

# “Only Historicize”: History, Material Culture (Food, Clothes, Books), and the Future of Dante Studies

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“*Only connect!*”

E.M. Forster

The *Commedia* has produced a prodigious amount of exegesis since the fourteenth century, and consequently one of our tasks is to direct and reassure the responsible young scholar who may think there is nothing left to say. The fact, however, is that there is plenty left to say, in part because for centuries many commentaries did little more than repeat previous commentaries and in part because the implicit hermeneutic guidelines structured by Dante into his text determine, indeed overdetermine, interpretation. My advice to the young Dante scholar is “only historicize.”

Of course, Fredric Jameson’s “always historicize” dates back to 1981.<sup>1</sup> But fields have their own histories. As has been pointed out in the context of African American literary studies: “At a time when theorists of European and Anglo-American literature were offering critiques of Anglo-American formalism, scholars of black literature, responding to the history of their own discipline, found it ‘radical’ to teach formal methods of reading.”<sup>2</sup> There are good reasons that Dante scholarship, following its own particular trajectory, has been slow to reach this point: lack of historicizing has been an abiding feature of Dante exegesis, an essentializing tradition in which the entry “Inferno” in the *Enciclopedia dantesca* does not even gesture toward the history of the idea of hell. We have had to find ways

to get traction in dealing with an overdetermined hermeneutic template engineered by the author to prescribe our readings. For me this traction came through “detheologizing”—a narrative approach that cleared the way for historicizing.<sup>3</sup> By “only historicize” I mean to invoke the well known injunction of E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* and thus to exhort rather than to restrict: “Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.” The fact that Forster’s plea also takes a stand that is profoundly against dualism makes it, in my view, all the more suited as a Dantean epigraph.

One way to historicize is through the study of material culture: the *Commedia* is full of information about food, clothes, books, and other aspects of the material culture in which it was created. In his early works Dante pays less attention to the historical, physical, and material occurrences of lack in human life, inclining consistently rather to the psychological, spiritual, and metaphorical. Thus love-suffering makes the lover-poet “magro” in the early canzone *Lo doloroso amor*, in a verse that provides the only use of the adjective “thin” in Dante’s lyrics (“E de la doglia diverrò sì magro” [*Lo doloroso amor*, 18]), while eating in the *Vita Nuova* occurs only in the scene in which Love constrains Beatrice to eat her lover’s heart: “che le faceva mangiare questa cosa che in mano li ardea, la quale ella mangiava dubitosamente” (*VN* 3.6).<sup>4</sup> This event has a physical antecedent in an Occitan story of literal heart-eating and will recur in its literal form in the *Decameron* as well, but in Dante’s youthful *libello* it remains steadfastly if somewhat unappetizingly symbolic, occurring within an apparition of Love that the prose glosses as a “maravigliosa visione.” There are no other occasions in the *Vita Nuova* in which the author is called upon to use *mangiare* or its more aulic variant *pascere* (which is the form he uses in the sonnet being glossed by the prose cited above: “Poi la svegliava, e d’esto core ardendo / lei paventosa umilmente pascea” [*A ciascun’ alma presa e gentil core*, 12–13]). The *Vita Nuova* contains no instances of *magro*, of its antonym *grasso*, of *pasto*, of *cibo*, of *pane*. The semantic field widens in Dante’s later moral poems: *pasto* and *pane* both appear once in *Doglia mi reca*, while *cibo* appears once in *Poscia ch’Amor*.

Dante’s unfinished philosophical treatise, *Convivio*, engages material life in its very title, which refers to the banquet of knowledge in the vernacular offered on behalf of those who cannot read philosophy and theology

in Latin. Although the word *pane* is used metaphorically, referring to the crumbs of knowledge from the table where the bread of the angels is served that Dante will dispense to those who have been knowledge-deprived (“Oh beati quelli pochi che seggiono a quella mensa dove lo pane de li angeli si manuca! e miseri quelli che con le pecore hanno comune cibo!” [*Conv.* 1.1.7]),<sup>5</sup> these metaphors are attuned to a meditation that embraces very real and material forms of life and culture.

Material life is thematized immediately in the *Convivio*: the first chapter’s explanation of why the *Convivio* exists is essentially an analysis of the forms of human deprivation, both spiritual and material, that the author is undertaking to redress. The argument is constructed as follows. It is a given, based on Aristotle, that “tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere”; it is further given that each being inclines to its “propria perfezione” and that knowledge is the “ultimate perfection” of our soul and the source of our “ultimate happiness”: “la scienza è ultima perfezione de la nostra anima, ne la quale sta la nostra ultima felicitade” (*Conv.* 1.1.1). Despite these givens, we can be deprived (“privati”) of our ultimate human perfections, for there are both interior and exterior “defects and impediments” that remove us from attainment of knowledge: “Veramente da questa nobilissima perfezione molti sono privati per diverse cagioni, che dentro a l’uomo e di fuori da esso lui rimovono da l’abito di scienza” (*Conv.* 1.1.2).

The interior defects that deter humans from acquiring knowledge in the analysis of the *Convivio* are, first, those that pertain to the body, as when a person is deaf or mute, and, second, those that pertain to the soul, as when a person is given over to the pursuit of vicious pleasures:

Dentro da l’uomo possono essere due difetti e impedi[men]ti: l’uno da la parte del corpo, l’altro da la parte de l’anima. Da la parte del corpo è quando le parti sono indebitamente disposte, sì che nulla ricevere può, sì come sono sordi e muti e loro simili. Da la parte de l’anima è quando la malizia vince in essa, sì che si fa seguitatrice di viziose delectazioni, ne le quali riceve tanto inganno che per quelle ogni cosa tiene a vile. (*Conv.* 1.1.3)

The exterior defects that remove us from the acquisition of knowledge are similarly twofold, the first caused by necessity and the second by a lazy disposition: “Di fuori da l’uomo possono essere similemente due cagioni intese, l’una de le quali è induttrice di necessitade, l’altra di pigrizia” (*Conv.* 1.1.4). *Necessitade* in this context includes those family and civic

pressures that deprive a man of the leisure for study: “La prima è la cura familiare e civile, la quale convenevolmente a sé tiene de li uomini lo maggior numero, sì che in ozio di speculazione esser non possono” (*Conv.* 1.1.4). The second exterior defect is laziness, the lack of self-motivation that can prevent someone who is deprived of educational resources and a university environment from making the effort on his own: “L’altra è lo difetto del luogo dove la persona è nata e nutrita, che tal ora sarà da ogni Studio non solamente privato, ma da gente studiosa lontano” (*Conv.* 1.1.4).

In this passage at the very beginning of the *Convivio* (1.1.1–4), Dante offers us a breakdown of the forms of material deprivation that can impede us from the self-perfection that is inherent in our species (or at least in its male members) that looks like this:

- I. Interior impediments: *difetti da la parte del corpo*
  - A. physical: deaf, mute, etc.
  - B. spiritual: *malizia*, the pursuit of vicious pleasures
  
- II. Exterior impediments: *difetti da la parte de l’anima*
  - A. *necessitate: cura familiare e civile*, which leaves no time for *ozio di speculazione*
  - B. *pigrizia*: being far from seats of learning

Dante concludes this analysis of forms of material deprivation by stating that the first of the interior and exterior impediments are to be excused, and the second are to be condemned, although *pigrizia* is less abominable than *malizia*.

This is a fascinating passage, indeed a succinct analysis of human life, its opportunities, and impediments—as well as an excellent example of untapped historical material. For me the opening of the *Convivio* has always been about the clarion call to an Aristotelian understanding of human desire for knowledge, about the affirmation that “tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere” (*Conv.* 1.1.1). But it is also an unexploited opportunity to see Dante’s deep connectedness to everyday material life with its material vicissitudes. Thus the obstacles to self-fulfillment begin for Dante with physical defects of the body, “difetti da la parte del corpo,” which until very recently in human history posed insurmountable impediments to full participation in life. Turning to spiritual causes for

lack of self-realization, *difetti da la parte de l'anima*, again Dante is thinking of something quite concrete, for the soul that “si fa seguitatrice di viziose delectazioni” is a soul that is given over to pleasures of the flesh and deceitful material goods. We can see here an early form of the analysis of human incontinence and inclination to material goods that runs through the *Commedia*: here malice dominates the soul (“la malizia vince in essa”), while eventually Dante will not use the word *malizia* in the context of incontinence, although he will keep the image of domination (“che la ragion sommettono al talento” [*Inf.* 5.39]).

The path of “viziose delectazioni” is one of which the poet of the *rime petrose* had direct personal knowledge. When we come to the exterior impediments to self-fulfillment, we find further connections to Dante’s own life (and we remember that the *Convivio* explicitly takes up the question of writing autobiography in the first person): he was famously caught up by “cura familiare e civile” (an issue important to Boccaccio in his treatment of Dante’s life), and it is interesting to note how the syntax of this sentence frames *cura* as the subject, an active force that grasps and holds onto the majority of men (“la quale convenevolmente a sé tiene de li uomini lo maggior numero”).

Why, however, is Dante so hard on those who have lack of knowledge “per difetto del luogo dove la persona è nata e nudrita,” classifying this impediment to knowledge as *pigrizia*? A little later on in this first chapter Dante describes himself as one who knows firsthand the misery of deprivation and exclusion:

E io adunque, che non seggio a la beata mensa, ma, fuggito de la pastura del vulgo, a’ piedi di coloro che seggiono ricolgo di quello che da loro cade, e conosco la misera vita di quelli che dietro m’ho lasciati, per la dolcezza ch’io sento in quello che a poco a poco ricolgo, misericordievolmente mosso, non me dimenticando, per li miseri alcuna cosa ho riservata, la quale a li occhi loro, già è più tempo, ho dimostrata; e in ciò li ho fatti maggiormente vogliosi. (*Conv.* 1.1.10)

Strikingly, Dante here identifies himself as one who has fled the fare offered the vulgar crowd (“fuggito de la pastura del vulgo”) and tells of the miserable life of those that he himself has left behind (“la misera vita di quelli che dietro m’ho lasciati”). In other words, he indicates some kinship, some feeling of “there but for the grace of God go I” with those who have been deprived of knowledge, a kinship that perhaps causes him

to place an even greater value on the self-motivation that allowed him to leave such a “misera vita” behind. He seems to be saying that in the same way that he pushed himself to leave behind the “pastura del vulgo” and the “misera vita di quelli che dietro m’ho lasciati,” so others should push themselves. The need to be motivated to overcome lack recurs years later in another food-oriented passage to do with access to knowledge; in the address to the reader in *Paradiso* 10, Dante writes, “Messo t’ho innanzi: omai per te ti ciba” (*Par.* 10.25), where we can see in the “omai per te” a somewhat tempered expression of the feelings that lead to the *pigrizia* classification of *Convivio* 1.1.4.

Indicating that men can be deprived of knowledge because of material defects in their places of birth—“difetto del luogo dove la persona è nata e nutrita, che tal ora sarà da ogni Studio non solamente privato, ma da gente studiosa lontano” (*Conv.* 1.1.4)—Dante demonstrates a profound appreciation for the material causes and circumstances that condition and limit our lives: the significance of where we are born and where we are raised, and the deprivation caused by physical distance from and lack of access to educational resources, by being “da gente studiosa lontano.” Dante’s sensitivity to deprivation caused by limitations in one’s material circumstances is further reflected in his keen awareness of the material transmission of knowledge. Although in the *Convivio* he does not absolve those who are deprived “per difetto del luogo” from responsibility for their lack, the concern we see in this passage for the inequities that result from the uneven distribution of access to knowledge will reappear in *Paradiso* 19. Again Dante considers “lo difetto del luogo dove la persona è nata e nutrita,” this time with respect to a man born outside of the reach of Christian teachings, on the banks of the Indus, where there is no one who speaks or teaches or writes of Christ: “Un uom nasce a la riva / de l’Indo, e quivi non è chi ragioni / di Cristo né che legga né chi scriva” (*Par.* 19.70–72). Again, what is at stake for Dante is lack of knowledge, lack of access to the sources of knowledge, lack of access to the *ragionare di Cristo*, *leggere di Cristo*, and *scrivere di Cristo* that could produce knowledge. In these circumstances, Dante asks, “ov’è la colpa sua, se ei non crede?” (*Par.* 19.78). In this mature formulation the concern for inequitable distribution of access to knowledge has remained but no longer the *Convivio*’s concept of *pigrizia*. Rather, in a case such as that of the man born on the banks of the Indus, where it cannot be said that “messo t’ho innanzi,” where indeed the whole point from Dante’s perspective is that

no one has ever *messo innanzi*, Dante’s concern for justice leads him to question how can it be this man’s fault if he lacks belief in Christ.

Material desire and material lack are also present in the *Convivio* in Dante’s parable of the stages of human life as a scaled ladder of desire, beginning with the desire for physical and affective nourishment and moving through various forms of social desire to the consuming desire for wealth: “Onde vedemo li parvuli desiderare massimamente un pomo; e poi, più procedendo, desiderare uno augellino; e poi, più oltre, desiderare bel vestimento; e poi lo cavallo, e poi una donna; e poi ricchezza non grande, e poi grande, e poi più” (*Conv.* 4.12.16). These desires bear witness to an inscribed Florentine sociology. We note the signifiers of social status and prestige—the beautiful clothing for display, the horse (indicating the importance that “knighthood,” or being a *cavaliere*, still held for bourgeois Florence). Even the loaded Dantean desire for “una donna” seems more socially than stilnovistically constructed, reminding us of what in any case passage after passage in the *Commedia* makes clear, namely, that Dante was keenly alive to the social and political implications of choosing a wife. The proximity of horse to woman in this simultaneously very philosophical and very realistic scale of values offers us a view of woman as commodity in Dante’s thought: Dante’s placement of “una donna” in the sequence suggests that a woman satisfies man’s desire more than a horse but less than wealth. Dante as social analyst was clearly capable of seeing women not in the idealized fashion we associate with his stilnovist poetry but as his society saw them. The *Convivio*’s ladder of material desire ends with wealth, whose ability to generate unending desire and unending lack looks forward to the *lupa* of *Inferno* 1, “che mai non empie la bramosa voglia, / e dopo il pasto ha più fame che pria” (*Inf.* 1.98–99).

We know the she-wolf of the *Commedia* as the embodiment of *cupiditas*, in other words, of extreme moral lack, but it is worth noticing that Dante figures moral lack as physical lack, conjuring the frightening image—particularly so in a world in which there was frequently the experience of not enough food—of being more hungry after a meal than before it. Of the *lupa* Dante writes that “che di tutte breme / sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza” (*Inf.* 1.49–50), thus engaging a semantic field that approaches the material in its most literally “visceral” sense: the semantic field of “thin” versus “fat,” nourishment versus lack thereof. In the same canto, the nourishment–deprivation machine that is the *lupa* is countered by the *veltro*, characterized in terms of the kinds of incorrect nourishment on

which it does not feed: “Questi non ciberà terra né peltro” (*Inf.* 1.103). As a force that can systematically promote hunger, the *lupa* is constructed as feminine, as a she-wolf, because she is the precise negation of the nourishing maternal force that Dante figures, for instance, in the mother stork of the simile of *Paradiso* 19: the mother stork feeds her young, “poi c’ha pasciuti la cicogna i figli” (*Par.* 19.92), and, rather than still being hungry after eating, the baby storks then gaze at her with the sated look of “one who has fed”—“come quel ch’è pasto” (*Par.* 19.93). Similarly, the mother bird of the opening simile of *Paradiso* 23, who attentively awaits the dawn so that she can begin the work of finding food for her young—“per trovar lo cibo onde li pasca, / in che gravi labor li sono aggrati” (*Par.* 23.5–6)—is a figure of anti-material-lack, of material plenitude. Interestingly, the *Commedia*’s greatest withholder of nourishment is a man, a father, Ugolino. All the threads of the semantic field of hunger converge in his episode.

Ugolino is the other infernal wolf; he sees himself in dream as “il lupo” with his “lupicini” (*Inf.* 33.29), and he is the opposite of the mother bird of *Paradiso* 19. Many of the words that signify physical and material lack in the *Commedia*—real, unbearable, excruciating want—converge in the Ugolino episode: proceeding in the order of the narrative, we find *manducare*, *pane*, and *fame* in one verse (“Come ’l pan per fame si manduca” [*Inf.* 32.127]), *pasto* (“La bocca sollevò dal fiero pasto” [*Inf.* 33.1]), *fame* again (“la qual per me ha ’l titol de la fame” [*Inf.* 33.23]), *magro* (“Con cagne magre, studïose e conte” [*Inf.* 33.31]), *cibo* (“che ’l cibo ne solea essere addotto” [*Inf.* 33.44]), and—in the famous climax—*digiuno* (“più che ’l dolor, poté ’l digiuno” [*Inf.* 33.75]). This masculine variant of *la lupa* is the father who inflicts on his sons the fearsome material lack with which *Inferno* seals itself in hunger and horror: a material mirror of the ultimate and eschatological lack that is hell.

These words take on very different connotations in *Paradiso*, as Dante continues to explore the language of physical lack. There is a commentary on monastic life inscribed in the *Commedia*’s language of food and harvest and gardening and eating and fasting. While the satiation of the baby storks is an image of plenitude, the *Commedia*’s few uses of *grasso* offer negative social commentary, regarding the corruption of those who “si fanno grassi stando a consistoro” (*Par.* 16.114) and, most spectacularly, the Antonine monks, of whom it is said “di questo ingrassa il porco Sant’Antonio” (*Par.* 29.124). A few other examples will suffice: the Dominicans

would be able to "fatten" virtuously did they not err ("u' ben s'impingua se non si vaneggia" [*Par.* 10.96]); the Franciscan order "solea fare i suoi cinti più macri" (*Inf.* 27.93); Peter Damian, hermit and then prior of Fonte Avellana, was content "pur con cibi di liquor d'ulivi" (*Par.* 21.115); Saints Peter and Paul were "magri e scalzi, / prendendo il cibo da qualunque ostello" (*Par.* 21.128–29) compared to modern pastors, who are so heavy ("gravi") that they require two horses to hold them up as they travel; St. Peter began his spiritual horticulture "poor and hungry," "che tu intrasti povero e digiuno / in campo, a seminar la buona pianta / che fu già vite e ora è fatta pruno" (*Par.* 24.109–111); and let us not forget that Dante describes himself as "made thin" by the making of his poem—"sì che m'ha fatto per molto anni macro" (*Par.* 25.3)—in the same way that the Franciscan order "solea fare i suoi cinti più macri."

This language reverberates for Dante on a very personal level: he himself was "made thin" by his devotion; he himself was "nimico ai lupi" (*Par.* 25.6), the wolves that ravage Florence and keep him from returning to the fold; he himself was impoverished by his exile. Of course the virtues associated with material lack lead us to the Franciscans, whose embrace of poverty is so captivating to Dante; Dante's endorsement of Franciscan values (and perhaps even of radical Franciscan values) takes us back to the critique built into *la lupa* and featured in the *Convivio's* indictment of material wealth, as we saw in the crescendo of desire culminating in "ricchezza non grande, e poi grande, e poi più." Poverty and its semantic field are related to hunger and its lexicon. Hence St. Peter is "povero e digiuno" and he and Peter are described as "magri e scalzi," barefootedness being a sign of poverty that Dante links to the early Franciscans (it was also required of the hermits of Fonte Avellana), who responded to Francis's ministry by kicking off their shoes: "Scalzasi Egidio, scalzasi Silvestro" (*Par.* 11.83).

Dante suggests his own ability to appreciate beautiful clothing ("bel vestimento") by featuring it so prominently in the *Convivio's* scaled desires. But by the time the mature Dante wrote the *Paradiso*, his view of *bel vestimento* had decidedly curdled, to the point that his indictment of contemporary Florence is also a manual to and indictment of contemporary fashion: "Non avea catenella, non corona, / non gonne contigiate, non cintura / che fosse a veder più che la persona" (*Par.* 15.100–102). Moreover, despite the gendered description of an idealized past Florence as "sobria e pudica" (*Par.* 15.99), and despite the temptation, rarely

resisted by moralists, to focus concerns about excess in dress on women (see, for instance, *Purgatorio* 23.101 on the “sfacciate donne fiorentine”), in Dante’s case, although more is said about female fashion decadence than male, the fashion indictment also includes the habits of contemporary Florentine men. Their tastes have apparently become more lavish since the good old days, when a kind of “caveman chic” seems to have been the prevailing dress code of the upper-class Florentine; as Cacciaguida says (without a hint of irony), “Bellincion Berti vid’ io andar cinto / di cuoio e d’osso” (*Par.* 15.112–13) and “vidi quel d’i Nerli e quel del Vecchio / esser contenti a la pelle scoperta” (*Par.* 15.115–16).

Dante’s interest in the materiality of texts or other vehicles for signs, such as papyrus (“come procede innanzi da l’ardore, / per lo papiro suso, un color bruno” [*Inf.* 25.64–65]), is readily apparent in the *Commedia*. For instance, references to what may be found “above” in the text—as in “li altri due che ’l canto suso appella” (*Inf.* 33.90) and “però miri a ciò ch’io dissi suso” (*Par.* 13.46)—betray an awareness of the text as material object, all the more interesting in that the fictive orality of “ciò ch’io dissi” is trumped by the nonfictive materiality of the text, in which one must look “above” for the speaker’s previous statements. Another telling instance of Dante’s awareness of the materiality of text is to be found in his indictment of the many misguided folk who study the decretals rather than the Gospels, referred to as those who wear out the margins of their decretals: “e solo ai Decretali / si studia, sì che pare a’ lor vivagni” (*Par.* 9.134–35). Dante’s awareness of the material transmission of texts extends even to the written word of God, the Bible, as we can see in expressions like “sì come ne scrive Luca” (*Purg.* 21.7), a phrase that comes from the Statius episode, a high-density meditation on both biblical and classical textual transmission.

Particularly interesting to me is the passage in *Paradiso* 19 in which Dante suggests that the exclusion from Paradise of those born in geographically remote areas of the world—in his words “alla riva / dell’Indo” (*Par.* 19.70–71)—is unjust precisely because the word of God was not textually and materially disseminated to those places: “e quivi non è chi ragioni / di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva” (*Par.* 19.71–72). The gloss of “chi legga” in the Bosco-Reggio commentary as “chi insegni” (“*Leggere* è termine ‘tecnico’ per indicare l’insegnamento, in genere universitario”) brings us back to the *Convivio*’s opening passage, on the importance of geographical proximity to universities and the knowledge they offer.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, *Paradiso* 19.72 is the only verse in the *Commedia* to contain both *leggere* and *scrivere*: the concentration of textual language serves to indicate the importance, and indeed indispensability, of specifically directed reading and writing—in this case the reading and writing of Christ—in the transmission of culture. And in fact Statius explains his conversion to Christ by pointing to the consonance he experienced between Vergil’s Fourth Eclogue and the newly disseminated words of the apostles: in contrast to the man on the banks of the Indus, he experienced the true faith because it was “seminata / per li messaggi dell’eterno regno” (*Purg.* 22.77–78).

The man born on the banks of the Indus takes us to another topic that will yield fruit in years to come, namely, Dante’s “multiculturalism,” a term I use to refer to Dante’s eclectic fusion of intellectual and ideological traditions deriving from different times and places in order to suggest that Dante’s diachronic syncretism is just as radical in its own time and place as the synchronic variety we practice today. Dante’s concern for the man on the banks of the Indus suggests that he was more open-minded than many alive today, for his heterodox and problematized thinking on the subject of who will be saved and who will be damned operates synchronically as well as diachronically—along a geographical axis in the world as he knew it: his concern for justice embraces not only the saved pagans revealed with great fanfare in *Paradiso* 20 but also the “Ethiopian” whom he provocatively suggests may well be saved when many Christians will be damned (*Par.* 19.109–11).

Dante mentions Ethiopia/Ethiopians and India/Indians three times in the *Commedia*, in *Purgatorio* 26.21 (twice) and in *Paradiso* 19. He builds an orientaling semantics through these citations: India and Ethiopia provide harsh desert landscapes in *Inferno* 14.32 (“d’India vide sopra ’l suo stuolo”) and *Inferno* 24.89 (“mostrò già mai con tutta l’Etiopia”); in *Purgatorio* 26.21 the “Indo o Etiopo” are the inhabitants of torrid lands who crave cold water. Both Indians and Ethiopians serve as examples of non-Christians who may well be more virtuous than Christians in *Paradiso* 19. In her 2007 commentary to *Othello*, Kim Hall notes that “in early modern Europe Ethiopian frequently referred to black peoples in general.”<sup>77</sup> And yet Dante commentaries do not indicate whether Italians in Dante’s time similarly construed the “Ethiope” as black. There is no reference to the Ethiopians’ color in the *Enciclopedia dantesca*, published in the 1970s, and

more recent work continues in the traditional methodology of Dante studies, allegorizing historical specificity out of Dante's text.

This may be a small example, but it is symptomatic of the lack of historicizing that has been an abiding feature of Dante exegesis. We are beginning to reverse that tradition, dismantling the high-culture peak on which the *Commedia* has long stood, grand but isolated from that very history on which it so ceaselessly ruminates. We can see the massive work of historicizing that lies before us, as we build an enriched historical context and a deeper understanding of the *Commedia's* place within so many histories: the history of the book and textuality, the history of the reception of classical antiquity, the history of visions, the history of the afterlife (including its various subhistories: the history of hell, purgatory, paradise, Limbo), the history of theology (and its many subhistories: the history of resurrection theology, salvation theology, etc.), the history of the church (and its subhistories, including the liturgy), the history of monasticism, the history of women (including practices of maternity and childbirth), the history of courtliness, the history of Italy. The *Paradiso's* individual philosophical nodes will be parsed one by one as idiosyncratic Dantean solutions, in one of which he will incline more to Aristotelianism and in another more to Neoplatonism.

These histories overlap and imbricate one another, often in unexpected ways: for instance, historicizing Francesca da Rimini led me to *Inferno* 27, a canto that features the Polenta and Malatesta families in the context of the history of Romagna. Reading historians of Romagna allowed me to glimpse the remarkable and unexploited historical density of Dante's poetry in Canto 27: the drama of Guido da Montefeltro's false conversion in the canto's latter half is ripe for a reexamination that reads his story against the canto's earlier probing of Romagnol history. In *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, the historian P. J. Jones writes of Guido's impact on Romagna that the "transformation of local into regional *signoria* was mainly the work of one man."<sup>8</sup> Even the imagery of Canto 27 can be contextualized with respect to contemporary politics: for instance, Jones mentions a Ghibelline poem that "sets out to contrast the two captains, Guido 'leone' and Malatesta da Verucchio 'veltro'" (34), while in *Inferno* 27 Malatesta is a mastiff rather than a *veltro*, and Guido famously says that his deeds "non furon leonine, ma di volpe" (*Inf.* 27.75). When the pilgrim, speaking to Guido da Montefeltro in *Inferno* 27, refers to the "lunga prova" endured by Forlì before it reduced the French to a "sanguinoso

mucchio,” he is referring to events in which historians assign that same Guido da Montefeltro the central role.<sup>9</sup> And yet there has not been a reading of Dante’s Guido da Montefeltro that takes into account his crucial role in a historical process—the formation of *tirannia*—that Dante deplored.

Dante’s meditation on *tirannia* may be gleaned even from a glance at his use of the words *tirannia* and *tiranno/tiranni* in the *Commedia*, words that are concentrated in *Inferno* 12 and 27 (the “*tiranno fello*” of *Inf.* 28.81, a reference to Malatestino Malatesta, takes us back to the Malatesta family of *Inferno* 5 and 27). The reconstruction of this meditation through an investigation of these passages and especially of the families to which Dante alludes would be a most worthwhile project.

Indeed, Dante’s thinking on the role of the *casato* as a key to the tragedy of Italian history is an unexplored feature of the Ugolino episode as well. *Inferno* 33 is steeped in the people and events that shaped Ugolino’s politics, whose central node was the Pisan possession Sardinia. The Guelph Visconti and Ghibelline Gherardesca families, traditionally opposed, became allies to protect their Sardinian holdings, an alliance that led to the ill-fated shared magistracy of Ugolino and his grandson Nino Visconti, the same Nino whom Dante hails in the Valley of the Princes by his Sardinian title, calling him “*giudice Nin gentil*” in *Purgatorio* 8.53 (the provinces of Sardinia were called “*giudicati*”).<sup>10</sup> I believe that the betrayal for which Dante held Ugolino responsible may be traced back to his treatment of Nino Visconti during the period in which they shared power in Pisa. In any case, there is a story here regarding the exploitation of the bonds of family love to political ends, an exploitation that while taken to the extreme in Ugolino’s case was systemic in Dante’s society. The *Commedia* includes an amazing web of family—and hence political—interconnectivity spun by Dante, who so carefully chose and enmeshed the characters of his great poem (one more little example, leading back again to *Inferno* 5: Tebaldello de’ Zambrasi of *Inferno* 32 was the father of Zambrasina, who married Gianciotto Malatesta after he killed Francesca). A tragic history of Dante’s Italy awaits reconstruction by scholars who set out to trace systematically all these lines, thereby accessing the ideological freight carried by the *Commedia*’s great web of family and dynastic connections.

Coming back now to a different tragedy, that of exclusion from grace, Dante’s concern for the man born on the banks of the Indus is the

geographical analogue to his concern for the virtuous pagans of classical antiquity: the Gospel did not reach one group because of its physical and geographical separation, while it did not reach the other because of its temporal remoteness. Here too we can experience the imbrication of history, for the history of visions offers insight into the nature of Dante's reception of classical antiquity. Dante does not differ from his humble visionary colleagues in the inclusion of contemporaries in his afterlife or in the inclusion of popes or kings; these are actions for which there are precedents. There is, however, no precedent for Dante's inclusion of figures from classical antiquity. The history of visions thus offers us a new prism through which to perceive Dante's early brand of humanism, his passionate commitment to classical culture. Historians of the Renaissance who have used Dante's placement of Aristotle and other pagans in Limbo and therefore in Hell as a marker of periodicity—a handy emblem of his still being “medieval”—have done so without historicizing Limbo: if we put Dante's Limbo in historical context, considering the history of the set of concepts aggregated under the rubric “Limbo,” we see how anomalous Dante's Limbo really is, for the history of Limbo does not include pagans. No theologian places pagans—or indeed adults of any kind—in Limbo, a place reserved for unbaptized infants (the Hebrew righteous having been freed from Limbo by Christ's harrowing of hell). Thus the point is not so much that Dante put most (but not all) of his pagans in Hell (he also was anomalous in saving pagans) but rather that classical antiquity exerted such a pull on his imagination that he felt compelled to engage it despite the absence of theological authority or visionary precedent.

We have more work to do on Dante's humanism, for it is perhaps the least overdetermined and the most incorrectly taken for granted aspect of Dante's poetics. There is a reception history here too, including a recent one that I have lived, for I was one of the critics who, in an attempt to replace impressionistic critical enthusiasms about Dante's filial piety toward Virgil with a more rigorous assessment of the poem's intertextuality, wrote in the 1980s about the *Commedia's* corrections of the *Aeneid* and classical antiquity. But I have come to see that more important than the revisions and corrections, which are indeed part of the *Commedia*, is the fact that it engages with classical antiquity so unremittingly. What does it mean—culturally speaking—for the author of a Christian afterlife to give classical as well as biblical *exempla* all through the *Purgatorio*? And

what does it mean that he explicitly bases his Hell on Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*? While much attention has been given to the question of how exactly to make Aristotle's categories fit in Dante's Hell, there has been little surprise that a Christian author should cite Aristotle as the basis for a part of his afterlife. And yet we should be surprised, and we should further note that Aristotle survives as an ethical template into the *Purgatorio*, whose apparent basis in the Christian idea of the seven deadly vices is enriched and destabilized by the encroaching Aristotelian paradigm.<sup>11</sup> The terrace of avarice is the first to destabilize the strictly Christian organization of sin: in revealing that prodigality is also purged on this terrace, Dante constructs an Aristotelian template, based on the idea of virtue as the mean between two extremes, which in this case are avarice and prodigality. It is significant that Dante seems to retrofit all of Purgatory to the Aristotelian paradigm, having the character Statius proclaim the validity of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean for all of Purgatory: "E sappie che la colpa che rimbecca / per dritta opposizione alcun peccato, / con esso insieme qui suo verde secca" (*Purg.* 22.49–51).

Statius's declaration that on each terrace we find both the vice and its opposite is not verifiable and therefore dismissed by commentators. However, Dante's desire to establish the Aristotelian template is quite definitely at work in his creation of two sets of opposing *exempla* for each terrace: one set of *exempla* cites practitioners of the vice and the other cites practitioners of the opposing virtue, indicating perhaps that people not particularly inclined to that sin but at the same time not beacons of virtue find themselves somewhere in the Aristotelian middle. And Dante's analysis of love in *Purgatorio* 17 as the foundational impulse of all human behavior, whether good or bad, revels in the idea of the extremes, of "troppo di vigore" and "poco di vigore," again implying that unqualified *vigore* is the optimal course of behavior. Moreover, although only the terrace of avarice boasts two clear Aristotelian extremes with respect to the vice being purged, Dante's treatment of lust also lends itself to the construction of an Aristotelian template.

The complexity of Dante's handling of human sexuality has only recently begun to be addressed, and it continues to be misunderstood. A recent example of such misunderstanding is the rebuke issued by former Italian prime minister Andreotti to his political opponents in the debate on same-sex union: "Non sarebbe male se tutti, compreso Prodi, si andassero a rileggere Dante: i sodomiti nella *Divina Commedia* finiscono all'inferno."<sup>12</sup> Andreotti needs to read beyond *Inferno*, to *Purgatorio* 26, in order

to realize that Dante's treatment of homosexuality is not so simple. Yes, Dante places homosexuals in hell, classifying them as violent against nature. But his purgatorial terrace of lust features both heterosexuals and homosexuals: two files of souls moving in opposite directions around the fiery terrace who meet and hastily exchange brief kisses. In Purgatory, Dante reclassifies same-sex love so that it is no longer a form of violence against nature but is rather a passion susceptible to incontinence, just like heterosexual lust.

Another aspect of Dante's treatment of human sexual conduct that merits attention is his dignifying of marriage, again as part of creating an Aristotelian template with marriage marking the mean. The extremes are absolute chastity, exemplified by Mary's "Virum non cognosco" and Diana, and the excesses figured by the bestial love of Pasiphaë, and those who, like the Cretan queen, can say "non servammo umana legge" (*Purg.* 26.83). So we have a divine standard, a bestial standard, and an in-between standard, the *umana legge* exemplified by "donne / . . . e mariti che fuor casti / come virtute e matrimonio imponne" (*Purg.* 25.133–35). While I am not suggesting that Dante is a Protestant author *avant la lettre* who celebrates married love at length, I do take issue with the view that the absence of conspicuous happy married couples indicates Dante's lack of sponsorship of normative heterosexual human sexuality within a marriage contract, which includes affection, as signaled for instance by the verse "Da poi che Carlo tuo, bella Clemenza" (*Par.* 9.1). With genial concision Dante includes marital love in the heaven of Venus, apostrophizing the wife of Charles Martel with respect to what Dante had learned from "your Charles" and loading the possessive adjective in "Carlo tuo" with marital affection.

Dante thus continues the cultural line we find in a bourgeois moralist like Guittone d'Arezzo, whose canzone on female chastity, *Altra fiata aggio già, donne, parlato*, praises absolute chastity but is open to chastity within marriage for a woman who has or desires a husband: "Chi non pote o non vol castità tale, / che ha marito overo aver desia" (83–84). A woman who lives chastely with her husband is virtuous for Guittone; Dante goes further, praising men who engage in marital chastity as well: "donne / gridavano e mariti che fuor casti / come virtute e matrimonio imponne" (*Purg.* 25.133–35).

Dante's sense of sexuality cannot be constrained within a normative social context, for there are already signs in his youthful poetry that his

thinking on gender and sexuality is nonnormative and transgressive. As my concluding example of the results that can come from pressuring Dante’s texts regarding their connections to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, history, and material culture, I offer two sonnets from the *Vita Nuova*—a text that has been even more insulated from history than the *Commedia*. In my work on a commentary to Dante’s lyrics, I have found a wealth of social concerns embedded in Dante’s poems, including *stil novo* poems that have traditionally been read only in terms of their ideology of love. Thus the two sonnets of *Vita Nuova* 22, in which Dante images a dialogue between himself and the ladies who are mourning the death of Beatrice’s father, show us a Dante at odds with the restrictive social conventions of Florentine mourning practices: he desires a level of participation—including participation in the act of weeping—that is inappropriate for him both as a nonintimate and as a man. These sonnets, *Voi che portate la sembianza umile* and *Se’ tu colui c’hai trattato sovente*, testify to a poet who views Florentine society with an almost anthropological attention and whose desire to transgress encompasses not only the poetic boundaries to which we are accustomed but social and gender boundaries as well.<sup>13</sup>

The good news for our students is that a massive work of social and historical contextualization lies before us.

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## NOTES

1. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press: 1981).

2. Henry Louis Gates Jr., Introduction to *PMLA* 105 (1990): 11–22; quotation, 15.

3. For instance, in dealing with *Inferno* 5, detheologizing allowed me to postulate interpretive categories more complex than “Dante places Francesca in hell, so his view of her is negative,” and thereby opened the way for a reconsideration of Dante’s treatment of the dynastic wife. “Dante and Francesca da Rimini: *Realpolitik*, Romance, Gender,” *Speculum* 75 (2000): 1–28, reprinted in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 304–32.

4. *Rime*, ed. Domenico De Robertis (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2005); *Vita Nuova*, ed. Domenico De Robertis (Milan: Ricciardi, 1980).

5. *Opere minori* 1/2, ed. Domenico De Robertis and Cesare Vasoli, *La letteratura italiana: Storia e testi* 5 (Milan: Ricciardi, 1988). On the *Convivio*’s treatment of impediments to study, but without a consideration of material culture, see Sonia Gentili, *L’uomo aristotelico alle origini della letteratura italiana* (Rome: Carocci, 2005), ch. 4.

6. *Paradiso*, ed. Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio (Florence: Le Monnier, 1979), 324.

7. *Othello, the Moor of Venice: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Kim F. Hall (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 185.

8. *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, 17. For the "long conflict between the Malatesta and Guido da Montefeltro, which was to continue intermittently until the end of the century," see pp. 33–34.

9. I am not suggesting that Dante views Guido da Montefeltro's leadership at Forlì negatively; rather, the historical context reveals to what degree Guido is a complexly "epic" figure, more like Ulysses, his companion in the *bolgia* of fraudulent counselors, than we have realized.

10. For more information that could be useful for historicizing the Ugolino episode, see *The Undivine Comedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 96–97.

11. For this issue, see my "Medieval Multiculturalism and Dante's Theology of Hell," now in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, 102–21. Much more work needs to be done on Dante's contribution to the history of hell, purgatory, and heaven. As I noted in *The Undivine Comedy*, with reference to Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. A. Goldhammer (1981; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984): Le Goff's "chapter on Dante, the weakest in the book, makes very little use of the material that his own previous chapters provide" (200 n. 7).

12. M. Antonietta Calabrò, "Andreotti: non posso dire sì a unioni dello stesso sesso," *Corriere della Sera*, February 14, 2007; thanks to Gian Maria Annovi for drawing my attention to this article.

13. For a fuller reading of these sonnets along these lines see the first volume of my commentary to Dante's lyrics, *Rime giovanili e della Vita Nuova* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009).