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CRITICAL EXCHANGE

Q: Does Dante Hope for Vergil's Salvation?

**A: Why Do We Care? For the Very Reason We Should Not Ask
the Question**

(Response to Mowbray Allan [MLN 104])

The *Commedia* makes narrative believers of us all. By this I mean that we accept the possible world (as logicians call it) that Dante has invented; we do not question its premises or assumptions except on its own terms. We read the *Commedia* as Fundamentalists read the Bible, as though it were true, and the fact that we do this is not connected to our religious beliefs; for, on a narrative level, we believe the *Commedia* without knowing that we do so. Whatever else Dante may have had in mind, this fact constitutes his essential “allegory of theologians”; indeed, it is possible that rather than continuing to attempt to ascertain Dante’s mode of signifying in the abstract, we should begin with what the poem actually does, and how it accomplishes what it does, and extrapolate backwards to its theoretical mode of signifying.¹

The history of the *Commedia*’s reception offers a sustained demonstration of our narrative credulity, our readerly incapacity to suspend our suspension of disbelief in front of the poet-creator’s masterful deployment of what are essentially techniques of verisimilitude, or (as Morton Bloomfield puts it) authenticating devices.² Thus, the poet manages our scandalized reaction to encountering his beloved teacher among the sodomites by staging his own—“Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?”—so creating a complicity between reader and pilgrim that masks the artifice always present in what is, after all, a text. Spontaneous lived experience replaces the artifice of representation. By the same token, we have rarely stopped to consider that the writer of the words on hell’s gate is Dante, that the maker of the “divine art” on the terrace of pride is also Dante, that Beatrice is employed by this same Dante to tell the pilgrim that the souls only appear in the various heavens for his sake because he (the poet) both requires the heavens as narrative differentiators and wishes to pretend that they are not there—that heaven is undifferentiated unity.³ All of this and much more: for these examples are culled from a text whose fundamental

strategy is that it has no strategy, that everything is described as it was “seen” (here Dante’s analogy between himself and Biblical visionaries like the author of the Apocalypse enters, with the whole question of the *Commedia*’s allegory), a text that propels critics to pose their questions and situate their debates within the very presuppositions of the fiction they are seeking to understand. Thus the common defensive move we could call the collocation fallacy, whereby a critic argues that reading x is not tenable with regard to soul x because, if it were operative, soul x would be located elsewhere (e.g. Ulysses cannot be guilty of fraudulent discourse, because then he would be with Sinon among the falsifiers of words).⁴ But why should collocation be elevated to a heuristic device? Only because we approach the poem through the lens of its own fiction treated as dogma.

How is all this connected to Vergil? One of Dante’s key strategies for achieving our narrative assent involves his handling of other poets: he consistently formulates the difference between his poetry and that of his predecessors as the difference between truth and (with various shadings) falsehood.⁵ In other words, the entire question of *Commedia*’s intertextuality can be placed under the rubric of its truth claims: one of the ways that Dante secures the credibility of his text is by constructing situations designed to reveal the incredibility of his precursors’ texts. I use the terms “credibility” and “incredibility” advisedly; I am echoing Dante’s own “cosa incredibile” from the Pier della Vigna episode, where the “incredible thing” is Piero himself, the fact that a man has become a tree. In this episode Vergil is put into the position of apologizing to Piero for having induced the pilgrim to pluck his branch; he would not have had to make this cruel suggestion had the pilgrim been able to believe, on the basis of his reading of the *Aeneid*, in the possibility of a tree-man: “S’elli avesse potuto creder prima, / rispouse ‘l savio mio, ‘anima lesa, / ciò c’ha veduto pur con la mia rima” (*Inf.* 13.46-48). But the *cosa incredibile*—the thing’s inherent incredibility—is such that Vergil cannot rely on the pilgrim’s knowledge of the Polydorus episode in the *Aeneid*; only direct experience can impart so incredible a reality: “ma la cosa incredibile mi fece / indurlo ad ovra ch’a me stesso pesa” (50-51). What is remarkable in this passage is how it succeeds in making us associate the *Aeneid* with the incredible—the nonbelievable textual world of fiction and make-believe in which men can be transformed into trees—and the *Commedia* by contrast with a reality in which the incredible is credible because it really is. As Cacciaguida puts it, transforming the *Aeneid*’s pagan *incredibilitas* into a blazon of the *Commedia*’s divinely sanctioned claim to credibility against all odds: “Io dirò cosa incredibile e vera” (*Par.* 16.124).⁶ The pilgrim is not expected to believe the *Aeneid*, so he must resort to action—to what takes place in the *Commedia*. He must substitute direct lived experience for the *Aeneid*’s artificial representation of experience, and that direct lived experience is—we are induced almost subliminally to believe—Dante’s poem.

Bur Vergil is subjected to a dialectical treatment in the *Commedia*: he is

undermined as a source of truth, but not as an object of devotion.⁷ Instead, the pilgrim's love for his guide becomes ever greater; indeed, it becomes more felt and more nuanced with the passage of (textual) time, precisely as emotions develop with the passage of time on earth. This love provides Mowbray Allan a pillar on which to rest his belief that the Vergil of the *Commedia* may be destined for salvation: "my strongest evidence is the warm advocacy of generations of readers and the pain their belief in Vergil's permanent damnation has caused them. One need only assume that such reactions are entirely consistent with the pilgrim's own feelings and, furthermore, with the poet's intentions."⁸ Moving to a discussion of the heaven of justice and its saved pagans, Trajan and Ripheus, Allan reminds us that *caldo amore* and *viva speranza* are said to be able to overcome the divine will, and notes that the saved do not yet know all their brethren: "ché noi, che Dio vedemo, / non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti" (*Par.* 20.134-135). He concludes: "There has long been 'caldo amore' on behalf of Vergil; I see no reason why there should not be 'viva speranza' as well" (204).

To the extent that we choose to grant the possible world depicted by the *Commedia* the status of an ontological reality with an extension into the future, there is no reason why we should not hope for Vergil's salvation. As Allan points out, "presumably Trajan was hopeless, too, until Gregory supplied hope" (194). Therefore, in the same way that we may wonder about the future of Maggie and the Prince after the conclusion of *The Golden Bowl*, we may wonder about Vergil's salvation; in both cases, we wonder because the author has created fictive characters so "real," so compelling that we invest them with our emotional concern. But whereas such speculation would not be entertained as legitimate scholarly enquiry vis-à-vis James's novel, because of its status as fiction, we are persuaded by the *Commedia* that it is legitimate to speculate about Vergil's future. And so we do: Vergil's salvation has been debated by Dante scholars always in terms of its theological plausibility (as Allan now frames the question), never in terms of the legitimacy of the question itself. In other words, the issue is discussed as though it belonged to the real world, rather than to a text whose fictive powers have generated our concern (we do not worry about the fate of virtuous pagans as a group, as Dante did, but about the fate of one fictive construct). We care about Vergil because Dante makes us care, which is why there is no point to speculating about his future: he exists only in Dante's mind, in the text.

The very fact that we pose such questions is an indication that in some way the *Commedia* does succeed, more than most texts, in constructing a literal sense that we accept—at an almost subconscious level—as true (and thus in constructing an "allegory of theologians"); the question "Does Dante hope for Vergil's salvation?" is based on a suspension of disbelief, on an implicit accordance to the text of a status beyond that of text. It is a question that, like the collocation fallacy, situates itself entirely within the

world created by the text, rather than stepping outside and viewing that world as artifice. Yes, Dante knows that the salvation of pagans is theologically possible (if not a topic that the theologians pursued with much vigor);⁹ yes, he could save Vergil. That is precisely why it is important that he does not, that instead he gives us ample reason to believe that Vergil will return to dwell eternally in the place from which Beatrice summons him, the first circle of hell. Instead of choosing to announce the salvation of Vergil, Dante chooses to return him to Limbo and to highlight the fact that, from a theological perspective, pagans can be saved—which he does by saving, with much fanfare, Cato, Trajan, and Ripheus. Allan would say that he may yet intend Vergil to be saved, that he has merely omitted to tell us what he has planned.¹⁰ My point is that *what Dante tells us is what is*—because the *Commedia* is not a world, but a text, and all we know about the possible world represented by the text is what the text chooses to tell us.

As a text, the *Commedia* is made of a series of choices, none of which had to be. We can look at our topic in terms of the fundamental authorial choices involved, choices that may well have preceded the casting of particular figures for these roles. Dante chose to choose a guide whom he would invest with the pathos of the human condition: a condition in which we love not wisely—which would involve loving only the infallible, incorruptible, and divine—but too well. He chose to choose a guide whom he would cause us to love and then to lose, thus forcing us to participate in the hard exchange of that which can be touched with our hands (as the Prince of Lampedusa memorably puts it) for that which cannot fail us.¹¹ He also chose to invest this problematic with a historical dimension, so that what must be sublimated is not just the guide but the culture that the guide represents: the classical culture Dante simultaneously adores and distrusts. He further chose to make this representative a fellow poet, the better to charge the dramatization with questions of poetic authority. And he chose to make the loss we suffer (we being the pilgrim and the reader whose complicity with the pilgrim has long been assured) more painful by showing us that the possibility of salvation for the likes of his guide does exist: we would prefer to think of the guide's damnation as inevitable, as in no way tied to a defect of character, but Dante chooses not to allow us so comfortable a solution.¹²

So, Dante chooses to structure his text around the pivot of a major protagonist whom the text's other major protagonist will come to love and lose: in narrative terms, a move of genius. Why? Because the *Commedia*, as plot, is severely overdetermined, a problem of which Dante is well aware and against which he mounts a remarkably successful campaign, causing us to feel suspense, for instance, on occasions when—from a theological perspective—there can be only certainty (think of the devils' attempts to obstruct the voyagers' passage). In hell Dante counters his plot by granting stature, linguistic and otherwise, to the sinners, in paradise by inducing

anxiety about the problem of differential grace, whereby God's light penetrates the universe "in una parte più e meno altrove" (*Par.* 1.3). Throughout the poem, although most striking in the second realm, runs the current of loss, of melancholy leave-taking, of that "desire for dead bodies" ("disio d'i corpi morti" [*Par.* 14.63]) that makes the souls clamor "Amen" at the thought of their resurrection. The figure of Vergil is the author's most charismatic emblem for this current, his greatest tool in his battle against complacent textuality, against the saccharine and the undramatic: how impossible the figure of Beatrice would be if the poet could not conjure the chiasmic drama of her arrival conjoined to Vergil's departure, if he could not make us resent her presence, linking it to the loss of the *dolcissimo padre*, and thereby work against the grain of the sweetly smiling aura of angelic beneficence that we expect!

Dante was not obliged to coordinate the pilgrim's realization of Vergil's absence with his realization of Beatrice's presence; Vergil's absence is noticed when it is noticed in order to create a node of surpassing textual tension, one that teaches us that all forward motion is bought at a price. Moreover, with supreme artistry, Dante registers Vergil's absence by way of the words the pilgrim would have addressed to him had he been there to hear them: the pilgrim turns to speak to his guide ("volsimi . . . per dicere a Virgilio" [*Purg.* 30.43, 46]), and the words that he would have uttered are transcribed as direct discourse ("Men che drama / di sangue m'è rimasto che non tremi: / conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma" [46-48]); only after reading them do we learn that they are hypothetical, when the narrator abruptly intervenes with the information that Vergil is not there: "Ma Virgilio n'avea lasciati scemi / di sé" (49-50). Dante thus inscribes his sweet father indelibly into the very syntax that tells us he is gone. Because of its will to force us to live its lesson of loss, to experience the shock of bereavement for ourselves, to feel it as the death of a beloved parent whose presence is still palpable, the text works at cross purposes to itself, achieving the same kind of dialectical "living" textuality that, for instance, confounds us by both celebrating Ulysses and damning him. In this case, while the content denotes an absence, the form works to make a presence—with the words that are addressed to one who cannot hear them, with the appropriation of Dido's verse from the *Aeneid*, and with the incantatory invocations of a repeated name: "Ma Virgilio n'avea lasciati scemi / di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo padre, / Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi" (49-51).

The pilgrim may hope for Vergil's salvation, but the poet wills otherwise—not because he is the reductively stern moralist of so much Dante criticism, but because Vergil provides the edge, the tension, the pain and irresolution out of which the poet can make effective poetry. (My point is not that there is no morality in the *Commedia*, but that the work's dialectical texture prevents it from functioning in a reductively schematic fashion.) It is, therefore, from a textual point of view, spurious to speculate about Vergil's salvation: an essential condition of Vergil's existence in the poem

that Dante chose to make is that he cease to exist.¹³ We can make another text in which he is saved—but it will be precisely that, another text.

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NOTES

- 1 For further elaboration of this suggestion, see my “Detheologizing Dante: For a ‘New Formalism’ in Dante Studies,” *Quaderni d’italianistica*, 10 (1988): 35-53.
- 2 See “Authenticating Realism and the Realism of Chaucer,” *Thought* 39 (1964): 335-358.
- 3 With regard to these three examples of the text’s ability to manipulate us, see, respectively: John Freccero, “Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell,” 1984, rpt. *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1986); Teodolinda Barolini, “Re-presenting What God Presented: The Arachnean Art of the Terrace of Pride,” *Dante Studies* 105 (1987): forthcoming; Teodolinda Barolini, “Dante’s Heaven of the Sun as a Meditation on Narrative,” *Lettere Italiane* 40 (1988): 3-36.
- 4 This example of a widespread practice is furnished by Lino Pertile, who claims that the fraudulent nature of Ulysses’ discourse is not a cause of his damnation, “ché se fosse un falsario di parole, dovremmo trovarlo più giù nell’Inferno insieme al suo commilitone Sinone” (“Dante e l’ingegno d’Ulisse,” *Stanford Italian Review* 1 [1979]: 42).
- 5 For exploration of this principle in both the lyric and epic spheres, see my *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1984). See also, vis-à-vis Vergil, Robert Hollander, most recently “Dante’s Virgil: A Light that Failed,” *Lectura Dantis Virginiana* 4 (1989): 3-9.
- 6 The *Commedia*’s three usages of *incredibile* suggest the text’s alignment of itself with truth and of its classical precursor with falsehood: used alone by Vergil in *Inferno* 13, with reference to the *Aeneid*, *incredibile* is paired with *vera* by Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* 16, who employs it again in *Paradiso* 17, with reference to Cangrande’s exploits. See *Dante’s Poets*, 281, where Cacciaguida’s “cosa incredibile e vera” is linked to the unbelievable truths—“mira vera”—of Dante’s second eclogue.
- 7 In chapter 3 of *Dante’s Poets*, I document “how the Vergilian paradox operates at the level of narrative, resulting in two distinct but tightly coordinated storylines: as one maps the progressive undermining of Vergil’s authority, i.e. of his appeal to the intellect, the other records the simultaneous growth in the pilgrim’s love for him, i.e. in his appeal to the will” (200-201).
- 8 “Does Dante Hope for Virgil’s Salvation?,” *MLN* 104 (1989): 193-205; quotation 195. (I have followed Gilbert Highet in using “Vergil” rather than “Virgil”; see *Dante’s Poets*, 207, note 25.)
- 9 Although there was a doctrine of implicit grace, according to Kenelm Foster it tended to be ignored by theologians: “Catholic theory by and large did not much concern itself with the ultimate destiny, in God’s sight, of the pagan world whether before or since the coming of Christ. . . . The concept itself of *fides implicita* was not lacking. . . . but it was hardly a central preoccupation of theologians, nor, in particular, do its implications for an assessment of the spiritual state of the world outside Christendom seem to have been taken very seriously” (*The Two Dantes and Other Studies* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California Press, 1977] 171-172). It is against this background of neglect that the radical import of Dante’s “prehumanistic” concern can best be measured; it is impor-

tant to actively remember, for instance, that there is no theological precedent for the presence of virtuous pagans in Limbo.

- 10 Karla Taylor provides a less tenable nuancing of the same suggestion when she argues that, in *Paradiso*, Dante has learned a new humility that prevents him from judging absolutely, with the result that the presence of Ripheus reflects, vis-à-vis Vergil, “the poet’s final reluctance to judge as firmly and surely as only God can” (“From *superbo Illiön* to *umile Italia*: The Acrostic of *Paradiso* 19,” *Stanford Italian Review* 7 [1987]: 47-65; quotation 64). Taylor’s argument is based not on what Dante has done (put Vergil in Limbo), but on what she thinks he should do (show enough humility to refuse to judge Vergil absolutely). Keeping our eyes firmly focused on what the poet has actually done, we can compare his refusal to locate Guido Cavalcanti in his afterworld (a case where Dante’s textual actions support the thesis of an authentic reluctance to judge) with his explicit collocation of Vergil in the first circle of hell. More generally, the weakness of Taylor’s argument is that it is premised on a newfound authorial humility that Dante allegedly acquires in the *Paradiso*, a humility for which one can find support in the *Commedia*’s content (think of St. Thomas’ strictures against judging) but not in its form; the judgments and distributions of the third realm are in no way more tentative than those of the earlier realms. Taylor’s procedure, frequent in Dante studies, is an example of extrapolating from the content—the need to be humble in paradise—to a conclusion for which there is no textual basis, namely that Dante-poet actually *is* more humble in writing *Paradiso*. More even than with respect to hell and purgatory, because of the ineffable nature of the vision, the only real way to have practiced humility in writing *Paradiso* would have been not to write it.
- 11 “Potremo magari preoccuparci per i nostri figli, forse per i nipotini; ma al di là di quanto possiamo sperare di accarezzare con queste mani non abbiamo obblighi” (Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo*). That which cannot fail is what the protagonist of the *Vita Nuova* learns to love, as a result of the failure of Beatrice’s greeting: “Ma poi che le piacque di negarlo a me, lo mio signore Amore, la sua merzede, ha posto tutta la mia beatitudine in quello che non mi puote venire meno” (18.4).
- 12 “But the presence of Ripheus is not a salutary one for Vergil, since it implies that Vergil’s exile is not simply the result of an impartial dogma. Dante could have reduced the tension surrounding Vergil by tacitly excluding all pagans from Heaven, or at least by including only those whose salvation, like Trajan’s, was buttressed by medieval legend” (*Dante’s Poets*, 254).
- 13 I hope with this paper to have better explained the principles that caused me to observe that it is “not so much theologically vain as poetically unrealistic to speculate about Vergil’s possible salvation, since it is an essential condition of his existence in the poem that he shall also cease to exist: his presence is predicated on his talent for absence” (*Dante’s Poets*, 200).

Response to Teodolinda Barolini

I am grateful for Teodolinda Barolini’s response to my essay. Though I still hold the position taken there, I do so tentatively, recognizing that the test of counter-argument is an essential stage in our approach to the truth.

Though I question it, I shall not argue the validity of Barolini’s sense that I read the *Comedy* “as though it were true,” since I doubt its relevance