

Panel Discussion: “Why Did Dante Write the *Comedy*?”

[The following three essays were presented as part of a panel discussion at the 1993 annual meeting of the Society in Cambridge.]

“Why Did Dante Write the *Commedia*?” or The Vision Thing

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The simple answer to this question is Dante’s own: “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, 103–105). Exchanging the chariot with any of the other sights that the pilgrim encounters on his journey, any of the other *cose nove* he sees along the way, we get an answer to our query: on behalf of the world that lives evilly, keep your eyes on what is in front of you, and that which you see—once you return to earth—be sure to write down. Beatrice here echoes many visionary texts, which commonly contain an obligation of *denuntiatio*: in the Apocalypse the Lord instructs John to “write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter” (1:19); in *St. Paul’s Apocalypse* (fourth century), the angel says “I will show you what you must describe and tell openly”; in his ninth-century vision, Wetti, a monk of Reichenau, is reluctant to reveal what he has learned and is scolded by his angel guide, “What God wishes and commands you to do, through me, do not dare put off,” eventually telling his fellow monks that “I was commanded with so much obligation to declare this in public that I am afraid I will be condemned without pardon if I am struck silent and cannot reveal what I saw and heard.” Thurkill, an Essex peasant whose vision occurred in 1206, requires a second vision to remind him to reveal his first: “In his great simplicity, however, he hesitated to relate his vision, until on the following night St. Julian appeared to him and gave him orders to reveal everything he had seen, because he said he had been taken from his body for the purpose of making public all he had

heard.”¹ These injunctions, from texts that are—with the exception of the biblical—not great masterpieces, nonetheless all touch on that complex node where originary presence encounters the belatedness of representation, where vision collides with language.

One of the goals of my recent book, *The Undivine “Comedy”*, is to suggest that the time has come for us to rehabilitate the *Commedia* as a vision, not making the positivist error of seeing earlier visions as sources of the *Commedia*, but reengaging Dante’s text in a dialogue with the visionary tradition. In my book I noted that while *dantisti* continue to debate whether or not to consider the *Commedia* a vision, scholars in other disciplines have been working to understand the common ground that underlies all vision literature.² If we wish our more nuanced sense of the *Commedia* to have any impact on such discussions, we must remove it from its isolated high-culture peak and come to terms with it not only as a literary artifact but also as the record of a visionary experience. Dante’s own suggestions regarding what is clearly a mystical experience have been handled with an excessive timidity that has its roots in our susceptibility to Dante’s narrative realism and our desire to keep poets safely segregated from prophets, as though our tradition were not replete with the complex *contaminatio* of poets and prophets, language users and visionaries, word-smiths and truth-tellers. Literary self-consciousness is a trademark of visionary authors, from the author of the Apocalypse, who refers repeatedly to himself as a writer and to us as his readers, to the author of *Tundale’s Vision* (Irish, 1149), who sets himself certain narrative regulations: he believes in selectivity (“we ought to try to be brief, since not all that we hear is worth writing down,” he says, anticipating Dante’s “altro parlando / che la mia comedia cantar non cura,” *Inf.* XXI, 1–2), does not want to be repetitive (“Since we described this before, we should not repeat it again”), is aware of his limitations (“Neither could your humble writer understand it nor his tongue tell of it”), and also of the service he performs, noting that he has recorded the vision “for the benefit of our readers”—“in pro del mondo che mal vive.”

Poetic self-consciousness, in other words, cannot be used as a litmus test to discriminate between poets and prophets, despite Salman Rushdie’s claims to the contrary. Hoping to persuade the Ayatollah Khomeini to take his text less seriously, Rushdie has pointed to its evident artifactuality, but the Ayatollah remained of the conviction that manipulations of narrative voice and other rhetorical techniques offer an author no

protective veil. I think it at least possible that Dante, who considered himself not a decretalist but a new St. John, would have welcomed the dangers attendant on being taken more seriously as prophet and visionary, but he did not succeed in eliciting from the Catholic Church of his time the attention that Rushdie elicited from the Iranian mullahs of ours. Despite Augustine's understanding that rhetorical prowess and access to truth can coincide, the Church on the whole (with a few telling exceptions like the Dominican ban of 1335) was willing to bracket Dante as a poet, a maker of *factio*. And yet Augustine had already disputed the idea—one that has been institutionalized in Dante studies through the *theologus-poeta* dichotomy—that one who is inspired by the Holy Spirit need not also attend to the “how” of language and rhetoric, asking “Does the Apostle contradict himself when he says that men are made teachers by the operation of the Holy Spirit and at the same time tells them what and how they should teach?” (*De doctrina christiana* 4.16.33). Augustine's answer to that question, we should work harder to remember, is no: the Apostle does *not* contradict himself when he says that men are made teachers by the operation of the Holy Spirit (i.e., they are inspired, they are visionaries, they are prophets) and, at the same time, tells them what and how they should teach (i.e., visionaries require rhetorical as well as substantive instruction, like poets). Augustine here makes the point that the contradiction is *apparent*, not real. This apparent contradiction, endemic to the truth-telling enterprise as a whole, and aggravated with respect to Dante because of cultural factors indisposing Italian Catholics from taking him as seriously as the Ayatollah took Rushdie, has warped our view of Dante's enterprise (or, more precisely, our view of his view of his enterprise) ever since his *piccioletta barca* was first launched.

The hermeneutic dance I am suggesting consists of the following moves. First, accept that Dante could have believed in his visionary and prophetic vocation, that he was acutely aware of the tension between his uncompromising visionary claims on the one hand and his extravagant poetic gifts on the other, and that he considered the latter insufficient arguments against the existence of the former. In other words, Dante agreed with Augustine that the contradiction between visionary vocation and poetic talent is apparent, not real, and considered himself a case in point. Second, the critical reaction that set about dichotomizing what Dante had fused was the result of a cultural posture that preferred to keep poets safely bracketed from prophets (and especially a poet who compli-

cated matters still further by deploying his poetic gifts in anything but prudent fashion, for instance by invoking classical models along side of biblical ones). In other words, the *secolare commento*—the history of the *Commedia*'s reception—was from the start profoundly defensive. Third, that Dante differs from the other “great prophet-visionaries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—Hildegard and Joachim, Mechthild and Marguerite,” with whom Peter Dronke would like us to associate Dante³—in the immensity of his poetic gift, which induces subconscious suspensions of disbelief in his readers on the one hand (duly reflected in the critical tradition) and prevents them from taking him seriously as a visionary on the other. A delicious irony here is that readers who do not “believe” Ezekiel or John the Divine, let alone Hildegard or Joachim, “believe” the *Commedia*, as is indicated each time a new class of first-time readers challenges their teacher regarding Francesca's damnation. Finally, if we keep all the above in mind, we can “look behind the veil” and catch a glimpse of *how*—using the only medium he had, words—Dante as poet-fabbro made/forged the magic of his compelling realism.

So, is there anything to be learned by bringing the *Commedia* into dialogue with its humble precursors, Dante into dialogue with the likes of Thurkill and Tundale? Precisely because these texts are so much cruder than the *Commedia*, their *fabbri* so much less rhetorically gifted, they allow us to see in a clear light—indeed, sometimes to see for the first time—the problems with which Dante would later deal, but which with his art he so masterfully obfuscates. For instance, the ambiguous status of the pilgrim's body, especially in *Paradiso*, is reflected in otherworld journeys of all periods, which posit the possibility of experiencing a true vision while the body remains on earth in apparent sleep. Thurkill is described as “lying senseless on his bed—as if oppressed with a heavy sleep—for two days and nights”; the monk of Evesham, too, appears almost dead, and returns to himself “as if waking out of a deep sleep.” Most importantly for readers of the *Commedia*, such a premise does not pave the way for an abstract and disembodied visionary experience; rather, these accounts are infused with an insistence on the physical reality of the experiences, an insistence that renders the status of the body highly ambiguous. Furseus, after returning, bears the physical marks of the fire that he had felt in his soul, while Thurkill's apparently lifeless body coughs at the same time as does his spirit in the otherworld. As Carol Zaleski notes, there is no “coherent rule for the interpretation of visions” precisely because of their ambiguity

regarding the status of the body: “Many ambiguities remain, all related to a central question: was the visionary still attached to a body, and, if so, what bearing does this have on the validity of the vision?”⁴

The status of the pilgrim’s body is an essentially new arena for students of Dante to explore. But visions can also reveal uncharted areas within zones that have apparently been fully explored. Take the issue of the structure of hell, as described by Vergil in a canto usually considered—I think it safe to say—fairly boring, namely *Inferno* XI. A reading of the visions of hell prior to the *Inferno* permit us to see that Canto XI is, in fact, a safeguard against boredom: a prime bulwark against the narrative parataxis—and resulting boredom—that afflicts earlier texts of this ilk. Visions of hell before the *Inferno* suffer from lack of difference: all the sinners seem the same, all the punishments merge into one sadistic blur. Where parataxis reigned, both stylistically and structurally, Dante—with passages like *Inferno* XI—imposes hypotaxis. In so doing, he eliminates the random—and he eliminates our boredom. Where, in earlier visions of hell, sins and sinners are piled one upon the other with minimal differentiation, so that the reader has no way of distinguishing the first from the second, third or fourth, and consequently little incentive to see who comes next, in the *Inferno* we know the order in which sins will be encountered and the moral value that has been assigned to each. Nor does Dante commit the opposite mistake of relaying such information too soon; he waits until he has taken us through all the circles based on the seven deadly sins, whose logic is easy enough to follow, and has begun to complicate matters in such a way that we require assistance. As a result the reader can anticipate the narrative, and is thereby induced to proceed, propelled by the subliminal desire to see how cogently the author’s rendering will conform to his earlier declarations, as well as by the urge to participate in a possible world which seems to make sense, or which can be challenged if it does not, because its structuring principles have been made known to us. By the same token, the visions help us to see that the *contrapasso* is less a theological device, as it is usually considered, than, in Dante’s hands, a narrative stroke of genius. If we look at previous visions from which the *contrapasso* is lacking, we can see by contrast to what extent its presence anchors the narrative, working with the narrative *gradatio* to deflect the random, to create a sense of order and confer a persuasiveness on the text. The comparative effectiveness of *Tundale’s Vision*, for example, derives in no small measure from its rudimentary deployment of the notion that certain pun-

ishments befit certain sinners: "Which souls in particular might this punishment be for?" asks Tundale of his angel-guide, thus acknowledging a curiosity that the ideology of moral decorum—the ideology of the *contra-passo*—succeeds in projecting onto the reader as well. This vision also displays an understanding of the need for narrative subordination in order to create differentiation (Tundale is frequently told that the newest punishment will be greater than any he has seen before). Moreover, the concern to differentiate has reached the point that the author imagines categories of souls called the "not-very-bad" and the "not-very-good." Such procedures, for all their crudity, lend this text a force that its predecessors lack, and remind us that not least among the secrets of Dante's greatness is his unsurpassed subtlety in deploying the not-so-simple staples of the narrator's art. The visions help us to see that Dante signifies by comparison not necessarily the arrival of a *theologus-poeta*, but the arrival of an *archi-poeta*, the advent of narrative cunning.

I could give many further examples, and even they would only represent the tip of the iceberg, since this is truly, in my estimation, a whole new field within Dante studies. Commentaries to the *Purgatorio*, for instance, do not inform the reader that Dante is making up everything as he goes along. A reading of Jacques Le Goff's groundbreaking *The Birth of Purgatory* helps us to focus on the degree to which Dante was venturing into uncharted waters as he sailed into his second realm, but even more effective is the realization that Thurkill's 1206 account is the first even to clearly distinguish hell and purgatory from each other. And the unique perspective the visionary tradition offers us for assessing the *Commedia* is never more useful than with respect to the representation of paradise. A perusal of earlier visions reminds us that Dante is unusual even in giving equal time—textually speaking—to heaven. Most importantly, we are reminded that there was no precedent for his agenda. If we imagine a contemporary poet attempting to graft into his poetry the concerns of modern theoretical physics, we may perhaps get a sense of what it meant for Dante to embrace in his paradise the discourse of medieval metaphysics. Against the backdrop of what his visionary precursors did not do, we can better appreciate what Dante did, remembering that he need not have chosen to deal with that aspect of his subject that is least accessible to the narrator's art. He could have followed his visionary predecessors in fashioning a more concrete paradise, whether pastoral or urban: either a supreme *locus amoenus*, the flowery fields and meadows of so many

medieval visions or, following St. John in the Book of Revelation, a magnificent heavenly Jerusalem. In other words, he could have adopted the restraint of previous composers of textual heavens, who make only few representational gestures toward the immaterial paradise favored by philosophers. The infinitely bolder path that Dante pursues is one that the context provided by the visionary tradition helps us to see. Indeed, when we consider that the *Paradiso* has traditionally been viewed as the least exciting part of the *Commedia*, we realize to what degree the visions can help us “see” the canticle anew.

In conclusion, let us look briefly at Dante’s internal handling of these issues, such as the meditation on visionary experience we find in *Purgatorio* xv. When the poet sets out to represent the *visioni estatiche* that the pilgrim experiences on the terrace of wrath, he puts himself in the position of representing both the content of these visions and the behavior of one who is in the grip of a visionary experience. This passage offers all the hallmarks of visionary experience: the withdrawal of the soul from the body, which lies lifeless, the trance-like state, and the soul’s participation in a different order of reality. This last is most explicitly expressed in the distinction between “le cose che son fuor di lei [l’anima] vere” (116)—i.e., “reality” as we normally know it, as constituted by those things whose truth is grounded in external sensory perception⁵—and, by contrast, those *cose che son dentro di lei vere*—i.e., things that are not externally grounded but that are nonetheless real, things whose truth is constituted in a different way. Finally, this passage offers a visionary who later writes what he sees, and thus a *mise en abîme* of the writing of the *Commedia* itself, whose author uncompromisingly believes that he, like Ezekiel, can paint things as he saw them: “ma leggi Ezechiel, che li dipigne / come li vide” (*Purg.* xxix, 100–101)—or at least die trying. Like the visionaries of old, the author of the *Commedia* consumes himself (this is after all a poem “che m’ha fatto per molti anni macro,” *Par.* xxv, 3) negotiating the perilous straits between the vision and the representation thereof, between *vedere* and *dipignere*, between *is* and *as*, the *is* of being and the *as* of represented being, the latter inscribed in Dante’s verse by the mediating *come*: “li dipigne *come* li vide.” Fragile bridge over the abyss though it be, that *come*, it does the job: Ezekiel *does* depict them as he sees them. It is into this visionary genealogy that Dante writes himself, aligning himself with his ancient precursors, the Ezekiels and Johns, and disregarding the flourishing contemporary tradition that peaks with Thurkill in the early thirteenth century.⁶ For,

when the pilgrim says to Marco Lombardo that “Dio m’ha in sua grazia rinchiuso, / tanto che vuol ch’i’ veggia la sua corte / per modo tutto fuor del moderno uso” (*Purg.* XVI, 40–42), he is suggesting that the mode of seeing vouchsafed the pilgrim is entirely unique in modern times. Reading other visions prevents us from glossing over this verse, forces us to query the pilgrim’s claim to see God’s court “per modo tutto fuor del moderno uso.” On the one hand, this statement is historically untrue (and most likely disingenuous). On the other hand, if we take “modo” to refer not only to the act of seeing but also to the act of representing, which is—for this tradition—essentially inseparable from the sight itself, how can we challenge the truth of Dante’s assertion? For visionary authors, from the humblest to the most sublime, it is not the “why” of the writing that is problematic but always the “how.” And with respect to the “how” there is no doubt that Dante’s text is indeed *del tutto fuor del moderno uso*.

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NOTES

1. The translations are from Eileen Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante* (New York: Italica Press, 1989).

2. *The Undivine “Comedy”: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992). See in particular Chapter 7.

3. *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 127.

4. *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 90.

5. It is worth remembering that “reality” here is purgatory, i.e., the macro-vision of the otherworld, within which the pilgrim experiences these micro-visions on the terrace of wrath. This kind of troping of the master trope is deployed frequently in the *Commedia*; see *The Undivine “Comedy”*.

6. There is an intriguing analogy here with Dante’s handling of his poetic precursors; in the poetic sphere, too, he acknowledges his debts to ancient authors more freely than to moderns.