks to the webs woven by Arachne: "né fuor tai tele per Aragne im-

poste" (*Inf.* XVII.18: nor were such webs loomed by Arachne). Here too — not coincidentally the locus of the poem's self-baptism as a "comedia," a term that should be glossed, as I have argued elsewhere, with the earlier "ver c'ha faccia di menzogna" — Dante establishes a precedent that has important repercussions for our theme of artistic pride and the episode of *Inferno* XXV: to wit, the least credible of his representations will be supported by the most unyielding and overt of authorial interventions.¹¹ Thus, just as in the Geryon episode Dante weds "maravigliosa" with "vidi," thereby closing off all escape routes to both himself and us by going out of his way to insist that he sees something that he acknowledges is incredible — and thereby, incidentally, creating a "truth that has the face of a lie" — so, faced with the equally fantastic sight of the thieves' metamorphoses, the poet opts for a bold frontal attack on the reader's credulity: "Se tu se' or, lettore, a creder lento / ciò ch'io dirò, non sarà maraviglia, / ché io che 'l vidi, a pena il mi consento" (*Inf.* XXV.46-48: If you are now, reader, slow to believe what I will say, it is no wonder, since I who saw it hardly consent to it myself).

The Geryon episode is fundamental to the *Commedia's* poetics, which we might call the poetics of the *mira vera* — true marvels — using the expression Dante coins for the miraculous flute, an instrument that produces not sounds but words, in one of his *Eclogues*.¹² This oxymoronic formulation demonstrates the poet's awareness of his own intransigence and corresponds precisely to the equally oxymoronic juxtaposition of "maravigliosa" ("mira") with "io vidi" ("vera"). Far from giving quarter, backing off when the *materia* being represented is too *maravigliosa* to be credible, Dante raises the ante by using such moments to underscore his poem's veracity, its status as historical scribal record of what he saw. Thus, in another of the *Inferno's* moments of greatest *maraviglia*, as the narrator sets out to represent the headless Bertran de Born, he reapplies the "Geryon principle," once again challenging the reader to disbelieve him:

Ma io rimasi a riguardar lo stuolo,
 e vidi cosa ch'io avrei paura,
 senza più prova, di contarla solo;
 se non che coscienza m'assicura,
 la buona compagnia che l'uom francheggia
 sotto l'asbergo del sentirsi pura.

Io vidi certo, e ancor par ch'io 'l veggia,
un busto sanza capo (*Inf.* XXVIII. 112-19)

But I remained to look over the troop, and I saw a thing that I would be afraid even to recount without more proof, except that my conscience — the good companion that gives a man courage under the hauberk of feeling itself pure — reassures me. I certainly saw, and still seem to see, a trunk without a head

Dante's strategy is bold, but it is also logical. By underlining what is apparently least verisimilar in his representation, and by letting us know that he fully shares our assessment regarding this material's lack of verisimilitude, which he does by posing as reluctant to represent it lest we lose confidence in him, the narrator secures our confidence for the rest of his story. Why is the plight of the lustful or the gluttonous any more verisimilar, or any more credible, than the plight of the thieves or the schismatics? By urging us to identify heightened drama with decreased verisimilitude and credibility, Dante is subtly encouraging us to accept his text's basic fictions and assumptions: usurers with purses around their necks are acceptable, but flying monsters are not. In this way he becomes the arbiter of our skepticism, allowing it to blossom forth only in authorially sanctioned moments of high drama.

The question of verisimilitude is brought most explicitly to the fore on purgatory's terrace of pride, where the travelers encounter visual *mira vera*, visual analogues to the artistic wonder of the singing flute. As the flute bypasses its normal role as a purveyor of art to become a purveyor of reality, bringing Mopsus' words to life, so the marble engravings of this terrace are not "veri-similar" but the *ver* — truth — itself: "Morti li morti e i vivi parean vivi: / non vide mei di me chi vide il vero" (*Purg.* XII.67-68: The dead seemed dead and the living alive: he who saw the truth saw no better than I). By concentrating on the divine authorship of the engravings, to which the poet alerts us only after the lengthy ecphrases of *Purgatorio* X, we have allowed Dante to obscure the crucial question: why does he choose to posit an art that is the equivalent of life, deliberately putting himself in the position of having to re-present God's more than verisimilar art with his own? As I have shown elsewhere, Dante's ecphrases are skillfully wrought, compounded of narrative devices

that work to make the engravings affect the reader as real, blurring the boundary between art and life;¹³ these same devices also blur the distinction between God's representation and the representation that represents it. As the sculpted figures in the engravings are portrayed as real, so the "real" souls of the terrace are portrayed as works of art: their speech patterns are made to recall those of the sculpted widow, and they are likened to caryatids,¹⁴ whose non-real suffering causes real distress in the observer. Dante thus sustains rather than lessens our confusion regarding what is art and what is life; his rendering of the engravings and their context conspires to suggest the interchangeability of the divine and human artists. And, indeed, what are Dante's textual goals if not the achievement of a supreme verisimilitude, an art in which "the dead seem dead and the living alive"?

Dante is not unaware of the dangers inherent in such goals, the dangers, in fact, of claiming that his subject is "quella materia ond'io son fatto scriba" (*Par. X.27*: that matter of which I am made the scribe). His awareness causes him not to desist from what he is doing, but to invoke the figure of Ulysses, who in my opinion functions in the *Commedia* as a lightning rod placed in the poem to attract and defuse the poet's consciousness of the presumption involved in anointing oneself *scriba Dei*. Among the examples of pride, therefore, we find Arachne, accompanied by the adjective *folle*, which signals Ulysses and reminds us that she is his surrogate in the sphere of art:¹⁵

O folle Aragne, sì vedea io te
 già mezza ragna, trista in su li stracci
 de l'opera che mal per te si fé. (*Purg. XII. 43-45*)

O mad Arachne, I saw you already half spider, wretched
 on the rags of the work that evilly by you was done.

Although commentators have routinely indicated the *Metamorphoses* as the source for this exemplum, none to my knowledge has noted that Ovid's account of Arachne and Dante's terrace of pride share an authorial self-consciousness that is underscored by their common use of ecphrasis (wherein one form of representation undertakes to represent another), or that the Ovidian story demonstrates the dangers of human representation in a way that is extremely suggestive in the context of *Purgatorio*

X-XII.¹⁶ Like Daedalus, Arachne is famous for her art (“non illa loco nec origine gentis / clara, sed arte fuit” [7-8]: she was famous not for place of birth or ancestry, but for her art), the art of weaving in which she will yield pride of place not even to Minerva.¹⁷ Like Phaeton, whose steeds run wild (“ruunt” [2.167, 204]), Arachne, called “temeraria” (“reckless” [32]), rushes to her fate: “in sua fata ruit” (51). Ovid’s language underscores the connection between textile pursuits and textuality: when Arachne challenges the goddess to a contest, the narrator describes how the contestants set up their webs (“intendunt . . . telas” [54]), how different colors are woven (“textitur” [62]) onto the loom, and finally how each embroiders into her fabric an ancient story (“vetus . . . argumentum” [69]). As God inscribes his warnings into stone, so Minerva (for whom Ovid interchanges verbs like “pingit” and “inscribit”) attempts to warn her rival (“aemula” [83]) with embroidered examples (“exemplis” [83]). But, if the goddess’ work is so effective that one of her figures appears to weep (“lacrimare videtur” [100]), Arachne’s is such that not only does Europa seem to be looking back and calling to her companions on the shore, but an observer would think that the bull and the sea were real: “verum taurum, freta vera putares” (104).

Arachne, *aemula* indeed, matches verisimilitude with greater verisimilitude. Thematically too, Arachne is the goddess’ rival, answering Minerva’s pictures of stately gods and humbled mortals with pictures of deceitful gods and violated mortals. Minerva’s “text” is double: it shows the gods gathered for an artistic creation of sorts, the naming of Athens, and, in the corners, it depicts men and women changed from their original forms as punishment for their presumption; those who dared to emulate the gods (“nomina summorum sibi qui tribuere deorum” [89]: who attributed to themselves the names of the most high gods) have become a frame to set off the gods’ accomplishments. Arachne counters with an act of creation that is not only as accomplished as Minerva’s — “Non illud Pallas, non illud carpere Livor / possit opus” (129-30: Not Pallas, not Envy, could criticize that work) — but that sets out to expose the gods’ failings; her Olympians use their powers not to create a great city, but to adopt other shapes in order to deceive and seduce. Both embroiderers weave miniature versions of the text that tells their tale, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Minerva shows the metamorphoses of men, Arachne the metamorphoses of gods, Ovid the metamorphoses of both.¹⁸ In this passage, Ovid — like Dante on the terrace of pride — depicts

a depicting strangely like his own; like Dante, he seems aware of the perils of his own project.

Also like Dante, Ovid plays with the slippery boundaries of mimesis; he too offers an example of ultimate verisimilitude, much like that of the purgatorial engravings, in his story of Pygmalion, whose female sculpture comes to life, and whose art is so skilled that it conceals itself: “ars adeo latet arte sua” (10.252). Perhaps not surprisingly, given their common concern with crossing boundaries, Dante follows his eclogue’s singing flute with an allusion to another Ovidian figure who confuses the boundaries between nature and art, the animate and inanimate:¹⁹ Midas.²⁰ The flute, in its ability to form words, is said to be similar to the reeds that exposed the shame of Midas’ ass’s ears by repeating the secret that his slave had whispered into a hole in the ground; the ass’s ears, we recall, were visited upon Midas by Apollo when the king assininely judged Pan’s playing superior to that of the god. Dante drastically conflates the two phases of Midas’ story — first, his wish for the golden touch, and the subsequent bathing in the river that removes it; second, his interference in the contest between Pan and Apollo, rewarded by the ass’s ears that, by contrast, he must learn to live with — in four dense verses:

Tibia non sentis quod fit virtute canora
numinis et similis natis de murmure cannis,
murmure pandenti turpissima tempora regis
qui iussu Bromii Pactolida tinxit arenam? (50-53)

Do you not understand that the flute is made songful
by virtue of a god and is similar to the reeds born of
the whisper, the whisper that revealed the most shameful
temples of the king who by order of Bromius [Bacchus]
colored the Pactolian sands?

Dante’s version of the Ovidian account harbors two acts that could be exploited as examples of artistic hubris: Midas’ transgression of the boundary between nature and art, recalled by the colored sands that absorb the golden tincture as it washes out of the king; and the misplaced critical judgment that leads to his ass’s ears and thus to his barber’s revelatory murmur. But, apart from the censure implicit in “turpissima

tempora,” Dante does not evoke Ovid to condemn artistic hubris; rather, he compares the singing flute, its successful transgression of the boundary between art and life, to the reeds that have been rendered, by virtue of a god — *virtute numinis* — similarly transgressive. The breath of life that Apollo gives to the reeds foretells that life that is conferred upon the flute: Ovid’s art anticipates Dante’s.²¹

The position that holds the prideful stance of *Inferno* XXV a self-correcting aberration posits a counter-Ovidian typology. In Peter Hawkins’ study of *Purgatorio* XXXII, Ovid is viewed as “a counter-type for the poet of the *Commedia*,” with the result that Dante’s use of Ovidian material in deploring his inability to represent himself while falling asleep signals the “narrowly aesthetic and ultimately self-serving preoccupations” into which Dante as poet is still capable of momentarily lapsing and from which he is roused by the Scripturally-attuned voice that awakens him.²² Comparing his slumber to that of Argus when Mercury’s narrative prowess finally conquers all his wakeful eyes, the poet wishes that he could represent the experience of falling asleep:

S’io potessi ritrar come assonnaro
li occhi spietati udendo di Siringa,
li occhi a cui pur vegghiar costò sì caro;
come pintor che con essempro pinga,
disegnerei com’io m’addormentai;
ma qual vuol sia che l’assonnar ben finga.
(*Purg.* XXXII. 64-69)

If I could depict how the pitiless eyes closed in sleep while listening about Syrinx — eyes whose wakefulness cost so dear — then as a painter who paints from his model, I would draw how I fell asleep; but let someone else be the one who adequately represents the act of falling asleep.

This passage is followed by a simile in which the pilgrim’s awakening is likened to that of the apostles Peter, James, and John when they awaken after the sight of the transfigured Christ. Far from disputing the pointed transition that Dante has effected from classical to Christian experience, I would sharpen it by noting his emphasis on Argus’ eyes in the anaphoric

“li occhi spietati . . . li occhi a cui,” and by pointing out that on the one other occasion in which Argus is mentioned in the *Commedia* his eyes are also a focal point. Occurring as it does within these same visionary cantos that end the second canticle, the passage in question is undoubtedly related to the passage in canto XXXII; again, the context is a self-conscious authorial meditation on representation, and again we find a marked transition from classical to Christian, indeed from Argus to St. John:

Ognuno era pennuto di sei ali;
le penne piene d'occhi; e li occhi d'Argo,
se fosser vivi, sarebber cotali.
A descriver lor forme più non spargo
rime, lettor; ch'altra spesa mi strigne,
tanto ch'a questa non posso esser largo;
ma leggi Ezechiël, che li dipigne
come li vide da la fredda parte
venir con vento e con nube e con igne;
e quali i troverai ne le sue carte,
tali eran quivi, salvo ch'a le penne
Giovanni è meco e da lui si diparte.
(*Purg.* XXIX. 94-105)

Each one was feathered with six wings, and the feathers were full of eyes; the eyes of Argus, if they were alive, would be like these. In describing their forms I will scatter no more rhymes, reader, for other spending constrains me, so much so that I cannot be generous in this one. But read Ezekiel, who depicts them as he saw them come from the cold parts with wind and cloud and fire, and as you find them in his pages, so were they here, except that in the matter of the wings John is with me and departs from him.

Twice, then, a transition is enacted from the eyes of Argus to the eyes of Christian visionaries, with the common denominator on the Christian side of the equation being the author of the Apocalypse, the sighted text par excellence. The issue is emphatically sight — what Argus sees,

what the pilgrim sees, what Ezekiel sees, what John sees, what Dante sees, what Ovid sees — and Dante is certainly letting us know that he sees better than Ovid (but let us not forget that he sees better than Ezekiel too!). The clarity of vision to which Dante aspires is that of John, who foresaw the very vicissitudes of the church that are revealed to the pilgrim in *Purgatorio* XXXII; as a telling periphrasis later in the poem reminds us, John is “quei che vide tutti i tempi gravi, / pria che morisse, de la bella sposa / che s’acquistò con la lancia e coi clavi” (*Par.* XXXII.127-29: he who saw, before he died, all the grave times of the beautiful bride who was won with the spear and nails). John is invoked in the *Purgatorio*’s final cantos with unusual frequency (we should bear in mind that the “Vangelista,” as John is called in a context informed by the same politicized apocalyptic imagery that imbues *Purgatorio* XXXII, and the author of Revelation are for Dante one and the same): in canto XXIX, Dante’s identification with John is expressed by way of the formula “Giovanni è meco,” in which the poet tells us that John agrees with him in the matter of the wings of the “quattro animali” who surround the chariot; also in canto XXIX we find the Apocalypse personified in a way that underscores the text’s sightedness, by an old man who comes forward “dormendo, con la faccia arguta” (144: sleeping, with a penetrating gaze); finally, in the simile of canto XXXII, “Pietro e Giovanni e Iacopo” see their master changed back to his earlier form after seeing his transfigured form in vision. John’s triple appearance in the allegorical procession, as one of the winged animals figuring the gospels, as one of the minor Epistles (“Poi vidi quattro in umile paruta” [142]: Then I saw four with humble appearance), and finally, “di retro da tutti,” as the *senex* figuring the Apocalypse, need not per se indicate the special importance Dante attaches to him. However, Dante also finds a way to introduce his name, alone among the four evangelists, and to pair it with that of the prophet Ezekiel, thus creating a visionary configuration that is reprised and brought home by the sleep-walking *senex* and the awakened apostle of the simile.²³

Argus’ sight leads Juno to choose him as guardian for Io and thus to his death at Mercury’s hands; therefore, his sight costs him dearly (“li occhi a cui pur vegghiar costò sì caro”), costs him his life. Sight leads to sleep leads to death. In the case of the apostles, and in the case of the poet who will shortly be enjoined to transcribe what he sees — “Però, in pro del mondo che mal vive, / al carro tieni or li occhi, e quel che

vedi, / ritornato di là, fa che tu scrive" (*Purg.* XXXII.103-5: Therefore, on behalf of the world that lives badly, fix *your eyes* on the chariot, and — when you've returned over there — make sure you write what *you see* [italics mine]) — sight follows sleep rather than preceding it: sleep leads to sight leads to life. Visionary sleep occurs regularly in the *Commedia* — we think of Ugolino, of the dreams of *Purgatorio*, of St. Dominic's godmother, who "vide nel sonno il mirabile frutto / ch'uscir dovea di lui e de le rede" (*Par.* XII.65-66: saw in sleep the marvellous fruit that was to come from him and from his heirs); indeed, as far as we can infer from his elliptical comments, visionary sleep underlies the experience of the *Commedia's* author, who is "pien di sonno a quel punto / che la verace via abbandonai" (*Inf.* I.11-12: full of sleep at that point when I abandoned the true path), and whose vision draws to an end "perché 'l tempo fugge che t'assonna" (*Par.* XXXII.139: because the time that puts you to sleep flees). This comment of St. Bernard's is proleptically glossed by the Apocalypse-*senex* of *Purgatorio* XXIX, whose "faccia arguta" penetrates the unknown while he sleeps; for Dante as for John, the *Vangelista*, this kind of sleep does not compromise the truth of a vision, but rather makes vision possible. The vision afforded the apostles in their sleep, the vision afforded the *senex* in his sleep, the "visione / estatica" afforded the pilgrim on the terrace of wrath²⁴ — all are analogues to the vision afforded Dante as author of this poem, analogues to the *Commedia*.²⁵

The transition from Argus to St. John reminds us that Dante sees better than Ovid, but it does not therefore signify that the poet's expressed desire to represent the Ovidian act of falling asleep is wrong. To represent the act that Dante denotes with the verb *assonnare* would be to represent transition into the state that furnishes the *materia* of the poem, and especially the *Paradiso*, the state that, as Augustine speculates, may have furnished St. Paul his experience of the third heaven.²⁶ Transition in the *Commedia* is regularly represented by sleep, a quintessentially liminal condition that participates in both life and death ("Io non mori' e non rimasi vivo," says the poet in a moment of heightened transition, as he faces Lucifer and prepares to leave hell); the pilgrim's faints in early hell and his dreams in purgatory are literalizations of sleep as a metaphor for transition. But the verb *assonnare* is reserved by Dante for supreme transition, for the rapt reverence that overcomes him in the presence of Beatrice, bowing him over "come l'uom ch'assonna"

(*Par.* VII.15: like the man who falls asleep), a phrase that yields the poem's only use of *assonnare* besides St. Bernard's "l tempo fugge che t'assonna" and the two uses in our Argus passage of *Purgatorio* XXXII: "S'io potessi ritrar come assonnaro . . . ma qual vuol sia che l'assonnar ben finga." The somnolence that overcomes the pilgrim at the sound of Beatrice's name is related to the ecstatic torpor that overcomes him on the terrace of wrath, where the ability to stumble along "a guisa di cui vino o sonno piega" (*Purg.* XV.123: like one whom wine or sleep bends over),²⁷ until he frees himself "sì com' om che dal sonno si slega" (119: as a man who unbinds himself from sleep), indicates a waking sleep, like that of the old man figuring the Apocalypse in the procession.²⁸ If he could depict the *assonnare* of Argus' eyes, says the poet, then "disegnerei com'io m'addormentai." What he wishes he could represent is the transition — the metamorphosis — into the potentially visionary state — not visionary for Argus, who could only see while awake, but visionary for those, like the disciples in the simile, who can see while sleeping — that generates the non-false error of the poem.²⁹

We come back, via Dante's metamorphic *assonnare*, a marvellous fusion of Ovidian and Johannine elements, to the problem of transgressive art. The problem is, to put it bluntly, the circular scale created by claiming to be God's scribe. One cannot cite Dante's scribal role, his avowed following behind the *dittator*, as a sign of his poetic humility; *he* realizes, even if we do not — having succumbed to a textual metaphysics that prevents us from analyzing the conditions that give rise to the illusion that such a metaphysics is possible — that his is a self-assigned scribal role, destining his humility to plunge toward pride and his pride to convert to humility in dizzying succession. In other words, he knows that he wrote the words that assign him his prophetic/poetic task; he knows that he wrote what Beatrice, Cacciaguida, and St. Peter tell him, as pilgrim, to do. Very little attempt has been made to study the strategies whereby Dante works to prevent us from knowing what he knows, the unremitting and subliminal narrative techniques that make us accept the poem's claims unquestioningly, answering questions about its poet with answers that he confected. We have distinguished between the pilgrim and the poet, and now we distinguish the poet at one stage of his journey from the poet at a later stage; indeed, our willingness to label him at given moments smug or prideful, narcissistic or self-serving, testifies to our need to develop perspective on a poem that gives us

precious little purchase. Distinguishing what Dante *says* from what Dante *does*, however, we realize that the narrative events (as compared to the thematic events) of the terrace of pride hardly constitute a correction of the narrative events of the *bolgia* of the thieves; instead *Purgatorio XII*'s acrostic, the inscribing of a visual art of Dante's own into the representation of God's visual art, is an emblem of the paradoxical situation in which Dante has placed himself, whereby his art becomes an Arachnean act of rivalling emulation. This paradox is inherent in any textuality that sets itself up, without the benefit of a literally biblical pedigree, as an analogue to St. John's. Moreover, far from diminishing as the poem proceeds, the problem becomes more acute: the *Paradiso*, if it is to exist at all, cannot fail to be transgressive; the poet cannot fail to be a Ulysses, since only a *trapassar del segno* will be able to render the experience of *trasumanar*.³⁰ In this sense, I endorse Auerbach's conclusion that the *Commedia*'s form imperils its content; but I would add that Dante knows it.³¹

New York University

NOTES

1. For Dante's handling of the *Aeneid*, see Robert Hollander, *Il Virgilio dantesco: tragedia nella Commedia* (Firenze, 1983); for Dante's handling of his Virgil-character, see Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton, 1984), chap. 3. Previous studies in this area were devoted to a fairly straightforward appraisal of the extent of Dante's use of a given author (see *Dante's Poets*, pp. 188-99, for a survey of Dante's indebtedness to his classical authors and for relevant bibliography).
2. The text of the *Commedia* is from the critical edition of Giorgio Petrocchi, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, 4 vols. (Milano, 1966-1967); translations are mine.
3. See *Dante's Poets*, pp. 223-26, where I argue that "the superiority of Dante's metamorphoses derives from that which they parody; as negative versions of one of the greatest of Christian mysteries, the dual nature of Christ, they resonate with a power not available to their classical counterparts" (p. 224).
4. Such swings are a feature of Dante studies: I am reminded of previous attempts to align all of Dante's theology with that of St. Thomas.

5. Giorgio Padoan attests eloquently to Dante's conscious and deliberate flouting of theological thought on Limbo in "Il Limbo dantesco," orig. 1969, rpt. *Il pio Enea, l'empio Ulisse* (Ravenna, 1977), pp. 103-24.
6. Padoan notes the added difficulty posed by the not entirely virtuous lives of some of the pagans — including Ovid — whom Dante chooses to celebrate: "anzi tra quelle addirittura accolte nel nobile castello, erano Lucrezia suicida, Cesare di cui nello stesso *Purgatorio* si ricordano gli atti contro natura, Ovidio la cui vita fu notoriamente tutt'altro che irreprensibile, e così via" (p. 115). In Ovid's case, the problem is further aggravated by the fact that he lived beyond the birth of Christ (see Padoan, p. 106).
7. *Mimesis* (1946; rpt. Princeton, 1974), p. 185.
8. "Problematical Virtuosity: Dante's Depiction of the Thieves," *Dante Studies*, 91 (1973), 27-45; quotation p. 42.
9. At the end of the "Farinata and Cavalcante" chapter in *Mimesis*, Auerbach writes: "And by virtue of this immediate and admiring sympathy with man, the principle, rooted in the divine order, of the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns *against* that order, makes it subservient to its own purposes, and obscures it. The image of man eclipses the image of God. Dante's work made man's Christian-figural being a reality, and destroyed it in the very process of realizing it. The tremendous pattern was broken by the overwhelming power of the images it had to contain" (p. 202).
10. "Virtuosity and Virtue: Poetic Self-Reflection in the *Commedia*," *Dante Studies*, 98 (1980), 1-18; quotations in this sentence from pp. 9, 1, and 11, in the next sentence from pp. 13, 14.
11. I argue that *comedia* = "ver c'ha faccia di menzogna" in *Dante's Poets*, pp. 213-14, where I note that I disagree with Franco Ferrucci, who takes the passage as Dante's indication to us that his poem is merely metaphorical, made of lies ("Comedia," 1971, rpt. "The Meeting with Geryon," in *The Poetics of Disguise* [Ithaca, 1980], pp. 66-102), and agree instead with Robert Hollander, who writes that Dante claims for Geryon "a literal verity" ("Dante *Theologus-Poeta*," 1976, rpt. in *Studies in Dante* [Ravenna, 1980], pp. 39-89; quotation p. 76). I strongly disagree, however, with Hollander's belief that Dante's handling of the Geryon episode involves an "authorial wink," and, by the same token, with his suggestion that Dante's "Giovanni è meco" (in the matter of the wings of the beasts who represent the gospels in the procession) indicates that he "was not without a sense of humor" (p. 77). There is no humor, no Aristostesque irony, in these strategies. They are the most exposed weapons in a massive and unrelenting campaign to coerce our suspension of disbelief, a campaign that the history of the *Commedia's* reception shows to have been remarkably successful.

12. In his second eclogue, Dante, personified as the aged Tityrus, receives the young Melibeus, who plays him Mopsus' (Giovanni del Virgilio's) new eclogue on his flute. The wonder is that, when Melibeus lifts his flute to his lips, it sings Mopsus' opening verse; describing this miracle of the singing flute, the narrator inserts the phrase "mira loquar, sed vera tamen" (4.40: I tell of marvels, but they are nonetheless true). Quotations are from the edition of Enzo Cecchini, in Dante Alighieri, *Opere minori*, tomo II, vol. 5 of *La letteratura italiana: storia e testi* (Milano-Napoli, 1979). Translations are mine.
13. See "Ricareare la creazione divina: l'arte aracnea della cornice dei superbi," in *Saggi danteschi americani*, ed. Gian Carlo Alessio and Robert Hollander (Milano, 1989).
14. Although Dante's grotesque figures do not qualify as caryatids in the English sense of the word, which includes only the draped female figures of classical antiquity, Italian uses the word to encompass both classical and medieval corbel figures; I use it here in conformity with scholarship on *Purgatorio* X.
15. My view of Ulysses as a *trapassator del segno* places me, generally, in the camp of Bruno Nardi ("La tragedia d'Ulisse," *Dante e la cultura medievale*, 2nd ed. rev. [Bari, 1949], pp. 153-65) as compared to that of Mario Fubini ("Il peccato d'Ulisse" and "Il canto XXVI dell'*Inferno*," in *Il peccato d'Ulisse e altri scritti danteschi* [Milano, 1966], pp. 1-76). A corollary to my view, which I hope to develop in the study of the *Commedia's* transgressive art on which I am currently working, is that, if the pilgrim learns to be unlike Ulysses, the poet becomes ever more conscious of being *like* him. Regarding the adjective *folle*, see Umberto Bosco, "La 'follia' di Dante," 1958, rpt. in *Dante vicino* (Caltanissetta-Roma, 1966), pp. 55-75. Other Ulyssean surrogates in the *Commedia* are the "failed flyers" Icarus and Phaeton.
16. The self-conscious components of Arachne's tale have been much discussed by students of Ovid; see especially Eleanor Winsor Leach, "Ekphrasis and the Theme of Artistic Failure in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *Ramus*, 3 (1974), 102-42, who comments that ekphrases "offer the artist an opportunity to speak in *propria persona* and to make us aware of the self-consciousness of his art through his attention to the fictional artistry of some other creator" (p. 104).
17. Arachne's story is told in *Metamorphoses* 6.1-145; as Leach points out, it is one of a series of contests between human artists and gods that occur in books 5 and 6. The Latin text is from the edition of W. S. Anderson (Leipzig, 1978). Translations are mine.
18. In response to W. S. Anderson's suggestion that Ovid's own art is like Arachne's asymmetrical and "baroque" tapestry, as compared to Minerva's balanced and "classicistic" work, Leach comments that "it is not Arachne's tapestry alone, but

the two scenes in combination that form a mirror of the *Metamorphoses*" (p. 117); for Anderson, see his review to Brooks Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet*, *American Journal of Philology*, 89 (1968), 93-104. Ovid's identification with Arachne is sustained also by Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 1-4.

19. Dante's interest in crossing the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate goes back to *Vita Nuova* XXV, where he discusses the propriety of having treated Love as an animate being, "come se fosse corpo" (2), and adduces as justification the behavior of classical poets, who "hanno parlato a le cose inanimate, sì come se avessero senso e ragione" (8). He gives an example from the *Aeneid*, in which "parla la cosa che non è animata a le cose animate" (9), an example from Lucan, in which "parla la cosa animata a la cosa inanimata" (9), an example from Horace, in which "parla l'uomo a la scienza medesima sì come ad altra persona" (9), and an example from Ovid (which, interestingly, corresponds to his own case, the handling of Amor), in which "parla Amore, sì come se fosse persona umana" (9). Quotations from the *Vita Nuova* are from the edition of Domenico De Robertis (Milano-Napoli, 1980).

The conceit of the singing flute also has roots in a longstanding interest in crossing the boundary between ("inanimate") sounds and ("animate") words: in the *Convivio*, Dante denies that the speech of magpies and parrots constitutes real speech, since it is based on imitation and not on reason (3.7.9). He makes the same point in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* 1.2.7, where he cites as a source for speaking magpies none other than Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

20. See Leach's insightful discussions of Pygmalion, pp. 123-25, and Midas, pp. 130-32.
21. The paradigm that emerges from the *Eclogues* is of particular significance because these works belong to the last years of Dante's life, 1320-1321, and, in the case of the second eclogue, perhaps to his last months (see Cecchini's introduction, pp. 648-49). One could see these texts as proposing a final succinct statement of Dantesque poetics, in which we move from the first eclogue's defense of *comica verba* (2.52) to the second's ultimate gloss of the province of such *verba*: *mira vera*.
22. "Transfiguring the Text: Ovid, Scripture and the Dynamics of Allusion," *Stanford Italian Review*, 5 (1985), 115-39; quotations from pp. 118 and 127. For Hawkins, Dante's interest in representing his own falling asleep is "a pointless (one might even say sterile) preoccupation" (p. 126).
23. In *De Genesi ad litteram* 12 (his commentary to 2 Corinthians 12.2-4, the verses in which St. Paul announces his *raptus*), Augustine offers Peter, John, Ezekiel and Isaiah as visionary analogues to Paul: "Ac per hoc si paradysum Paulus ita vidit, ut apparuit Petro ille discus submissus e coelo (Act. X, 11), ut Joanni quidquid in Apocalypsi se vidisse conscripsit (Apoc. I, 12, etc.), ut Ezechieli campus ille cum ossibus mortuorum et illa eorum resurrectio (Ezech. XXXVII, 1-10),

ut Isaiaē sedens Deus, et in conspectu ejus Seraphim, et ara unde carbo assumptus Prophetæ labia mundavit (Isai. VI, 1-7); manifestum est eum ignorare potuisse utrum in corpore, an extra corpus ea viderit" (12.2.5; *Patrologia Latina* 34.455). In *City of God* 22.29, he brings together as visionaries Paul, John, and Elisha. While Paul receives less attention than John in the apocalyptic cantos at the end of the *Purgatorio*, he is a more explicit model throughout the *Commedia*, from *Inferno* II.32 ("Io non Enēa, io non Paulo sono") to *Paradiso* I.73-75, where Dante appropriates the verses from 2 Corinthians that were of such interest to Augustine.

24. *Purgatorio* XV.85-86; the importance of this passage is further underscored by the fact that *estatica* is a hapax, not just in the *Commedia*, but in all of Dante's work.
25. Discussion of the verb *assonnare* leads to discussion of the *Commedia* as vision; see the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (Roma, 1970-1978), s.v. *assonnare*, which refers us to Michele Barbi's thoughts on "perché 'l tempo fugge che t'assonna": "Non è qui il luogo di trattare la questione se Dante voglia far credere d'essere andato pei cieli col corpo o senza . . . io credo ch'egli voglia far intendere d'esserci stato corporalmente. Certo è che in tutta la *Commedia* dà a credere d'aver fatto un viaggio reale pei regni ultraterreni, non d'aver avuto una visione nel sonno" (*Problemi di critica dantesca, Prima serie* [Firenze, 1934], p. 294). The fact is that Dante gives us contradictory information on this matter; nor is it impossible that he could both insist he had been where he says he was *and* think he was the recipient of a true and prophetic vision. As Nicolò Mineo points out: "sia in un sogno che in una visione può accadere che il soggetto veda se stesso compiere azioni e niente esclude che possa vedersi compiere azioni in corpo" (*Profetismo e apocalittica in Dante* [Catania, 1968], p. 196).
26. The second chapter of *De Genesi ad litteram* 12 treats dreaming and ecstasy under the heading "Apostolum potuisse nescire an extra corpus paradysum viderit, si vidit in ecstasi." With respect to dreams, Augustine notes that the soul is awake while the body sleeps ("quamvis mirabiliter vigilans, anima dormientis" [3]); with respect to visions, he claims that the soul is removed from the senses of the body, more than in sleep but less than in death (12.26.53). Barbi suggestively relates "perché 'l tempo fugge che t'assonna" to St. John and to Augustine on St. Paul: "il poeta, rapito ormai nella contemplazione dei più profondi misteri, quasi dormiens vigilaret (son parole di S. Agostino, a proposito del ratto di S. Paolo, e cfr. *Purg.* XXIX, 144, ove l'autore dell'*Apocalisse* si vide 'venir dormendo con la faccia arguta)" (p. 294). (Since neither Barbi nor the *ED*, which repeats Barbi, gives a more precise reference for "quasi dormiens vigilaret," I will take this opportunity to note that if the reference is to *De Genesi ad litteram* 12.5.14, "et non quasi dormiens evigilaret," the allusion is not, as Barbi suggests, to a waking sleep.) Dante's sense of the interconnectedness of John and Paul is never more apparent than in *Paradiso* XXVI, where the pilgrim, blinded as a result of having gazed at John in an effort to ascertain whether he was raised to heaven in the flesh, is compared to Paul, blinded by the vision of God on the road to Damascus.

Although the pilgrim learns that only Mary and Christ were so raised, his concern reminds us again of the crucial verses of 2 Corinthians, and of Dante's rewriting of them in *Paradiso* I: "S'i' era sol di me quel che creasti / novellamente, amor che'l ciel governi, / tu 'l sai, che col tuo lume mi levasti" (73-75).

27. Virgil's association of waking sleep with *piegare*, bending, is reprised in *Paradiso* VII, where the sound of Beatrice's name "mi richinava come l'uom ch'assonna."
28. Natalino Sapegno makes the connection between "mi richinava come l'uom ch'assonna" and the visionary experience of the terrace of wrath, as well as with the dream-state the pilgrim enters at the end of *Purgatorio* XVIII: "La similitudine dell'uomo assonnato, che a taluno è parsa inopportuna, può esser meglio intesa, se la riacostiamo a due luoghi del *Purg.*, XV, 118-23 e XVIII, 87 e 144-45, nel primo dei quali la sonnolenza rappresenta l'uomo rapito fuori dei sensi e nel secondo prelude a una visione profetica; in *Par.*, XXXII, 139, lo stesso vocabolo *assonna* esprime probabilmente una condizione di astrazione e di estasi" (*La Divina Commedia*, 2nd ed. [Firenze, 1968]). The negative reaction to this reading in the Bosco-Reggio commentary (*La Divina Commedia* [Firenze, 1979]), which notes "ma qui si parla di *reverenza* (v. 13) non di rapimento estatico," strikes me as typical of the excessive timidity with which we handle Dante's suggestions regarding what is clearly a mystical experience; his empiricism prevents us from acknowledging his mysticism. And yet Dante's empiricism is ultimately in the service of his mysticism; the problem is that the poetic strategies with which he constructs his empirical scaffolding are so effective that critics are dissuaded from accepting their mystical foundation.
29. Dante refers to his ecstatic visions of *Purgatorio* XV as "non falsi errori" (117), a telling phrase that I believe provides an insight into the larger vision constituted by the *Commedia*, linking it to the visionary paradox of wakeful sleep and to the debate regarding Paul's method of attaining his *raptus*. As Augustine says of the Apostle, in words that I suggest should inform our discussion of Dante (especially considering Dante's express alignment of himself with the Apostle's uncertainty): "Apostolus certus se vidisse tertium coelum, incertus quomodo viderit" (*De Genesi ad litteram* 12.3).
30. For Dante's awareness of the problems inherent in writing the *Paradiso*, see my "Dante's Heaven of the Sun as a Meditation on Narrative," *Lettere Italiane*, 40 (1988), 3-36.
31. I would like to thank Charles Muscatine for the thoughts on Auerbach and Dante that provided so much of the stimulus for this essay.