THE SACRAMENTAL POETICS OF DANTE’S COMMEDIA

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Abstract

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My interdisciplinary study uses the medieval sacramental theology of “double signification” to integrate two contemporary conversations in Dante scholarship: the question of how to understand Dante’s poetics, and the problems surrounding the presence of medieval liturgy in the Comedy. Using a close-reading methodology, I examine how three key passages from the Comedy—the encounters with Adam in Paradiso XXVI, Ulysses and Guido da Montefeltro in Inferno XXVI and XXVII, and Bonagiunta da Lucca in Purgatorio XXIV—reveal the human person as both a sign of God and (potentially) God by participation in Christ’s divine nature. This revelation allows Dante-Poet to present himself as not only imitating God’s writing, but as participating in God’s writing. The result is a new hermeneutical framework for an integrated reading of all three cantiche.
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Procession on July 22, 2003, celebrating the Eucharistic miracle of Bolsena, Italy. It is this miracle which tradition says spurred Pope Urban IV to make the feast of Corpus Christi official in 1264, the year before Dante was born. (Photo is public domain. Source: Wikipedia.)
CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

The following study attempts, among other things, to integrate two discussions occurring within Dante scholarship. The older one, dating back to the earliest years of commentaries on the Comedy, concerns the presence in the Comedy of allusions to medieval liturgy, or elements modeled thereon. More recently (i.e., within the last century and a half), a conversation has developed regarding how to understand Dante’s poetics\(^1\) in his capolavoro. As will be seen, the two conversations can in fact fruitfully inform one another.

1.1 Discussion One: The Liturgy in the Comedy

Pre-modern commentators on the Comedy, such as Francesco da Buti,\(^2\) saw the banners trailing between the Griffon’s wings in Purgatorio XXIX.73-79 as an image of the

\(^1\) Unless otherwise indicated, “poetics” refers to poetic technique as actually carried out by Dante or another, not to a theory of such technique.

seven sacraments, with the Eucharist in the middle. Luigi Bennassuti, writing in the 19th century, read the entire Comedy as Dante’s journey to receive his Easter communion—culminating, therefore, in a Eucharistic reception at the Paradiso’s conclusion:

Ora Dante, o l’uomo in genere, ha tanto di forza quanto basta a salire il Calvario senza paura delle fiere, e massime della lupa; ed ha tanto di perfezione quanto basta a far la sua Comunione Pasquale, che è il fine inteso da Dante col suo viaggio. A queste nozze spirituali egli intese di preparare il cristiano colla sua Divina Comedia, come Virgilio con tutta la sua Eneide intese di condurre Enea alle nozze con Lavinia. E come in Virgilio queste nozze non si raccontano, ma si lasciano supporre avvenute subito dopo la vittoria sul suo nemico Turno, così è in Dante, che lascia supporre le nozze dell’anima con Dio nella Comunione Pasquale entro il tempo santo che ancor correva (giovedì dopo Pasqua, ossia l’ottava della istituzione della Eucaristia) dopo la vittoria su tutti i suoi nemici spirituali, ossia sulle sue passioni.3

Interest in the Comedy’s liturgical references has been on the increase since the early 20th century. L.A. Fisher’s The Mystic Vision in the Grail Legend and in the Divine Comedy is perhaps the most in-depth analysis of the historical context of the Eucharistic presence in the Comedy; especially noteworthy is the connection it traces between the procession in Dante’s Eden and the feast of Corpus Christi. This theme is picked up by J.I. Friedman,4 who examines medieval artwork representing the Purgatorio’s procession as part of her project of supporting the procession’s connection to the feast of Corpus


Christi. William O’Brien⁵ has examined apparent references to the feast of Corpus Christi in *Paradiso* II. Judson Allen argues that the Eucharist was an important element of Dante’s linguistic project—and interprets Dante’s final vision of the Trinity as “an elevated host.” Allen perceives, in the primary images from *Paradiso* XIV to the end of the poem, a single super-image: “[At the top] is the divine emblem of the interlocked circles, containing the image of man. The result, taking all these icons as one picture, drawn in the literal words of a journey through space, is a chalice, with an elevated host above.”⁶ Finally, Ronald Herzman,⁷ Donald Hoffman⁸ and Robert Durling⁹ all find images of a “corrupted Eucharist” in Hell.

Not all scholars have taken such a positive view of liturgical studies of the *Comedy*, of course. Peter Armour, perhaps the most outspoken scholar to take a more skeptical view, claims that there is a “complete absence from the poem” of overt allusions to the “Sacraments or to the most important of all the Christian rituals, the

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Mass…. The Eucharist is nowhere mentioned nor used as a symbol....” Nonetheless, Armour asserts, “Elsewhere too Dante does occasionally use imagery with sacramental overtones, but wherever he does so it is always in a much wider and more allusive context.” Thus, even for Armour, the presence of the sacraments in the Comedy is a question of quale sit, not an sit—the manner and degree is in doubt, not the presence itself.

Entering the 21st century, the general tone of Dante studies seems to favor the view that the liturgies of the Medieval period can be a useful tool for illuminating Dante’s masterpiece. Matthew Treherne has argued that the moments of ekphrasis on the Purgatorial terrace of Pride are meant to imitate the Eucharist’s effects on the communicant, effecting a similar sort of transformation; he also argues briefly against those critics, including Armour, who cast doubt on sacramental readings of passages in the Comedy. Nicola Fosca’s recent commentary on the Comedy also provides support for those who find allusions to the feast of Corpus Christi in the poem, as well as arguing for Eucharistic readings of various passages, most notably in Purgatorio XXXI.119-132.


11 Ibid. 5.


Like Treherne, Fosca also provides counter-arguments to critics who attempt to
downplay Dante’s use of the Eucharist.

1.2 Discussion Two: The *Comedy’s* Poetics

Of all critics the critics who investigate the presence of the liturgy in the *Comedy*,
however, only Treherne explicitly integrates the liturgy, specifically the Eucharist, with
Dante’s poetics. However, recent developments in the study of the poetics of the
*Comedy* seem to indicate that such an integration is not only possible, but desirable.
With the advent of the 20th century, Dante criticism shifted its understanding of Dante’s
poetic technique away from the traditional “personification allegory” model towards a
much more complex set of views: the various positions within the “Allegory of the Poets
vs. Allegory of the Theologians” debate; the “figural” view; the “incarnational” view.
These boundaries are not clear-cut between scholars, and some (most notably Charles
Singleton and Robert Hollander) have staked out interrelated positions in all three sub-
conversations. Nevertheless, a review of these various schools of thought will help
illuminate the key issues currently under investigation, and how scholarship might
benefit from an integration of the two conversations.

Although dominant until the 20th century, the personification reading no longer
finds much place in contemporary Dante scholarship. This view “replaces” each
character of the *Comedy* with a corresponding non-literal reality: Virgil as human
knowledge and Beatrice as divine wisdom, for example. Consider the following tercet from *Paradiso* XXVI, when Dante-Pilgrim regains his sight:

...onde mei che dinanzi vidi poi;  
e quasi stupefatto domandai  
d’un quarto lume ch’io vidi tra noi.14

The “fourth light” that Dante-Pilgrim sees is Adam, the first man. Johannis de Serravalle, applying a personification exegesis to this passage in 1416-17, records:

Iam Beatrix restituit sibi [visum] quem quasi amiserat, propter intueri in Sanctum Ioannem; quia sola Theologia est illa que sufficit intelligere subtilia et archana que continentur in illis clausulis Evangelii Sancti Ioannis, In principio erat Verbum, etc., et in libro Apocalipsis: et sic et taliter Beatrix restituit sibi visum, quod melius quam prius modo videbat.15

In this reading, there is a simple “a equals b” formula that elucidates the passage. Beatrice is Theology, St. John is the Biblical writings attributed to him. Theology illuminates Dante’s intellect so that he may understand Scripture. No mention is made of Adam; Johannis’ attention is entirely focused on the first line of the tercet, effectively ignoring two-thirds of the stanza. Is it possible that he could not find a fitting meaning with which to replace Adam? Whether this is the reason or not, when Johannis does


mention Adam in the following comments, it is simply to note that the latter was the first human being created by God. The commentator discovers no meaning for Adam, nor does he try to understand the purpose of Adam’s appearance here; for in personification allegory, the purpose and the personified meaning are indeed indistinguishable from each other. Yet Adam’s appearance here is stupefying, to use Dante-Poet’s term, and surely has meaning.

Even as late as the 20th century, some commentators continued to describe the Comedy in personification terms. Dino Provenzal writes, “B[eatrice], la Verità rivelata, con gli occhi che rispecchiano la luce di Dio, restituisce a D. la vista della mente.”

Beatrice is “la Verità rivelata,” revealed truth—Revelation personified. Regarding Adam’s stupefying appearance, however, Provenzal only says, “È l’anima di Adamo.”

Adam is now referred to, but like the previous commentator Provenzal makes no attempt to understand Adam’s appearance. Why here? Why now? And if it is really stupefacente, as Dante claims, why is the sudden revelation of Adam unaddressed?

Dissatisfied with the limits of personification allegory as applied to the Comedy, recent critics have put forth other possible exegetical principles. The basic counter-argument to the personification reading claims that the literal meaning of the poem is meant to affect the lives of readers as much as the deeper meaning(s); it is not an outer

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17 Provenzal Paradiso 26.79-81.
shell to be discarded after the deeper meaning is reached. The language of this
discussion has its roots in Augustine’s distinction between allegory *in verbis* and allegory
*in factis*: the former is the domain of human writing, by which words signify something
other than their usual meaning; the latter is God’s writing, by which events themselves
can signify something else. Augustine was not the first to make such a distinction,
however, though he is among the best known to use this language; during the same
period, John Cassian fleshed out allegory *in factis* into a four-fold exegetical approach to
Scripture.\(^\text{18}\) A well-known rhyme from the Medieval period has it:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Littera gesta docet; quid credas, allegoria;} \\
\text{Moralis quid agas; quo tendas, anagogia.}
\end{align*}
\]

These four senses formed the framework for biblical interpretation, though not all
agreed as to how to apply each sense in every scriptural passage, or whether all four
senses were in fact present at every place in the Bible. The literal sense was generally
understood as what the words in a biblical passage meant when taken at face value.
(This was not the universal understanding of “literal,” however—Aquinas extended it to
include every meaning intended by the human author.\(^\text{19}\) As always, the generalizations
made here should not overshadow the differences in exegetical theory throughout the
Middle Ages.) Next came the spiritual modes of interpretation: the allegorical sense,

\(^{18}\) Beryl Smalley. *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.* 41.
referring to articles of faith “hidden” within the literal sense; the moral, revealing lessons for right behavior; and the anagogical, referring to the divine realities in the Christian’s future.

Those who reject personification readings of the *Comedy* (at least, as the only possible readings thereof) support their exegesis with Dante’s own statements on interpretation of his poetry. In the *Convivio*, the poet seems to apply the four-fold method to his own poetry:

Dico che, sì come nel primo capitolo è narrato, questa esposizione conviene essere litterale ed allegorica. E a ciò dare a intendere, si vuol sapere che le scritture si possono intendere e deonsi esponere massimamente per quattro sensi.

L’uno si chiama litterale, e questo è quello che […] L’altro si chiama allegorico, e questo è quello che si nasconde sotto ‘l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna…. Veramente li teologi questo [allegorico] senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti; ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo delli poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato.

Lo terzo senso si chiama morale, e questo è quello che li lettori deono intentamente andare apostando per le scritture ad utilitade di loro e di loro discenti…. Lo quarto senso si chiama anagogico, cioè sovrasenso; e questo è quando spiritualmente si spone una scrittura, la quale ancora [che sia vera] eziandio nel senso litterale, per le cose significate significa delle superne cose dell’etternal gloria…

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21 Ibid. 2-6.
Dante appears to be saying that the poet can write a poem that functions on all the same levels that Scripture does, and so many scholars understand him. God, however, writes in factis, that is, in history; humans can only write in verbis. How then can human writing have the same kind of meaning found in divine writing? Baranski\(^ {22} \) and Singleton suggest that (according to Dante) humans can imitate God’s writing; thus, within the framework of the Comedy’s fiction, the literal is “real” and thus contains an imitative version of the other three senses of interpretation. Singleton’s famous formulation has it thus: “the fiction of the Divine Comedy is that it is not a fiction.”\(^ {23} \) Elsewhere he writes,

\[\text{A poet has not God’s power and may not presume to write as He can. But he may imitate God’s way of writing. He may construct a literal historical sense, a journey beyond (it too happens to be an Exodus!) to be, in the make-believe of his poem, as God’s literal sense is in His book (and with God’s help he will have the power to make it real). And he will make his allegorical or mystic, his other sense, even as God’s: a sense concerning our journey, our way of salvation, here in this life.}\]

\(^{24}\)

According to this view, Dante intended to imitate God’s writing, and that meant creating a literal level of meaning that cannot be discarded or interpreted away. However, what exactly Dante means in this passage of the Convivio is obscured by a lacuna, and so


\(^{24}\) Ibid. 15-16.
contemporary Dante scholarship has not come to a consensus on the poet’s exact meaning here. Hollander, in his book on Allegory, argues that the four-fold method is one way that Dante intended his *Comedy* to be interpreted (though not the only way); so, too, argues the Epistle to Can Grande. All these would seem to imply that the *Comedy* is intended to be read according to the four-fold method. The meaning of the passage in the Epistle to Can Grande passage is debated, however; and the debate is further compounded by the question of the epistle’s authenticity. In short, it is common—but not universally accepted—to speak of an “Allegory of the Poets” and an “Allegory of the Theologians” based on *Convivio* II, and to argue over how Dante employs one or both in his writings.

Certain scholars propose that Dante used the “Allegory of Poets” in the *Convivio*, then switched to the “Allegory of the Theologians” in the *Comedy*; supporters of this view, however, tend to be flexible when applying the “Allegory of the Theologians” to the *Comedy*. Hollander uses the “Allegory of Theologians” as a starting point for a more extended figural approach. As an example, one may see Hollander’s possible solution to the mysterious identity of *colui/che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto*.  


[W]e can tick off our simpleminded use of four-fold analysis: literally we see the damned soul of Celestine; figurally, the life of the caitiff prince of the Church which brought him to this pass; morally, how not to behave; anagogically, that God’s Justice is always evident in the afterworld. However, the further uses of figural techniques are far more interesting. For in the refusal of Celestine we may see the refusal of Pilate, and perhaps even a reflection of that refusal of Esau. To be sure, none of this is certain. Nevertheless, I believe it is a more satisfying way of entertaining the possibilities than that of the other commentators, all of whom must argue for one or for another identification.  

This example demonstrates the two sides of the “Allegory of Theologians” approach to the Comedy. On the one hand, it admits of multiple and complementary meanings in a single element of the Comedy; on the other, we can see that more than four meanings can make sense at the same point in the poem. Hollander also admits that, in his view, the Comedy does not usually employ the moral or anagogical senses, while combinations of personification allegory with figuralism, which are not strictly identical with either “Allegory of the Poet” or “Allegory of the Theologian,” do appear. He also observes, and we shall see below, that there appear to be moments in which the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians flow together.

A similar approach can be seen in Singleton’s use of the “Allegory of Theologians,” with this shift in emphasis: in addition to permitting polysemous interpretation, it emphasizes the reality of the Comedy’s literal sense. In “In Exitu Israel


28 Ibid. 239-256.

29 Ibid. 233 et passim.
de Aegypto,” Singleton uses this principle to explicate the *Comedy*’s theme of conversion.

We know now what Dante’s basic method of allegory is in the *Comedy*. It is allegory by evocation. Intermittently, along the line of a journey beyond, a double vision is summoned up, as a journey *there* brings journey *here* to mind, journey *here*, that is, as represented in the [*Inferno*’s] prologue scene…. If the historical event of the Exodus can point beyond itself, signifying conversion, may not a conversion, any conversion, point back to the historical event of Exodus?  

The temporal arrow of Biblical signification is reversed; whereas the Old Testament events pointed to those that came after, now the events after point to the Old Testament occurrences that preceded them. An event is not an abstraction, but an (in some sense) historical reality; making one event mean another event implies that the poet’s meaning cannot be divorced from the literal, “historical” level of the poem. The literal cannot be discarded. Such is also true when we consider a third level of meaning, to which both the Exodus and Dante’s story direct us—Christ.

Gradually we learn again to read Dante’s great poem in its deeper Christian meanings, to see it as the great “imitation” it is. The poet chose his model well. That model was nothing less than God’s way of writing. The poet’s way will imitate that Divine polysemous way, whereby an event such as Exodus can signify both our Redemption through Christ and the conversion of the soul. The two significations have their common root in Exodus because Exodus is their *figura*.  

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The Exodus is the death and resurrection of Christ; the story of Christ is the conversion of Dante; the story of Dante is the Exodus. A new layer of meaning is disclosed, yet it is still a literal, historical level of meaning. Moreover, the Comedy also connects earlier and later events within its own storyline:

In the prologue “Exodus” [i.e., the opening to Inferno I, understood in terms of its parallels to the biblical Exodus account] no manna falls, and the more the wayfarer struggles to cope with the beasts there, the more he falls back. In the second “Exodus,” in Purgatory [II], “temptations” do indeed come as before, but the guiding and protecting hand of the Lord is always there to help the pilgrim on his way, and this time the ascent of the mountain proves possible.... In the focus of double vision, in which one Exodus calls the other to mind, such a difference could not be more apparent to any reader who sees the matter in these terms.\(^\text{32}\)

Allegory in this sense is dialectic, the second event recalling the first through their similarities while communicating through their differences. The Comedy’s moments of conversion evoke: 1) its own earlier conversion moments, as well as 2) Old Testament references to the Exodus, which were the type of 3) Christ’s life, the model for 4) Dante’s conversion in the Comedy. And there is yet another conversion which these are meant to evoke:

The journey to the scene of which we may say “then” and “there” and “his” will leave behind it another of which we may speak in terms of “here” and “now” and “our,” leave it and yet not lose touch with it. For his journey beyond will

\(^{32}\) Ibid. 8-9 (74-5).
remain potentially open to our journey here, between the two there will be a bridge not cut by any divider, an organic tie, a living way back to metaphor.  

The Comedy’s account of conversion(s) is meant to stir our conversion; Dante’s journey from damnation to salvation must become his reader’s journey as well. This is certainly not the strict four-fold method that Dante appears to call the “Allegory of the Theologians”; nor does it have to be, given that the Comedy is not the Convivio, in which Dante differentiates the two forms of allegory. Yet it preserves an important aspect of the fourfold method of scriptural exegesis, namely the importance of the literal, concrete, historical, and individual. Instead of viewing truth as an abstraction and consigning the concrete literal to the proverbial dustbin, Singleton finds within the literal sense of the Comedy a meaning which is itself literal: Christ, the penetration of the eternal into the temporal, stands at the nexus between Old Testament and New, between the Bible and the Comedy, between Dante and us.

Whereas Hollander places the transition from the Allegory of Poets to the Allegory of Theologians between the Convivio and the Comedy, Singleton places it within the first canto of the Comedy itself.

[Dante-Pilgrim’s] body is tired from the struggle out of the pelago! But the pelago, but that water, is not really there on the scene at all, it is only part of a comparison, it is only the first term of a simile. No matter. This body is tired from

33 Singleton “Allegory” 10 (100).
the struggle out of that water, and when it moves on across the deserted shore (shore!) it may no longer be recalled or reduced to metaphor.\textsuperscript{34}

“Our” journey [i.e., the metaphorical meaning of the \textit{Comedy}] must become “his” journey [i.e., the \textit{Comedy}'s literal meaning], “his” must arise out of “our.” A literal and very real journey of a living man, a man in a body of flesh and bone, is to be launched forth from a place that does not occupy space. ... Even in the prologue, in “our journey,” the birth of a literal sense, “his journey,” takes place.\textsuperscript{35}

Dante-Poet, then, deliberately sets up a metaphorical poetic, beginning his poem with what appears to be the “Allegory of Poets,” and then ruptures it, introducing a non-reducible literal sense. Zygmunt Baranski argues similarly in “La lezione esegetica di ‘\textit{Inferno}’ I: allegoria, storia, e letteratura nella ‘\textit{Commedia}’”.\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{quote}
“Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia? 
perché non sali il dilettoso monte 
ch’è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?”
(vv. 76-78)
\end{quote}

Ciò che colpisce è che, in queste due domande, Virgilio tratta il viaggiatore e le sue avventure come se facessero parte di quella stessa realtà storica che egli ha appena presentato nelle tre terzine precedenti.... Non solo: anche il Pellegrino, ora pure lui figura reale, si riferisce agli eventi a cui ha partecipato nei dintorni del “colle” e ne parla come di esperienza vissuta alla pari della sua carriera poetica...\textsuperscript{37}

Through allusions back to the initial part of the canto, Virgil and Dante-Pilgrim reincorporate the “Allegory of Poets” section—which otherwise should have no literal

\textsuperscript{34} Singleton \textit{Elements} 12.

\textsuperscript{35} Singleton “Allegory” 10 (100).

\textsuperscript{36} Baranski “La lezione” 88-90.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid}. 90.
importance—into the literal sense of the poem, thus endowing that portion with literal significance. Baranski concludes that Dante here models his writing on that of the Bible:

Da questo punto di vista, la Commedia, nel suo prooemium, annuncia che riferisce una storia in cui le cose, le persone, e gli eventi, a cominciare dalla “selva”, dal viaggiatore, e dalle sue avventure, hanno la stessa verità dei fatti raccontati nella Bibbia. Dante non racconta una historia come, per esempio, quella scritta da Lívio, ma una historia in cui “significantur universales actus et conditiones pertinentes ad informationem hominum et contemplationem divinorum mysteriorum significatio rerum”. 38

Baranski goes on to demonstrate how the three spiritual senses operate in Inferno I. Dante-Poet’s abandonment of a purely metaphorical poetic thus reveals the meaning of the Comedy as inescapably rooted in its literal sense. Therefore, the Comedy can contain the same kinds of meaning that the Bible does.

Drawing also on biblical exegetical methods, Erich Auerbach introduced another way of understanding Dante’s poetics in his 1959 essay, “Figura.” Just as, in the Bible, Old Testament persons are seen as “types” or “figures” of New Testament persons—especially Christ—so the Comedy’s characters are fulfillments of their earthly lives, which were “figures” or foreshadowings of what they were to become in the afterlife.

Beyond any doubt Cato [in the Purgatorio] is a figura; not an allegory like the characters from the Roman de la Rose, but a figure that has become the truth. The Comedy is a vision which regards and proclaims the figural truth as already fulfilled, and what constitutes its distinctive character is precisely that, fully in

38 Ibid. 92. The final quote (in Latin) is from Alexander of Hales, Summa Theologica, Tractatus Introductivus q. 1 c. 1.; the entire passage is given in Baranski “Allegoria” 91.
the spirit of figural interpretation, it attaches the truth perceived in the vision to historical, earthly events.  

The historical Virgil is “fulfilled” by the dweller in Limbo, the companion of the great poets of antiquity, who at the wish of Beatrice undertakes to guide Dante.

Cato and Virgil and all the rest of the denizens of the afterlife are presented in death as the result of who they were in life; effectively, they are poetic commentaries on who they were in history. A.C. Charity, too, emphasizes the figural nature of the Comedy’s characters:

Neither equated with, nor wholly distinct from, their living selves, the dead summon up their past life, and expose it more fully than ever before. Despite the great transformation which death brings about, their manifestation here is of such kind that each one is revealed in his situation as the forma perfectior of his earthly self, as a selfhood now freed from the contingency of earthly affairs which had hitherto always impeded his total self-revelation.

As seen from these citations, the figural hermeneutic, like the “Allegory of Theologians,” focuses on the Comedy’s evocations of events past, present, and future; but like the “personification” interpretations, the figural ones also focus on people. In other words, while the “Allegory of Theologians” exegesis interprets events literally and figuratively—

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40 Ibid. 69 (59).

allegory in factis, to use Augustine’s term—figural exegesis also interprets people literally and figuratively, allegory in hominibus, to coin a phrase. What differentiates this allegory in hominibus from personification is that the individuals represent themselves, not an abstraction.

A final approach to interpreting the Comedy develops from the “figural” approach, and may be called “incarnational.” Referring to Jesus Christ as the incarnate God—in biblical terms, the Word made Flesh—it interprets the Comedy’s poetics as modeled on his Incarnation. This follows from observations such as the following:

One cannot address the “supernatural order” as such, one can only address its incarnate revelation, that part of the divine plan of salvation which precisely is the miracle whereby men are raised above other earthly creatures. Beatrice is incarnation, she is figura or idolo Christi (her eyes reflect her twofold nature, Purg., 31, 126) and thus... her relation to Dante cannot fully be explained by dogmatic considerations [i.e. personification allegory]. Our remarks are intended only to show that theological interpretation, while always useful and even indispensable, does not compel us to abandon the historical reality of Beatrice—on the contrary.

Beatrice is a figure of Christ, not just of herself; that is, both in her life and in her state in death, she is a sign of the Incarnate God. Similarly, Singleton argues that the imitatio Christi is an important aspect of Dante-Pilgrim, making the latter a Christ-figure. Given the view of Singleton and Baranski that Dante-Poet aims to imitate God’s way of writing,

42 John 1.14.

43 Auerbach ibid. 75-6 (65-6).
it is a small step to interpret the *Comedy* as, like the Christian view of history, centered on the Incarnation. Singleton emphasizes this point in contrasting the poetics of the *Convivio* with that of the *Comedy*:

Lady Philosophy did not, does not, will not, exist in the flesh. As she is constructed in the *Convivio* she comes to stand for Sapientia, for *created* Sapientia standing in analogy to uncreated Sapientia which is the Word. Even so, she is word without flesh. And only the word made flesh can lift man to God. ... [The *Comedy* is] historical and, by a Christian standard, beautiful as an allegory because [it bears] within it the reflection of the true way to God in this life—a way given and supported by the Word made flesh. With its first meaning as an historical meaning, the allegory of the *Divine Comedy* is grounded in the mystery of the Incarnation.  

“Only the word made flesh can lift man to God”—the conversion that the *Comedy* aims to effect in its readers succeeds only when the human person is united to God; such union is paradigmatically and primarily the Incarnation. As Kevin Brownlee puts it, “It is, in other words, Dante who undergoes a *Christian* metamorphosis linked to the Incarnation and Redemption, i.e., to the successful union of human and divine.”  

What is at stake, in the argument over the *Comedy*’s literal sense, is precisely the poem’s power to effect a conversion towards divine union. Hollander characterizes his reading of the *Comedy* in almost identical terms, and describes the discussion with religious terminology:

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44 Singleton “Dante’s Allegory” 83(113). In note 19, three pages later, the author compares those who ascribe an “Allegory of the Poets” to the *Comedy* to Manichees, who fictionalize the Incarnation.

The Judaeo-Christian historical tradition, centered for Christians in the doctrine of Incarnation, which for so many centuries had been attacked by heretical Christians (who may be generically referred to as gnostics), met similar opposition from literary men; this gnostic impulse was reinvigorated by that part of the fourteenth century which turned away from the ideas of imitation and “historicity” in art in favor of the treatment of this world, and the consequent representation of this world, as being merely a veil, a cloak, that concealed and revealed the way to the next. The Christian Incarnational art of Dante, while it agrees that this world is an *umbra* of the next, treats this world as substantial shadow, as being actually existent and hence the tangible counterpart of a heavenly paradigm. The gnostic impulse likes neither fact nor flesh of this world, preferring the non-physical intimations of the next, the spiritual realm.46

The Incarnation, according to this exegesis, is absolutely essential to understanding the *Comedy*. Dante’s poetic is predicated on his morality; his moral conversion implies also a poetic conversion; and the centrality of the Incarnation in the one necessitates its centrality to the other. Giuseppe Mazzotta points to the scene in which Dante explains his poetics to Bonagiunta da Lucca:

\[E i o a lui: "I’ mi son un che, quando Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo ch’e’ ditta dentro vo significando."\]47

Mazzotta summarizes this passage (along with others) as follows:

This esthetic theory in no way implies that the absolute self-sufficiency of God is less real: it bespeaks, rather, the vital function of the human word as the link with the divine. It is within this context that we have to see the poetical acts as

46 Hollander *Allegory* 52; cf. 5.

fundamentally analogous to the Incarnation. Like the Incarnate Word, which is its model, this human word is the vehicle to God.\textsuperscript{48}

The image of Love inspiring poetry in Dante reflects that of the Holy Spirit in-spiring the incarnate Christ into Mary. As the poet figures Christ, so the poem signifies him—in some sense.

In what sense? How do Dante and his \textit{Comedy} manifest Christ so as to effect an incarnational conversion in the reader?

1.3 The Sacraments and Sacramental Signification

It is the argument of this work that a model for the \textit{Comedy}'s conversion-driven poetics can be found in the medieval conception of the sacraments; this poetic model may be called “sacramental signification.” “Sacrament” and “sacramental” derive from the Latin term \textit{sacramentum},\textsuperscript{49} used in classical Rome to designate either an oath or money dedicated to (pagan) religious purposes. From there its meaning expanded to include religious rituals in general. When adopted by the early Christians, \textit{sacramentum} expanded again to include a variety of Christian rites, not necessarily limited to the seven rituals for which the term is reserved today. The Christian usage also permanently imbued \textit{sacramentum} with the sense of “sign,” especially something signifying a sacred

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reality. For example, in the New Testament Epistle to the Ephesians, the author writes that the union of husband and wife in marriage is a great *sacramentum* of the union between Christ and his Church: *Sacramentum hoc magnum est, ego autem dico in Christo et in Ecclesia*. Since this period, signification has been essential to the meaning of “sacrament.”

The most important Christian ritual was and is what came to be known as the Mass; the central sacred sign in the Mass is the sacrament of the Eucharist, the re-enactment of Jesus Christ’s Last Supper. The moment of Eucharistic consecration, when the bread and wine are believed to become Jesus’ own body and blood, recalls Jesus’ words at that meal:

> Et accepto pane gratias egit, et fregit, et dedit eis, dicens: Hoc est corpus meum, quod pro vobis datur: hoc facite in meam commemorationem. Similiter et calicem, postquam coénavit, dicens: Hic est calix novum testamentum in sanguine meo, qui pro vobis fundetur.\(^{51}\)

Three of the four Gospels describe this event in similar terms: Jesus spoke these words, or their equivalent, over the bread and the wine; he asked his followers to do likewise after he was gone, so as to recall him to memory—that is, to signify and re-present him.


The “commemoration” of the Last Supper, however, was understood to go beyond merely signifying as average signs do; as the author of I Corinthians writes:

Calix benedictionis, cui benedicimus, nonne communicatio sanguinis Christi est? et panis quem frangimus, nonne participatio corporis Domini est?  

That is, the Eucharist, as a sign, led the Christian participants to share in the reality that it signified; by participating in the memorializing sign of Christ, the Christians also participated in his very divine nature—they were divinized.

Sacramentum was not limited to what we know as the “seven sacraments” today, however. Not until the Council of Trent would the Church officially declare that there were exactly seven sacraments. In expanding the meaning of sacramentum to include Christian rituals, the Christians also kept the older meanings; they even extended the term further to rituals found in the Old Testament, such as circumcision. Thus the meaning of sacramentum evolved substantially between its early uses and its modern sense. With respect to Dante’s own time, it is impossible to say what the “official” meaning of the term would have been: the Catholic Church has never defined “sacrament” even to this day in any binding way. Rather, various theologians put forward definitions of more or less increasing precision. At the same time, popular piety

52 I Cor. 10.16.


54 Ibid. 465.
has taken on various manifestations of sacramental understanding, in dialogue with the theological conceptions but not necessarily identical with them. It is in these twin domains that a definition of “sacrament” must be sought.

The eventual narrowing of “sacrament” to the seven rites we know today originated in the quest of theologians to understand better the rites that the Church already used. The patristic attempts to understand Baptism better led to some of the earliest definitions of “sacrament,” such as Augustine’s: a sacrament is a sign consisting of words and elements,\(^\text{55}\) or a visible sign of an invisible thing.\(^\text{56}\) It is interesting to note that this process of defining the sacraments is still under way today: a recent article from a Catholic newspaper, for example, identifies Confirmation as “a sacrament in search of a theology.”\(^\text{57}\)

After the patristic period, theologians turned their focus to the Eucharist, a discussion that continued until Dante’s own time. From the 9\(^\text{th}\) to the 11\(^\text{th}\) century, the primary discussion surrounding the Eucharist centered on how exactly to understand the nature of Christ’s presence in the sacrament—that is, in what sense the Eucharist could be said to be Christ’s body and blood. Notable among those who denied a strict


identity between the historical body of Christ and the sacramental body of Christ were Berengar and Ratramnus; those who affirmed such an identity included Paschasius and Lanfranc. The latter emphasized the reality of Christ’s physical presence in the Eucharist (the *res*); the former emphasized the sign of his presence (the *signum/sacramentum*). They and their successors strove to define to what degree, and in what way, Christ was present in the Eucharist; most importantly, they sought to establish whether he was present in it in a way that went beyond normal signification. The latter party won out, and Paschasius was eventually canonized. The Eucharist, it was affirmed, is a sign more closely united to the reality it signified than a typical sign; it (somehow) gives direct access to the reality that it signifies.

This work was built upon by the 12th century theologians, who for the first time set out to systematize Catholic understanding of the sacraments. In particular, Peter Lombard was the first to enumerate seven sacraments, the same list that endures in Catholic theology to this day:

**Baptism** makes one a member of the Church, and hence capable of receiving the Eucharist.

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58 Irwin 468.


60 Irwin 470.
**Confirmation** continues the Christian’s spiritual development begun in Baptism.

**Penance** obtains forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God and the Church.

**Ordination** makes a priest, the usual minister of other sacraments.

**Marriage** unites a man and woman as a symbol of the unity of Christ and his Church.

**Anointing of the Sick** prepares the Christian for death.

**The Eucharist/Mass** is and was considered most important of the sacraments. When the priest says the words of consecration, as noted earlier, the bread and wine—the sacramental signs—are believed to be transformed into Jesus himself, appearances notwithstanding. The Christian then consumes this Eucharistic body of Christ, and is thus united to Christ and to the rest of the Church, forming his Mystical Body. This is considered the primary means of divine union and deification, since by it one receives God’s divinity directly.

Peter Lombard also introduced new language into the discussion of the sacraments—“word” and “element” became replaced with terms like “formal cause” and “material cause,” and Christ’s institution of the sacraments was the “efficient cause” of their power. Moreover, while it was conventional to speak of the *sacramentum* and the *res* of the sacrament—i.e., the sign and the reality it signified—he put forth the concept of a two-fold *res*. He distinguished between the *res* contained...
within a sacrament (such as the physical body of Christ in the Eucharist) and the res not contained therein (e.g., the Church as the body of Christ). He also called the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus conversio “conversion,” thus relating the Eucharistic transformation to the transformation of the individual Christian. Dante would later follow his lead, apparently, by modeling his word for the human’s transformation, trasumanar “trans-humanize,” on a synonym for Eucharistic conversio, transsubstantiatio “transubstantiation.”

Contemporary with Peter Lombard was Hugh of St. Victor. He was the first to attempt a systematic account that distinguished the “seven sacraments” from all other sacramenta; he proposed the same list of seven sacraments that Peter Lombard did, and attempted to articulate them from fixed principles. Hugh explained that a sacrament, unlike other signs, conveys grace; that is, it is the efficient cause of what it signifies.

Next appears the imposing figure of Thomas Aquinas. In the Summa Theologiae he presented his famous definition of a sacrament as signum rei sacrae inquantum est

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63 Colish 1.561, 582.

In this he continued using causal language to describe the sacraments:

Dicendum quod... sacramentum proprie dicitur quod ordinatur ad significandam nostram sanctificationem. In qua tria possunt considerari: videlicet ipsa causa sanctificationis nostrae, quae est passio Christi; et forma nostrae sanctificationis, quae consistit in gratia et virtutibus; et ultimus finis nostrae sanctificationis, qui est vita aeterna. Et haec omnia per sacramenta significantur. Unde sacramentum est et signum rememorativum ejus quod praecessit, scilicet passionis Christi; et demonstrativum ejus quod in nobis efficitur per Christi passionem, scilicet gratiae; et prognosticum, idest praenuntiativum, futurae gloriae.  

Each sacrament, he argued, signified three causes: its efficient, formal, and final causes. The efficient cause of the sacrament—the event that made it possible—was the passion and death of Christ. The grace from his passion and death was the sacrament’s formal cause, which made the sacrament what it was at the time of enactment. Finally, the sacrament also signified glory in heaven, for which the Christian hoped in receiving the sacrament; this was the final cause, the sacrament’s ultimate purpose. Thus, the sacraments united past, present, and future in Christ, and the Christian to all three realities in Christ. To take the Eucharist as an example once more:

Dicendum quod hoc sacramentum habet triplicem significationem. Unam quidem respectu praeteriti: inquantum scilicet est commemorativum Dominicae passionis.... Aliam autem significationem habet respectu rei praesentis, scilicet ecclesiasticae unitatis, cui homines congregantur per hoc sacramentum. ...
Tertiam significationem habet respectu future: inquantum scilicet hoc sacramentum est praefigurativum fruitionis Dei, quae erit in patria.67

In the Eucharist, the efficient cause is the passion and death of Christ; the formal cause, the grace of the sacrament, is divine unity in the Mystical Body of Christ; and the final cause is the perfection of divine union in Heaven. These three things that the Eucharist signifies correspond to the pattern Aquinas laid out in 60.3: the passion of Christ in the past; the grace of Christ in the present; and the glory of Christ in the future. Through the sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, the Christian participates in all three.

Aquinas also refined Lombard’s double-res idea into “double signification”: the *sacramentum tantum* signifies the *sacramentum et res*, which in turn signifies the *res tantum*.68 The *sacramentum tantum*, that which is only a sign and not a reality, becomes the reality—*res*—it signifies; this reality is itself a sign, and hence is a *sacramentum et res*; the *sacramentum et res*, in turn, signifies and effects a further reality, the *res tantum*, that which is only a reality and not a sign. To use the Eucharist as an example,

Dicendum quod in hoc sacramento tria considerare possimus: scilicet id quod est sacramentum tantum, scilicet panis et vinum; et id quod est res et sacramentum, scilicet corpus Christi verum; et quod est res tantum scilicet effectus hujus sacramenti.69


69 *Ibid.* 3a.73.6. Here Aquinas applies the terms specifically to the Eucharist. In his section on the sacraments in general, Aquinas does not explicitly spell out double signification; but 3a.64.8 r2 indicates
In other words, the bread and wine (sacramentum tantum) signify and become the sacramental body and blood of Christ (sacramentum et res), which in turn signifies and effects the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church (res tantum). These key concepts from Aquinas are essential our following analysis of the Comedy:

**Double signification**, as distinguishing the sacramentum tantum “sign only,” the sacramentum et res “sign and reality,” and res tantum “reality only.” (The term “double signification” comes from the fact that there are two things signified.)

Especially important is the two-fold res of the Eucharist: the sacramentum et res, the substantially present Christ; and the res tantum, the Mystical Body united to Christ. Each res, in Eucharistic terms, is God, albeit in different senses (the first in itself, the second by participation).

In these, the human individual is (or can be) at the point of union between God and Creation, temporal life and eternal life, sign and signified reality.

In 1215, a major landmark in official Catholic teaching on the Eucharist occurred: the 4th Lateran Council formally defined the dogma of Transubstantiation, concluding the conversation about the nature of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist (at least until the Reformation). Headed by Pope Innocent III, the Council declared that the bread and wine used in the Mass become completely the body and blood of Christ, while keeping their ordinary appearances.

that sacramentum et res—the last of the three terms to appear—had been used previously; and in 73.6 Aquinas takes it for granted that the basic terms will be familiar to his audience.
Una vero est fidelium universalis ecclesia, extra quam nullus omnino salvatur. In qua idem ipse sacerdos, et sacrificum Jesus Christus; cujus corpus et sanguis in sacramento altaris sub speciebus panis et vini veraciter continentur; transsubstantiatis, pane in corpus, et vino in sanguinem, potestate Divina, ut ad perficiendum mysterium unitatis accipiamus ipsi de suo quod accepit ipse de nostro.\(^70\)

In other words, the Council declared that the symbolic bread and wine used in the Mass become the body of Christ in order that human beings might partake of Christ’s divine nature through it (accipiamus ipsi de suo quod accepit ipse de nostro). The Council was also noteworthy for citing Peter Lombard (in canon 2) as an authority, thus confirming his status among the most preeminent sacramental theologians of the time.

Thus we arrive at the time of Dante. The general tenets of sacramental belief at this time may be summed up as follows. Sacraments in the narrow sense were (as they are also considered today) unique rituals because a) they were instituted by Christ, and b) they effected what they signified. Yet even now, vestiges of the earlier use of “sacrament” endured: Aquinas also discussed “sacraments” of the Old Testament in the Summa, and even described creation itself as a sacrament, insofar as it is a sign of God.\(^71\) (In this last point, he was again following Peter Lombard.)\(^72\) Therefore, the sacraments offer but one manifestation of the sacramentality of creation, and there are


\(^71\) Aquinas 31.60.2.

\(^72\) Colish 1.122.
other signs that, though not derived directly from Christ during his mission on Earth and hence lacking the same power, could by grace lead one to conversion and salvation. Finally, the most emphasized of the sacraments was the Eucharist, the means by which the human being might achieve deificatio “deification.”

1.4 Popular Piety

The Eucharist as the primary means of deification was not confined to theological discussions. Alongside these rose a popular tide of devotion to the Eucharist, a devotion that took many forms. As Fisher says,

The eucharist was one means, and not the least important, by which man might achieve union with God. Through it the soul entered into union with God Incarnate, His splendor being sacramentally veiled in mercy to finite powers, and the intuitive knowledge of transubstantiation, conceived as the miracle whereby the special presence of God was invoked, was claimed as a part, at least, of the mystic vision....

Chief among sacraments is the Eucharist, for in it sign and thing signified are one, even Christ, and so by its means man attains on earth to communion with God.73

The Eucharist, in other words, was and is considered the means by which anyone—cleric or lay, rich or poor, man or woman—might become divine. Moreover, such divinity was not merely union with God alone. Helen Dunbar also observes, looking at the medieval

73 Fisher viii, 4.
culture, that the union with God in the sacramental body of Christ leads to the union of all believers in God as the mystical body of Christ.\textsuperscript{74}

One major Eucharistic devotion was that surrounding the feast of Corpus Christi, the body of Christ.

Julianna, prioress of Mont-Corneillon near Liège, had a vision in which she saw the full moon disfigured by a black spot. This she interpreted as meaning that the black spot on the church calendar was the want of a day devoted to the honor of the sacrament of the altar. ... [Pope Urban IV] wished to give full sanction to the new feast, but hesitated about the final step, it is said, until his decision was quickened by a miracle of the bleeding host, known as the miracle of Bolsena. In 1264 he issued the bull \textit{Transiturus}, establishing the feast of Corpus Christi, to be held on the Thursday succeeding Trinity Sunday.\textsuperscript{75}

The feast of Corpus Christi, at least as an official feast of the Church, was thus extremely new when Dante lived (1265-1321). Miri Rubin has observed that the death of Urban IV diminished the Church hierarchy’s promotion of the feast until 1317, when John XXII finally reconfirmed Urban’s decision. However, the feast continued to be spread by means of individual bishops,\textsuperscript{76} religious orders\textsuperscript{77} (including the Dominicans, with whom

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{74}{Helen Dunbar. \textit{Symbolism in Medieval Thought and its Consummation in the Divine Comedy}. New York: Russell & Russell, 1961. 74.}
\footnotetext{75}{Fisher 93.}
\footnotetext{76}{Miri Rubin. \textit{Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture}. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. 179.}
\footnotetext{77}{\textit{Ibid}. 180. The Cistercians adopted the feast in 1277; the Dominicans in 1304.}
\end{footnotes}
Dante would have been familiar), and personal contacts among bishops and laity.78 In Italy, during Dante’s lifetime, the feast is recorded as being celebrated in Venice;79 its office was prayed in Caiazzo, in the Compania region, and Agnone, in Molise;80 and said office appears to have been composed by Thomas Aquinas,81 whose influence on Dante is well known.

Also new was the practice of Eucharistic adoration. According to Herbert Thurston, Eucharistic adoration is first recorded around the year 1200,82 and accompanied the quickly spreading Corpus Christi devotion; therefore Dante would have been born into the middle of this Eucharistic fervor.

Whether the institution of the feast of Corpus Christi with its procession, an innovation due to the visions of the Flemish contemplative, St. Juliana Cornelion, is to be regarded as the cause, or rather the effect, of this great desire to behold the Body of Christ is somewhat doubtful. … Moreover, we find it debated among scholastic theologians, as early as the thirteenth century, whether the looking upon the consecrated Host was permissible to those in the state of grievous sin, and it was commonly decided that far from being a new offense against God,

79 Rubin 181.
81 Walters 31-34.
82 In the English Ancrene Riwle or Ancrene Wisse.
such an act was praiseworthy, if it were done with a reverent intention, and was likely to obtain for the sinner the grace of true contrition.  

That merely gazing on the Eucharist could provide one with purification even from mortal sins indicates how intensely the Eucharist was revered at this time. Èdouard Dumoutet examines the same discussion in the writings of such notable medieval personages as Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, and concludes, “Le désir de voir l’Hostie fut, sans aucun doute, une grande dévotion médiévale: son apogée coïncide avec l’époque qu’on est convenu d’appeler la fin du moyen âge.”

N. D. Mitchell writes,

> From the 12th and 13th centuries onward, there is mounting evidence that visits to the Blessed Sacrament were made to honor Christ or to pray for special favors. Thomas Becket told King Henry II that he prayed for him "before the Majesty of the Body of Christ." At the end of the 14th century private devotion at the place of reservation was common among lay Christians, monks, and religious women.

It was into this world, a world saturated with sacramentality, the Eucharist, and the hope of deification for even the lowest of people, that Dante was born, and in which he wrote. Those who were sufficiently educated—popes, scholars, and the like—engaged in discussions of sacramental theology; those who were not lived out devotion to the

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Eucharist. The importance of these factors for artists and poets of the time should not be overlooked.

...there can be no question that in the later Middle Ages the eucharist was viewed not only as the continual extension of the Incarnation and the centre of Christian worship, but was also the supreme expression of all spiritual life and the focus of devotional expression, poetry, and drama.\footnote{Fisher 18.}

In short, sacramentality formed a decisive factor in shaping popular imagination at Dante’s time. It seems natural, therefore, that a poet of Dante’s stature would engage this dimension in his own imaginative work.

1.5 Sacramental Signification in the Comedy

We thus return to our question regarding Dante’s poetics: how can humans write like God? A new answer emerges. In the sacraments, the human being signifies with God, participates in divine power and activities. In the Eucharist, especially, human unites with God; here, as in the Comedy, making signs forms a single whole with a moral conversion that leads to divine union. The human person can do more than just imitate God’s writing; s/he can share, i.e. participate in, God’s salvific sign-making (literally “signifying”) as s/he participates in his divinity. There is in both the sacraments and the Comedy an inextricable connection between transubstantiation/trasumanar and signifying.
Humans can also fail to participate, however—they are fallen creatures, as Dante’s *Inferno* amply attests. A fallen human being, separated from God, cannot participate in the divine signification for the simple reason that he does not participate in the divine nature. Indeed, fallen humanity, apart from grace, is capable only of fallen signification, of being a distorted representation of God-\textit{res}, not participating in God’s divine salvific power. Moreover, fallen signification runs the risk of propelling the fallen signifier to the Underworld, or hastening his arrival therein—cf. Ulysses, whose speech hastened not only the physical demise of himself and his crew, but also their damnation.

What is more, humanity’s fallen state is its natural state, that in which one is born; to attain to union and participation in God requires one’s conversion. There must thus be a transition for the would-be prophetic poet from a fallen signifier like Ulysses to a divinized signifier, exemplified most notably through Beatrice, but also through the other denizens of Heaven such as Adam. Such a transition must be not just a spiritual transformation or just a poetic one, but both, at once and together. Dante-Pilgrim, as he appears in *Inferno* I, must go from a man who, like Ulysses, is incapable of divinely signifying to a man like Adam who is. The story arc of the *Comedy* from Hell to Heaven, from Ulysses to Adam, chronicles the transfiguration of Dante-Pilgrim the Fallen into Dante-Pilgrim the Converted, who is ultimately Dante-Poet, capable of divinely signifying in his poetry.

Without such a conversion, the *Comedy* would lose its power to effect conversion in its readers. The *Comedy* would be marred, an incomplete sign of
conversion, inasmuch as it would be the story of an unconverted Dante, himself an incomplete sign of conversion. He would remain fallen. God can use the writing of fallen men such as Virgil to convert a Statius—just as he can save men without using the sacraments—but far greater is the salvific power of God’s own signs, which he has a direct hand in writing. Dante’s story derives its power to signify a conversion effectively from Dante’s power to signify a conversion himself, i.e. to be converted. If Dante is to write with God, then Dante must become God’s sign, too. In short, he must become a sign of God’s power to transform a human being into what we were meant to be, signs of God that are also united to God.

Such a conversion must occur in reference to the understanding of the Eucharist at that time. Dante wished to write a divinely-inspired sign that would effect the divine union that it signified. So too in the Eucharist, the human makes a sign, instituted by God, that also represents union with God, and in so doing unites with God, that is, shares in God the sign-maker. Both the sacraments and the Comedy understand the human being as intended to be a sign of God that is also united to God; both intend to effect a transformation toward that end. For a Catholic, attaining this kind of signification means participating in the sacraments, God’s uniquely transforming signs. Dante’s journey is only possible in sacramental terms; it requires a transformation equivalent to that in which the sacraments play a pivotal role. The very concepts on which Dante draws for his narrative are Eucharistic.
The various schools of interpretation of the *Comedy* intuit these ideas, to a degree. The reactions to personification allegory recognized that the literal sense cannot be divorced from the poem’s meaning, an insight that scholars like Hollander have understood to derive from a Catholic understanding of the Incarnation as the union of divine and human natures in Christ. The literal sense does not merely *mean* (as a sign, a *sacramentum*); it is also *meant* (and is thus *res*). It embodies meaning in a union analogous to the union of the human and the divine in Christ. Figuralism’s insight into the *Comedy* reveals the poem’s saved characters to be figures of Christ; and Christ is the point of reference for all people, even the damned. This also true of even non-human things like events in the poem (such is part of Singleton’s argument quoted earlier); but Christ’s own human nature calls the other humans in the *Comedy* into the foreground of our attention—humanity is the only part of creation, of all that exists within the dimensions of space and time, that is permanently united to God. The insight of the “Incarnational” view understands that Christ is the source of Dante’s poetry, as Dante presents it; the *Comedy*’s “inspiration” is a sign recalling, and even re-enacting, Christ’s Incarnation.

The centrality of Christ as both human and divine, as both sign and signified, in the *Comedy*’s poetics indicates the sacramental dimension of the poem’s signification. In medieval theology, Christ in his Incarnation is the ultimate sacrament,\(^7\) the perfect

\(^7\) Colish 1.66.
union of God (the signified res) and Human (the signifying sacramentum). In him, a literal and historical humanity unites with its meaning, God—the sign and the meaning cannot be divorced from each other. To remove Christ from history means dividing the divine from the human, the signifier from the signified, the sign from the meaning, and the fallen human from any chance of conversion. What is more, Christ in the Incarnation is also Christ in the Eucharist, in which the sacramentum tantum—that which is only sign—transforms into sacramentum et res—sign and signified. Again the sign and its meaning are united. Remove Christ, and the sacrament reduces to merely a sacramentum tantum divorced from the res tantum, from meaning. It is this union of sign and signifier, in particular, that was understood to be the source of union with God; without it, and without the larger sacramental system rooted in it, conversion would be impossible. Analogously, without the union of sign and signifier in Dante-Poet, his poem would be incapable of effecting conversion; but through this divine union, Dante can write—can signify—with God, uniting sacramentum and res in his poem and in himself. And what God has joined, let no man divide.

With these concepts in mind, we can analyze Dante’s conversion from pilgrim to poet, from Ulysses to Adam, in light of these two characters who embody the start and end of his journey. In Dante’s moral journey we see also his poetic journey, from fallen and empty signification to divinized—i.e. sacramental—signifier.
2.1 The Puzzle of Adam in Paradise

Dante’s Adam appears dramatically in the middle of Paradiso XXVI, on the threshold of the Primo Mobile, the nexus between the created world and the Empyrean. Dante-Pilgrim has been blind since the end of canto XXV, when he tried to see St. John’s body within the latter’s covering of light. During the first half of canto XXVI, John questions him regarding Charity; and at the end of his interrogation, Dante-Pilgrim hears Beatrice and the other souls present sing, Santo, santo, santo! At that moment, Beatrice restores Dante’s vision—and he sees Adam, who has arrived without warning.

Curious to know who the newly-appeared soul may be, Dante puts the question to Beatrice—and her reply shocks him. He sways back, comparing himself to a fronda (literally, “frond” or leafy branch) blown back in the wind, but then righting itself as he regains his confidence. Then, in one of the more puzzling moments in the poem, Dante-Pilgrim addresses Adam as pomo “apple”—a clear reference to the first man’s primordial sin. He asks Adam to answer four questions about life in Eden and the loss thereof; Adam indicates a willingness to respond, which indication Dante-Poet
compares to an *animal covero* “covered animal”—another puzzling image. The canto ends with Adam answering Dante’s questions, concluding with a reference to his expulsion from Eden. The allusion to humanity’s loss of the earthly Paradise thus immediately precedes the Pilgrim’s arrival in the Primo Mobile, the last step before he concludes his entrance into the heavenly Paradise.

It is only natural that Dante-Poet draws out the pilgrim’s experience on the border of the Primo Mobile over some five cantos. First, the pilgrim sees the Triumph of Christ, a display of the entire Mystical Body of Christ with Christ at its head. Next he undergoes an examination on the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love, by three men no less important than Sts. Peter, James, and John. But the action climaxes with the arrival of Adam, whose presence will dominate the second half of *Paradiso* XXVI.

2.2 The Incarnational Interpretation of Adam

What is the purpose of Adam’s appearance here? The answer depends on how one understands Dante’s poetics. Personification allegory, as earlier, has difficulty explaining the presence of Adam at this point. However, proponents of the Incarnational school of interpretation suggest that Adam functions here as a key to

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88 *Paradiso* 23.
89 *Paradiso* 23.29.
90 *Paradiso* 24-26.
understanding Dante’s poetics. Kevin Brownlee, in particular, has worked out an extended interpretation of Adam, and interprets the character as critical to Dante’s self-presentation as a *theologus-poeta*, or divinely-sanctioned poet. While attempting to unravel the problem of the identity of the *animal covero*, he suggests that Dante presents Adam as a poet:

...[T]he fact that *this* animal [in Dante’s *animal covero* simile] is unnamed recalls contrastively that it was Adam who first gave names to all the animals (Gen. 2:19-20). ...[T]he Dantean Adam functions in part as “the archetypal poet.” And this component of Adamic identity is of fundamental importance to Dante’s self-presentation through the canto as a new Adam.91

The purpose of presenting Adam as a poet, Brownlee suggests, is so that Dante may contrast himself-qua-poet with Adam. Brownlee lists several reasons to suppose that Dante does just that. He cites Dante-Pilgrim’s final words to John:

Le fonde onde s’infronda tutto l’orto
de l’ortolano eterno, am’ io cotanto
quanto da lui a lor di bene è porto.92

Brownlee interprets these lines as follows:

...[T]he garden imagery [that concludes the pilgrim’s discussion with John] evokes a “corrected” Eden, an Eden correctly loved. In this context, there is, I

92 *Paradiso* 26.64-66.
think, the further suggestion of Dante as a new, “corrected” Adam, which would serve as a preparation for the immanent arrival of the original...  

The presence of a “corrected” Eden invokes a “corrected” Adam—Dante-Pilgrim, who reverses Adam’s journey out of Paradise through the former’s journey into Paradise. In this light, Brownlee argues that we can better understand Adam’s final words to the pilgrim:

Par. 26 closes as Adam answers Dante’s second question by explaining (vv.139-42) that he spent barely seven hours in Eden before the Fall: from sunrise of the day he was created to just after noon. ... This time period also corresponds to Dante-protagonist’s own stay in Eden, from sunrise (Purg. 27.133) to just past noon (Purg. 33.103-05) on Easter Wednesday. Adam’s statement thus in part functions to recall contrastively Dante’s successful overcoming of Eden through the mediation of Beatrice/Christ, and the canto closes with another implicit presentation of Dante as a new Adam figure.  

Again Dante employs the image of his journey to Paradise as a reversal of Adam’s expulsion from Paradise. This journey and the Edenic resonances of Dante’s orto de l’ortolano etterno, when viewed alongside Adam-qua-poet, suggest that Dante equates himself with Adam—but in a corrected fashion—to make a statement about his poetics as somehow Adamic, though again “corrected.” But why would Dante do this?

Brownlee opines that Adam is an integral part of Dante’s presentation in Paradiso XXIV-XXVI of himself as a theologus-poeta—a morally-upright, divinely-approved poet. He quotes Dante’s second response to John:

93 Brownlee “Language and Desire in Paradiso XXVI” 49.
94 Ibid. 54.
Sternilmi tu ancora, incominciando
l’alto preconio che grida l’arcano
di qui là giù sovra ogne altro bando. 95

The word *arcano* Brownlee finds significant:

The use of the word *arcano* in the rhyme position (v. 43, a *hapax* in the *Commedia*) to designate St. John’s message is suggestive because of its Pauline resonances: in 2 Corinthians 12:4, the Apostle describes his heavenly journey in terms of *arcana verba* which he was not permitted to utter once he had returned to earth. An implicit contrast is suggested between St. Paul’s silence and St. John’s speech with regard to the “experience” of heaven that is particularly relevant to the canto’s presentation of Dante as a St. Paul figure. What is emphasized is a key difference: in contradistinction to his Pauline model (and like St. John) Dante-poet articulates, cries out (*grida*) the mystery (*arcano*) he experienced during his celestial journey. 96

Dante’s mission is to speak the unspeakable, to express the experience of Paradise. He needs to become a poet of the highest degree, one whom—unlike even St. Paul—God will permit to speak *l’arcano.* Brownlee terms this aspect of Dante’s self-presentation *theologus-poeta*, the poet who combines poetic facility with moral rectitude. Whereas the questioning by the apostles demonstrates Dante to be *theologus*, his appearance as a new Adam shows him to be *poeta.* 97

95 *Paradiso* 26.43-45.

96 Brownlee “Language and Desire in *Paradiso* XXVI” 48.

2.3 A Complex Adam

Thus far, Brownlee seems to be correct; yet this argument raises additional questions about Adam and his place vis-à-vis Dante’s poetics. In the first place, Adam has a complex history. God created him as the capstone to all of creation, placing him in the earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden. God brought the animals to Adam to be named; then he caused Adam to fall asleep, fashioned Eve from the latter’s side, and presented the newly-awoken Adam with his wife. All was well until, at a serpent’s instigation, Adam and Eve violated God’s command—they ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. According to Genesis, they then realized they were naked, and took fig leaves to cover themselves. When God confronted Adam about his sin, Adam hid, and only presented himself to God reluctantly. God heard the sad account, passed judgment on Adam, Eve, and the serpent, and replaced the fig leaves with garments fashioned from animal skins. Then he expelled Adam and his wife from Eden.98 According to Dante, Adam spent 930 years on Earth and 4,302 years in Limbo before Christ’s redemption opened Heaven to him; then he spent 1,266 years in beatitude before Dante-Pilgrim’s arrival.99 There are thus several “Adams” intersecting Dante’s narrative: the Adam who named the animals (and is thus a poet, according to Brownlee) differs from the Adam who needs to be “corrected,” and who in turn differs

98 Genesis 1-3.

99 Paradiso 26.118-123 for the first two figures; Hollander’s calculations (comment on vv. 121-3) for the third. Hollander’s reasoning makes sense to me: if Christ died and freed Adam from Limbo in 34 A.D., and Dante’s journey occurred in 1300, then 1300-34=1266.
from the “corrected” Adam Dante-Pilgrim encounters in Paradise. The first Adam is
unfallen; the second, fallen; and the third, redeemed and perfected. Who is Dante with
respect to each of these, and what are the ramifications for his poetics?

Furthermore, “new Adam” is not a phrase or concept that originated with Dante
(or Dante scholarship); its origins lie in Scripture. St. Paul uses it of Christ:

Nunc autem Christus resurrexit a mortuis primitæ dormientium, quoniam
quidem per hominem mors, et per hominem resurrectio mortuorum. Et sicut in
Adam omnes moriuntur, ita et in Christo omnes vivificabuntur. ... Factus est
primus homo Adam in animam viventem, novissimus Adam in spiritum
vivificantem. Sed non prius quod spiritale est, sed quod animale: deinde quod
spiritale. Primus homo de terra, terrenus: secundus homo de cælo, cælestis.
Qualis terrenus, tales et terreni: et qualis cælestis, tales et cælestes. Igitur, sicut
portavimus imaginem terreni, portemus et imaginem cælestis. 100

Adam can only be a “new Adam” because of the novissimus Adam, Christ. Therefore, if
Dante is a “new Adam,” he is also—and more importantly—an image of the novissimus
Adam. If Dante-qua-corrected Adam/poet is Christ, then his poetics has a Christological
dimension; as Brownlee states (but without elaborating):

For it is the Incarnation, the central fact of both Christian theology and Christian
history, which simultaneously epitomizes and underwrites Dante’s global literary
enterprise as articulated in Par. 26. The Incarnate Christ, the Word made Flesh—the
highest fusion of desire and language, of love and speech—both inspires and
authorizes Dante’s extraordinary claim to a “redeemed” poetic practice. 101

100 I Corinthians 15.20-22, 45-49.

101 Brownlee “Language and Desire in Paradiso XXVI” 57.
The Adam-Dante poetic relationship is thus grounded in the Adam-Dante Christological relationship. Dante can only be a new Adam/poet insofar as he is a new Christ—in the words of the author of I Corinthians, insofar as he carries the image of the “second man” (Christ) instead of the “first man” (fallen Adam). Does not Dante, by presenting himself as a “new Adam,” present himself as a *novissimus Adam* as well? How does this relate to the Adam of Paradise—who is paradoxically the old Adam *and* the new Adam? And again, what are the ramifications for Dante’s poetics?

In this chapter is explored the relationship between Dante-Poet/Pilgrim and the complex figure of Adam, focusing on the poetical implications for reading the *Comedy*. After looking further at how Dante identifies—and contrasts—himself with Adam, we shall take up the relationship between the figure of Adam and Dante’s poetics, ending with the suggestion that Dante’s Adam in Paradise figures the poet that Dante wants to be, precisely because the “corrected” Adam is *sacramentum et res*, the goal of Dante-Pilgrim’s journey.

### 2.4 Adam as Dante, Dante as Adam

That Dante sets up a parallel between himself and Adam is undisputed. In addition to Brownlee’s reasons for considering Adam in Paradise as a figure of Dante, one of the canto’s key moments in Dante-Pilgrim’s itinerary resembles a key moment in the life of Adam. The moment in Dante’s narrative is the restoration of his vision:

\begin{quote}
E come a lume acuto si disonna
per lo spirto visivo che ricorre
\end{quote}
a lo splendor che va di gonna in gonna,
e lo svegliato ciò che vede aborre,
sì nescia è la sùbita vigilia
fin che la stimativa non soccorre;
co’si de l’occhi miei ogne quisquilia
fugò Beatrice col raggio d’i suoi,
che rifulgea da più di mille milia:
onde mei che dinanzi vidi poi;
e quasi stupefatto domandai
d’un quarto lume ch’io vidi tra noi. 102

Commentators generally remark of this scene that the description of one waking up (too scientifically precise, according to Momigliano) 103 resembles the scientific explanation of sight given in Convivio III.9:

The forms of things enter the eye as through vetro trasparente.

The image passes through water in the eye and strikes its rear wall, quasi come specchio.

Lo spirito visivo transfers the image instantly to the front of the brain. 104

In the Convivio, Dante follows this description with a series of reasons why sight sometimes errs or fails, 105 one of which is that the light may be so bright that it overcomes the sight, as happens initially in the simile above (and as Mattalia specifically

102 Paradiso 26.70-81.
104 Convivio 3.9.7-9.
105 Ibid. 11-16.
notes).\textsuperscript{106} Most attribute some allegorical meaning to the blindness and its healing (Mengaldo counts only three that do not: Bevenuto da Imola, Casini, and Torraca).\textsuperscript{107} There is, however, no consensus among critics as to the exact allegory in Dante’s blindness and cure. Personification readings take Beatrice to be Theology, scattering the blindness of error.\textsuperscript{108} Fallani interprets the darkness as a figure of the mystical “dark night” preceding divine union;\textsuperscript{109} and Gaffney provides a more developed version of this interpretation.\textsuperscript{110} Mengaldo denies Fallani’s view (and therefore, presumably, Gaffney’s), but does not address it in detail; in his analysis, Dante-Pilgrim’s renewed vision signifies a renewal of grace necessary to pass to the Empyrean.\textsuperscript{111} Singleton argues similarly:

Now it will be remembered that the two keys that were left to Peter by Christ are (as the poet has chosen to conceive the matter) in the hands of the guardian angel at the gate of Purgatory proper, the \textit{entrance} to Purgatory (\textit{Purg. IX}, 117-129). But Peter’s presence here in Paradise, framing the examination cantos XXIV-XXVI (for Peter appears centrally on the scene in \textit{Par. XXVII}), and the reference in \textit{Par. XXIII}, 139, to him as “the one who holds the keys to such glory” (the glory above this heaven, in the Empyrean) clearly signal the fact that the

\begin{flushright}


\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Ibid.} 230.


\textsuperscript{111} Mengaldo 230; 232.
\end{flushright}
wayfarer here passes through a kind of “gateway” (symbolically conveyed), if not a material gate such as that of Purgatory, where the keys actually are.\footnote{C.S. Singleton. \textit{The Divine Comedy, Translated, with a Commentary, by Charles S. Singleton}. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970-75. Dartmouth Dante Project. Web. 24 Oct. 2009. \textit{Paradiso} 26.1-79.}

According to this view, the pilgrim, having arrived at the conclusion of his exam, symbolically passes through the gate controlled by St. Peter’s keys, and so is ready to enter the Empyrean. In fact, apart from the personification interpretations, such views are not so different as they appear, though they give emphasis to different details. Since the blessed souls dwell in the Empyrean, this sphere signifies the divine union in which they participate; all of the given interpretations implicitly or explicitly recognize Dante-Pilgrim as being brought by divine aid to the threshold of that divine union. So all these interpretations acknowledge a general appropriateness of a simile of natural awakening at the point of greater spiritual awakening; but the four \textit{terzine} dedicated to this moment, and the way that the description dovetails into the literally “stupefying” encounter with Adam, suggest that this simile carries greater import, especially for our understanding of Adam, Dante-Pilgrim, and their complex relationship.

Does Dante’s account of his restored vision in some way reflect Adam, then? The moment does seem to echo the account of Adam’s Fall:

\begin{quote}
Vidit igitur mulier quod bonum esset lignum ad vescendum, et pulchrum oculis, aspectuque delectabile: et tulit de fructu illius, et comedit: deditque viro suo, qui
\end{quote}
“The eyes of both were opened”—Adam and Eve, having sinned in the garden of Eden, received a new spiritual vision. That is, they saw themselves with open eyes; the ambiguity of se could mean that each recognized the nakedness of himself or herself (Adam recognizing his own), or that they recognized it of the other (Adam recognizing it of Eve, and vice-versa), or both. Dante-Pilgrim’s eyes are also newly opened, though in a vastly different sense: he perceives Adam, whom he calls pomo—an inversion of the biblical account of seeing the fruit and then receiving opened eyes. Dante-Pilgrim thus re-enacts Adam—but Adam with a difference. Instead of eyes opened in sin, Dante’s eyes are opened in grace. Instead of Adam as he was, he becomes in a sense both Adam as he should have been, and Adam as he has finally become. Dante-Pilgrim re-enacts an Adamic moment as redeemed Adam—the Adam he simultaneously perceives.

It is possible, moreover, that there is an extended allusive contextualization of this scene against the background of the Genesis account. In Genesis, the story opens with an account of God’s creation of the world. At first, all is dark. Then God creates light, followed by the rest of the world over the course of six days. The climax of his creation is Adam, for whom God creates a garden in Eden. Compare this with Dante’s

113 Genesis 3.6-7.
114 Genesis 1.1-25.
115 Genesis 1.26-31; 2.
Paradiso XXVI: it opens in darkness, followed by six conversational acts (three question-answer pairs). The climax of the discussion is Dante’s declaration of love for the “garden of the Eternal Gardener,” his “corrected Eden.” Then comes the renewal of light for Dante’s eyes.

To be sure, there are significant differences between the two accounts. The appearance of light comes at different parts of the two narratives (at the beginning in Genesis, in the middle of Paradiso XXVI). Furthermore, despite similarities between God’s creation in Genesis and the conversation between John and Dante-Pilgrim—both consist of six speech-acts, for example—there are divergences, too. While creating the non-human parts of the world, God uses the simple subjunctive (“Fiat lux”); by contrast, when God creates Adam on the sixth day (the last sentence listed), the Creator uses a hortatory subjunctive (“Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostrum”), which along with the plural pronoun indicates for the first time a conversation among multiple people. This contrasts sharply with Dante’s discussion with John, which is entirely conversational. The parallel between the two passages should not be overdrawn. Nonetheless, it seems that such similarities should be pointed out as relevant.

Furthermore, Dante may deliberately contrast his story with Adam’s by moving the pilgrim’s moment of illumination just before Adam’s arrival, rather than placing it at

116 Paradiso 26.4-12 (John), 13-18 (Dante), 22-24 (John), 25-45 (Dante), 46-51 (John), 55-66 (Dante).
the beginning of his story as in Genesis. Dante’s instance of illumination signifies not the physical creation of light, but the increase of the human capacity to receive physical and ultimately spiritual light. That is, this illumination centers on the human, not the world. This is appropriate for what follows immediately after: in the very act of receiving his renewed sight, Dante-Pilgrim also sees Adam, the first-created man. The Genesis allusions focus on Adam as he was originally created, unfallen and perfect—as he was, and as he has again become. This, too, is who Dante must be.

2.5 Adam as (proto/ex-)Eucharist

And who is this Adam that appears before Dante as himself? Dante-Pilgrim gives him a revealing name:

O pomo che maturo
solo prodotto fosti, o padre antico
a cui ciascuna sposa è figlia e nuro...

The key moment of the Adam episode—and perhaps the only point more shocking upon a first reading of this canto than the appearance of Adam himself—is Dante’s address to Adam as *pomo* “apple.” Scholarship generally finds this moment unsettling. Singleton’s comment suggests that the address to Adam, recalling as it does the moment of his great sin, seems tactless; Andreoli and Tommaseo agree that the title seems out of place. Mestica acknowledges that there appears to be a reference to the Fall in

117 *Paradiso* 26.91-93.
word *pomo*—but denies that this can be, since it would be disrespectful. However, an analysis of the pilgrim’s words within the context of the poet’s revision of the Fall suggests that, far from being inappropriate, Dante’s allusion to Adam at the moment of his failure plays a key role in Dante’s self-presentation as a new Adam; his address is thus essential to this canto, and even (we shall see) reveals the full measure of the redemption of the Adam of Paradise.

In the middle of the garden of Eden was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, with its infamous fruit. Although the fruit is traditionally identified as an apple, neither Genesis nor Dante refer to it as such. Dante prefers the term *legno* “wood.” In line 91, however, Dante-Pilgrim addresses Adam as *pomo* “apple.” The fruit of the tree was thus an image of Adam, the real apple or fruit of God; it was a sign to him that he (as one of the *fronde* in God’s *orto*) grew united with God in the true garden. In other words, the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was a *sacramentum tantum* referring to (but not participating in) Adam; God, the *res tantum*, was Adam’s referent (in whom Adam did participate). Adam himself was *sacramentum et res*, the proto-Eucharistic nexus between the two. By transferring the traditional name of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge to Adam, Dante redirects the signification of the word *pomo* from the fruit to the man. Dante-Pilgrim shifts the sign from its expected referent—a *sacramentum tantum*—to a *sacramentum et res*; that is, the sign *pomo* points not to another mere

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118 So, for example, he has Adam refer to eating the fruit as *il gustar del legno* (115).
sign, which has no share in the ultimate being of God-*res*, but to a sign that does share in that being.

Therein lies the tragedy of the Fall: it interrupted Adam’s condition as *sacramentum et res*. Adam, participating in God, should have recognized the fruit as a sign of himself in relation to God. He should have read the sign and realized that he shared the divine life of God in a way analogous to the apple’s connection to the tree: he already participated in God’s nature. Instead, he refused to read it as a sign:

> Vidit igitur mulier quod bonum esset lignum ad vescendum, et pulchrum oculis, aspectuque delectabile: et tulit de fructu illius, et comedit: deditque viro suo, qui comedit. 119

Assuming that Adam’s treatment of the fruit was the same as his wife’s, his analysis of the *pomo* stopped literally at the surface: the fruit looked lovely and tasty. Failing to treat the *sacramentum tantum* as a sign, to look beyond it to what it signified, Adam “trespassed the sign.” Plucking the fruit from the tree, Adam plucked himself from God’s “tree,” i.e. divine nature. Thus elevating the *sacramentum tantum* above the *res tantum*, Adam chose to participate also in its mere signification; he lost his *res*. Adam became a *sacramentum tantum*. Having rejected God, he as a sign now pointed merely to another sign, which pointed back to himself. In this circularity, signification lost its reference to *res*, i.e. its meaning.

119 Genesis 3.6.
This circularity of signification is damnation. In Hell, Dante-Pilgrim met Master Adam and Sinon, who began arguing with each other. Their lengthy speech is only quoted in part here (Virgil assures Dante-Pilgrim—and us—that it is not worth paying much attention to):

“Ricorditi, spergiuro, del cavallo,”
rispuose quel ch’avèa infiata l’epa;
“e sieti reo che tutto il mondo sallo!”
“E te sia rea la sete onde ti crepa,”
disse ‘I Greco, “la lingua, e l’acqua marcia
ti ventre innanzi a li occhi sì t’assiepa!”

Their altercation contains many instances of repeating the other or saying things very like what the other has just said, such as sieti reo and te sia rea. R.A. Shoaf, interpreting their sin and speech, comments,

Here in Hell, the image is the only reality, the only matter, the only efficacy. It is precisely reference that has been repudiated: none of these souls would, for example, grow to maturity, that is, become one with his referent, or God. Each one is an “ombra”—“shade” but also “image”—without a referent. This is [Master Adam’s] fraudulence; he is a false image of God because, having corrupted reference itself, he can no longer refer to any Other, least of all God. … Master Adam and Sinon are mirrors each to the other; each reflects the other. Each is a Narcissus; together they are Narcissus talking to himself. And it is hardly fanciful to hear in their exchange Echo, especially in the pair “sieti reo” and “sia rea.” The Other is the Same, and in this illusory difference there is reference, but it is the corrupt reference of the sign signifying only itself signifying, referring only to its own referring—Echo. 

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120 Inferno 30.118-123.

Master Adam’s corrupt signification, as his name suggests, images the corrupt signification of the first Adam. Each becomes a *sacramentum tantum* that can refer to no reality—*res*—but only to a sign that refers back to it: Master Adam and Sinon mutually refer to each other, as do Adam and his “apple.”

Dante-Pilgrim, as the new Adam, does not make Adam’s error. He perceives that the true *pomo* is human, Adam/Dante himself. Recognizing that the fruit was a sign of the human-qua-*sacramentum et res*, Dante reads the sign of the *pomo* correctly: the human being is meant to be united to God as the fruit is to the tree, rewriting—as Dante does—the old Adam with the new.

2.6 The Garden and the Gardener

With this exegesis of the *pomo* passage, we can better understand the significance of what Kevin Brownlee calls Dante’s “corrected Eden.” At the end of his questioning by St. John—barely a moment before Adam’s appearance—Dante-Pilgrim professes his love in the following tercet:

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Le fronde onde s’infronda tutto l’orto
de l’ortolano eterno, am’ io cotanto
quanto da lui a lor di bene è porto.  
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[122] “Language and Desire” 49.
As several commentators have noted,\textsuperscript{124} the primary source for this passage is Christ’s Last Supper discourse to his apostles in the Gospel of John. Christ says, \textit{Ego sum vitis vera, et Pater meus agricola est... Ego sum vitis, vos palmites.}\textsuperscript{125} The vine is Christ, the Father is the vine-grower, and the branches are Christians. A strict parallel with Dante’s metaphor would have his garden equivalent to the vine, and hence symbolizing Christ; the leaves in both cases would be Christians; and the \textit{ortolano} would be identified with the \textit{agricola}, God the Father. In sacramental terms, this is significant for two reasons: first, it situates Dante-Pilgrim’s profession of love within Christ’s institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist; and second, it provides an interpretation of Dante’s metaphor in which the tenor includes the Mystical Body of Christ, the goal of the Eucharist. The \textit{fronde}, like Adam-\textit{pomo}, are \textit{sacramentum et res}. This interpretation would be consistent with that of the \textit{pomo} given above: the leaves/apple grow on the garden/tree as symbols of the human beings who share the life of God.

\begin{flushleft}
Singleton \textit{Paradiso} 26.64-66.
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This interpretation of the *orto* as the Mystical Body is, to be sure, at variance with other readings of this passage. In a similar but not identical view, Pasquini and Quaglio explain that “[le] *fronde* [sono] le anime che vivono nell’*orto* (la Chiesa militante) redento dall’*ortolano*, l’«agricola» evangelico [i.e. God the Father]”; and Bosco and Reggio interpret as follows:

Le fronde onde s’infronda tutto l’orto dell’ortolano eterno, indica il prossimo, o, meglio, l’insieme dei cristiani redenti e in grazia di Dio. Le metafore nascono dall’immagine giovane... : Dio è l’*ortolano eterno*, l’*orto* la Chiesa militante, già così indicata in *Pd* XII 72 e 104, le *fronde* non sono tutti gli uomini, ma, come è detto nel v. 66, gli uomini tocciati dalla grazia.\(^{126}\)

Bosco and Reggio argue for their interpretation of the *orto* as the Church Militant—the Christians on earth only, excluding those in heaven and Purgatory—based on the following passages from *Paradiso* XII:

Domenico fu detto; e io ne parlo
sì come de l’agricola che Cristo
ellesse a l’orto suo per aiutarlo.\(^{127}\)

Di lui [i.e. Domenico] si fecer poi diversi rivi
onde l’orto catolico si riga,
sì che i suoi arbuscelli stan più vivi.\(^{128}\)

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\(^{126}\) Bosco/Reggio *Paradiso* 26.64-66. The same position, or a similar one, is taken by Giuseppe Giacalone, Siro Chimenz, Natalino Sapegno, Manfredi Porena, and Trifon Gabriele. (Niccolò Tommaso takes an equivalent view of the *orto* and *fronde*, but interprets the *ortolano* as Christ.) Full bibliographic information on these commentaries is omitted here for reasons of space, and may be found in the bibliography.

\(^{127}\) *Paradiso* 12.70-72.

In each of these cases, the *orto* appears to refer to the Church on Earth. In light of John 15, however, one could argue that since the Mystical Body is so intimately united, insofar as St. Dominic helped a part of the Church, he helped the whole. Perhaps this is demanding a greater consistency in Dante’s use of *orto* than need be, however. In any event, Bosco and Reggio define the leaves also as “men touched by grace,” and not all men touched by grace are still on Earth; some are in Purgatory, others in Heaven. Orto would then take on a wider sense in canto XXVI, with Dante-Pilgrim professing love for the entire Mystical Body of Christ.

More divergent is the interpretation that understands the “garden” to be all of (the original) creation, and the “leaves” to be all creatures, a position that may seem reasonable given that in the immediately preceding lines (especially 58) the Pilgrim describes how all of creation draws his heart to love God. Singleton interprets this passage as follows:

Dante is saying that he loves the various creatures of God’s creation (the leaves of His garden) that make up the world, in proportion to the goodness which their Maker (the eternal Gardener) in His predestination has bestowed upon them.\(^{129}\)

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\(^{129}\) Singleton *Paradiso* 26.64-66. The interpretation that has the leaves as all creatures in the garden of the world (or universe) has a number of adherents, as seen in the comments on this passage of Fallani, Mattalia, Luigi Pietrobono, Ernesto Trucchi, Carlo Grabher, Scartazzini (alone and with G. Vandelli), Carlo Steiner, C.H. Grandgent, Giacomo Poletto, Giuseppe Campi, Brunone Bianchi, H.W. Longfellow, Luigi Portirelli, Baldassare Lombardi, P. Pompeo Venturi, the Anonimo Fiorentino, John Carroll, Raffaello Andreoli, Paolo Costa, the *Chiose ambrosiane*, and Jacopo della Lana. See Bibliography for more information.
This interpretation would have Dante expressing love for, in part, the old order of creation, that which has its origin in the old Adam, not the New Adam. So, too, for the similar view that interprets the *fronde* as all men, not simply those within the Church, though not necessarily all creatures.\(^{130}\) While there is in theory nothing wrong with loving the older creation—indeed, Dante does describe his love for it in line 58 and elsewhere—it seems odd that a discourse on divine Love, situated in a context of Dante’s entrance into the new creation and becoming a new Adam, should climax with a look backwards, as it were, to the world being left behind.

There are additional reasons to prefer the *orto*-as-Mystical Body interpretation over the old creation one. Both John’s and Dante’s metaphors are contextualized in a discussion of love. In the former case, Christ describes not a love for all creatures, but for fellow Christians; he commands his followers to love the other members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Then, too, there is the parallel between Dante’s metaphor and the Song of Songs, in which the bride is compared to a garden: *Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa,/hortus conclusus, fons signatus.*\(^{131}\) In the Middle Ages, the bride/hortus was interpreted as an image of the Church, the bride of Christ—and also his Mystical Body. It is not unthinkable that *orto* recalls *hortus* as an image of the Mystical Body.

\(^{130}\) Cf. the comments of Tommaso Casini and S.A. Barbi, H.F. Tozer, Enrico Mestica (who includes not only all men but all “intelligent creatures”), Bernardino Daniello, Vellutello, Benvenuto da Imola, the *Codice cassinese*, Pietro Alighieri, and the *Ottimo commento*. See Bibliography for more information.

\(^{131}\) Song of Songs 4.12.
A final objection to the orto-qua-Mystical Body might be raised by those who interpret the ortolano to be Christ, not the orto.\textsuperscript{132} Supporters of the latter viewpoint to John 20.15 and the passage from the Song of Songs just mentioned. In the gospel passage, Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ, but mistakes his identity: \textit{illa existimans quia hortulanus esset}... The parallel between ortolano and hortulanus would suggest that Christ is the gardener of Dante as well as John. Fortunately, the two views of Christ—as orto and ortolano—can be harmonized. For this purpose we can turn to St. Augustine’s commentary on John 15.1-3, the passage that serves as Dante’s precedent:

\begin{quote}
Numquid unum sunt agricola et vitis? Secundum hoc ergo vitis Christus, secundum quod ait: \textit{Pater maior me est}; secundum autem id quod ait: \textit{Ego et Pater unum sumus}, et ipse agricola est. ... Denique cum de Patre tamquam de agricola dixisset quod infructuosos palmites tollat, fructuosos autem purget ut plus afferant fructum, continuo etiam seipsum mundatorem palmitum ostendens: \textit{Iam vos, inquit, mundi estis propter sermonem quem locutus sum vobis}. Ecce et ipse mundator est palmitum, quod est agricolae, non uitis officium, qui etiam palmites operarios suos fecit.\textsuperscript{133}
\end{quote}

In other words, both the Father and the Son are the vine-grower, through their intimate union; and the Son is also the vine. The two interpretations of the orto metaphor, both finding support in Scripture, can thus be brought into harmony. Christ in union with God the Father is the ortolano etterno; Christ in union with his Mystical Body is the orto. As argued previously, Adam as the true pomo rooted in God foreshadowed the fronde—

\textsuperscript{132} As in the comments of Tommaseo, Andreoli, Vellutello, and Francesco da Buti.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Tract.} lxxx in Joan. 2.4-9, 15-20.
Dante and the rest of the Mystical Body—who are rooted in Christ/orfo. Both symbols represent a sacramentum et res relationship of the human being to God.

2.7 Dante’s Adam/s as Poetics

In light of the preceding analysis, it appears significant that Dante-Pilgrim’s address to Adam is flanked by two similes: Dante as fronda and Adam as animal covertto. What might be the significance of these passages for the Dante-Adam connection and ultimately for Dante’s poetics?

2.7.1 Dante the Leaf

The first simile, comparing Dante-Pilgrim to a fronda, comes immediately after Dante asks Beatrice who the “fourth light” is:

E la mia donna: “Dentro da quei rai vagheggia il suo fattor l’anima prima che la prima virtù creasse mai.”
Come la fronda che flette la cima nel transito del vento, e poi si leva per la propria virtù che la soblima, fec’io in tanto in quant’ ella diceva, stupendo, e poi mi rifece sicuro un disio di parlare ond’’io ardeva.
E cominciai: “O pomo…”

The action of the moment seems clear enough: knowing he sees Adam, the pilgrim responds stupendo. The exact meaning of the simile, however, especially regarding the

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134 Paradiso 26.82-91.
word *fronda*, has been the subject of much critical debate. Hollander, taking a neutral tone, describes the problem as follows:

This is an at least somewhat puzzling simile, equating Beatrice with a gust of wind, forcing the top of a tree down from its normal inclination upward. It then goes on to equate Dante with that treetop, regaining its natural upward direction once the gust has blown itself out. The meaning is plain, but the negative associations that surround Beatrice seem strange, and the positive ones that accumulate around Dante’s desires to do something that Beatrice seems to want to inhibit seem so, too.\(^{135}\)

Hollander explains the general problem, but not the specific one—what is the *fronda*, literally “leaf”? While he interprets it as “treetop,” other commentators take the term as synecdoche for “tree,”\(^{136}\) while on the other extreme are those who interpret it literally as “leaf” or “branch,” or even “tip of a leaf.”\(^{137}\) (Salvatore Battaglia’s *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* does not include this last meaning as a sense of *fronda* during the writings of Dante’s period, however.) How one interprets *fronda* determines how to interpret the rest of the simile. If the *fronda* is a leaf or other small part of a tree, how can it be said to raise itself up *per la propria virtù*? If it is a tree, then what is its meaning? Mattalia, on the “tree” side of the debate, argues as follows:

\(^{135}\) Hollander *Paradiso* 26.85-90.

\(^{136}\) Cf. the commentaries on this passage of Emilio Pasquini and Antonio Quaglio, Bosco and Reggio, Fallani, Chimenz, Pietrobono, Daniello, Vellutello, the Anonimo Fiorentino, Jacopo della Lana, and Mattalia. See Bibliography for more information.

\(^{137}\) Cf. comments (on the simile proper) of Porena, Singleton, Grandgent, Campi, Johannis de Serravalle, Momigliano, Steiner, Casini and Barbi, Mestica, Poletto, Benvenuto da Imola, and the *Ottimo commento*; and that of Carroll on line 91. See Bibliography for more information.
la fronda, foglia, non può flettere la sua cima, secondo la interpretazione di qualche commentatore; e quindi, sarà l’albero (la parte per il tutto): e nemmeno il ramo, del quale non si può dire che abbia come propria virtù (v.87) di essere verticale. Il paragone è vivo in sè, ma alquanto sforzato nell’applicazione, confrontandosi l’effetto dello stupore (così dice il v. 89) con quello del vento sull’albero: Dante, insomma, dice di aver quasi vacillato per lo stupore.

A branch or leaf cannot bend its tip or have its “own virtue”; such would argue in favor of interpreting the fronda as tree. The problem, as Mattalia observes, is that the simile is rather forced; and the interpretation that follows, while precise, seems rather lifeless.

On the “leaf” side, Momigliano comments (complains?), “Se però da questa trasfigurazione stagliata in un’aria così pura si passa al movimento per cui essa è stata pensata, si sente che il vigore lirico iniziale si fiacca alquanto...” Other commentators find the simile quite meaningful, however. Trucchi (of the “leaf” party) interprets the passage thus:

Così Dante, un istante fortemente turbato, risorge, perchè la sua forza vitale si manifesta in un bisogno veemente di parlare a quell’anima. Dante, il peregrino uscito dal mar de l’amor torto (v.62), a la riva del dritto amore (v.63), sente il bisogno di comunicare con colui che, posto sulla riva, era precipitato nel pelago: perchè se fino ad Adamo e così piena è discesa la misericordia divina in grazia del suo pentimento, e per la Redenzione, e quale degli uomini pentiti sarà ella negata? Adamo, sorto a lato degli Apostoli, muto, senza canto o danze, è la più eloquente prova della debolezza umana, ma anche la più bella e confortante testimonianza della Redenzione e del Vangelo; donde il rapido risollevarsi di Dante, prima atterrito, e il bisogno d’interrogarlo; lui, che fin a questo punto, in questo cielo, era stato l’interrogato.

Per tutti questi contrasti la figura di Adamo ci apparirà sulle prime sublime e scialba ad un tempo, tratteggiata dal Poeta non senza una punta d’ironico risentimento. Sublime per la sua collocazione a lato degli Apostoli; ma sublime in grazia della misericordia e della bontà di Dio, non per merito proprio: sicchè Dante lo paragonerà ad un pulcino nella stoppa o ad un animale impigliatosi nelle sue coperture che broglia (v.97), si dibatte inutilmente, se una virtude amica, come dice il Manzoni, non viene a soccorrelo: l’antitesi della fronda viva.
Taking the *fronda* as a leaf, Trucchi recalls the earlier metaphor of *le fronde onde s’infronda l’orto* and contrasts the living leaf/Dante with Adam (described in a moment by the next simile, to which Trucchi here refers). Adam is the weakest, the most fallen, of human beings—but thereby also the greatest testimony to Christ’s redemption, of which Dante has now availed himself. Similarly, Benvenuto da Imola sees in the *fronda* an image of the redeemed Dante redirecting himself to God:

...sicut enim virga viridis suo proprio motu tendit sursum; et si aliquando reflectitur versus terram motu violento venti, tamen revertitur versus coelum; ita autor hic tanquam planta horti hortulani aeterni, ut dixit paullo ante, virens scientia, sua virtute tendebat recte versus Deum; et quamvis inclinatus vi stuporis rei admirabilis erexit se sursum, et loquutus est Adae sub subscripta forma.

Benvenuto, like Trucchi, connects this passage to the garden metaphor, and likewise interprets the simile as Dante righting himself not only physically, but also spiritually. It is not a difficult step to imagine the swaying *fronda* as an image equally applicable to Dante and Adam—fallen, then redeemed.

Further analysis confirms that the *fronda* simile parallels Adam’s Fall, containing as it does echoes of the Genesis account:

Et aperti sunt oculi amborum; cumque cognovissent se esse nudos, consuerunt folia ficus, et fecerunt sibi perizomata. Et cum audissent vocem Domini Dei deambulantis in paradiso ad auram post meridiem, abscondit se Adam et uxor ejus a facie Domini Dei in medio ligni paradisi.\(^\text{138}\)

\(^{138}\) Genesis 3.7-8.
The eyes of Adam and Eve were opened; they recognized they were naked; they made coverings from *folia*, leaves, for themselves. Next appears God at the time of the *auram*, the “air” or “breeze” that marks the first meeting between God and man after their separation through sin; and the first couple hides in shame. In the *Paradiso* account, Dante-Pilgrim follows a similar pattern of “new sight—recognition—leaf”: his eyes are opened; he asks who Adam is, then recognizes him; and then compares himself to a *fronda*, a leaf. The *transito del vento* moreover echoes the *aura* marking the meeting between God and fallen Adam; and Dante-Pilgrim, as a *fronda* bending back from the *vento*, mirrors Adam fleeing from God at the coming of the *aura*. Whereas the earlier *fronde* were rooted to the garden of the Eternal Gardner, this *fronda* appears isolated, alone, detached from any tree. The former *fronde* endured with their Gardner; the separated *fronda* has no such endurance. Sin, cutting off Adam from the root of his permanence, necessitates decay and death—in the simile, a literal fall. But then the *fronda* resurrects! Unlike the old Adam in Genesis (but like Dante’s Adam in Paradise), Dante/Adam returns to grace. Adam was ashamed of who he was, and so hid himself from his own eyes and God’s; but Dante-Pilgrim, though symbolically re-enacting Adam’s concealment, also re-enacts his return to God and to himself as he was meant to be.

Put another way, a *fronda*, if detached from its tree, has no *propria virtù che la soblima*, no strength *of itself* to lift itself up. Its *virtù* comes from the tree to which it is attached; severed—left to its own strength—it can do nothing. So, too, a fallen human being, once cut off from God, cannot raise himself or herself back up to God. This again
recalls the “I am the Vine, you are the branches” discourse in John 15: *Ego sum vitis, vos palmites: qui manet in me, et ego in eo, hic fert fructum multum, quia sine me nihil potestis facere*. “Without me, you can do nothing,” says Christ. Dante-Pilgrim, once more rooted in Christ the orto, negates the Fall and rises again.

2.7.2 Adam the *Animal/Anima*

The old Adam, now that the new Adam has raised him back where he was meant to be, has been transformed in the image of the new Adam; Dante-Poet revises Adam poetically, as it were. Instead of concealing himself from human eyes as before, when he covered himself from his sight and Eve’s, Adam now willingly reveals himself to Dante. In Dante-Poet’s description, we find another simile:

Talvolta un animal coverto broglia,
sì che l’affetto convien che si paia
per lo seguir che face a lui la ‘nvoglia;
e similmente l’anima primaia
mi facea trasparer per la coverta
quant’ ella a complacermi venìa gaia.\(^{139}\)

These lines have not always fared well among commentators. Hollander observes on line 97, “This line has caused confusion, even anger, and (perhaps consequently) flights of fancy.”\(^{140}\) Momigliano opines, “Fra l’uno e l’altro oggetto [Adam and the animal], appunto, c’è una disparatezza profonda...,”\(^{141}\) while Mestica finds the simile troubling

\(^{139}\) 97-102.

\(^{140}\) Hollander *Paradiso* 26.97.

\(^{141}\) Momigliano *Paradiso* 26.96-99.
for Adam’s sake: “Si vede che era destino del nostro Padre Adamo di non aver molta
fortuna nemmeno coi poeti.” 142 Trucchi is more positive, if no less perplexed: “La
similitudine potrebbe davvero sembrare strana e forzata e sconveniente, senza quanto
abbiamo premesso. Ma certamente brilla di grande originalità, nè può dirsi oscura.” 143
Also of the opinion that the simile is strange are Pasquini and Quaglio, Bosco and
Reggio, Sapegno, and Casini and Barbi. Scartazzini cites Filalete sympathetically:
“Confesso che questa comparazione fu sempre per me uno di quei pochi passi della D.
C., leggendo i quali io esclamava involontariamente: Quandoque bonus dormitat
Homerus.” Tozer calls the simile “quaint.” 144 Only Poletto seems to dissent from the
general puzzlement:

...data la condizione di Adamo avviluppato di luce, e i movimenti suoi esprimenti
gli affetti dell’anima, non so quale comparazione più viva e precisa ed efficace si
potesse rinvenire; non è, in sostanza, paragone tra una bestia ed Adamo, ma tra
gli atti di quella e i movimenti di questo. 145

The strangeness of the simile simply does not exist, in this view, because it is the
movements of Adam and the animal that are compared, not Adam and the animal
themselves. While a precise distinction, it does not alleviate the contrast between the
agents of said movements; in any event, the similar sounds and stanzaic locating of

143 Trucchi Paradiso 26.97-102.
144 Tozer Paradiso 26.97-102.
animal and anima suggests that Dante-Poet intends some juxtaposition between the two.

Two uncertainties in particular have bedeviled commentators. What is the nature of the covered animal? And why and how is it covered? One answer to both questions is that the animal is a horse, wearing a decorated caparison. Grandgent suggests it could be a falcon, perhaps covered with a hunting hood. Porena, drawing on personal experience, proposes that the animal could be a cat carried in a sack. Still others argue that the specific nature of the animal does not matter; in fact, they view the non-specificity of the term as deliberate. Among these diverse opinions, two interpretations stand out, those of Carroll and Brownlee. Carroll first cites I Corinthians: “Factus est primus homo Adam in animam viventem, novissimus Adam in spiritum vivificantem. Sed non prius quod spiritale est, sed quod animale: deinde quod spiritale.” Since Adam is here defined as both anima and animale, Carroll argues that Dante-Poet refers to the animal part of Adam’s soul, which Dante-Pilgrim now sees


147 Grandgent Paradiso 26.97.


149 Cf. comments of Pasquini and Quaglio, Bosco and Reggio, Sapegno, and Casini and Barbi.

150 I Corinthians 15.45-46.
Brownlee, for his part, calls the solution of the caparisoned horse “ingenious,” but adds:

This is something of a false problem, however, since the simile functions in part precisely by referring to a “generic animal.” Much more important in terms of the poetics of the canto is the way in which this image evokes one of the best known medieval figures for the relationship between language and truth: the body which is truth is both covered and revealed by the clothing of language. In addition, the play between animal and anima reflects the double (and peculiarly human) identity of Adam at the moment of his creation. At the same time, the fact that this animal is unnamed recalls contrastively that it was Adam who first gave names to all the animals (Gen. 2:19-20). In Giuseppe Mazzotta’s suggestive phrase, the Dantean Adam functions in part as “the archetypal poet.” And this component of Adamic identity is of fundamental importance to Dante’s self-presentation through the canto as a new Adam.

Of the interpretations put forth, the last two seem to address the key issue, the relationship between the animal and Adam. Both Carroll and Brownlee argue that the animal is in some sense Adam himself: both are given similar names (animal/anima), names which occur in roughly the same position in each terzina; Adam, as a human being, is both spirit and animal; and there is a biblical precedent for calling Adam by both terms. Brownlee further notes the import of the animal/Adam identity, that it allows Dante to set himself up as poet via Adam-qua-poet.

This perspective seems stronger if we further observe that the model for the covered animal comes from Genesis 3.21: Fecit quoque Dominus Deus Adæ et uxori ejus

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152 Brownlee “Language and Desire in Paradiso XXVI.” This is the full paragraph quoted in part at the beginning of this chapter.
tunicas pelliceas, et induit eos. After Adam’s sin, God clothed him and Eve with animal skins. Adam in Eden serves as the model for the animal/Adam in Paradise. But the old Adam, the animal covered/clothed in animal skins, differs from the new Adam clothed in light. The fallen Adam hid in his covering; the new Adam reveals through it (trasparer). More precisely, both earthly and heavenly signs cover and reveal truth; but the heavenly sign provides direct if veiled access to truth, like light through a translucent surface, while the earthly sign can only provide mediation to truth, like the animal whose presence is deduced from other signs. The animal is not directly seen, the light is; and such is the advantage of the supernatural sign over the natural one.

Adam as animal/anima brings the Incarnational/Eucharistic poetic to the fore. Adam may, at this stage, be merely a soul; but the fact that he is also an animal points to the fact that one day he will again be reunited to his body, as he once was so united. In other words, the emphasis is on human nature as embodied, even in union with God who is pure spirit. Through the simile, Dante-Poet suggests Adam’s re-embodiment at the general resurrection. Adam is symbolically incarnate, a sacramentum of the past event of the Incarnation and its future fulfillment in the Mystical Body—as is also the Eucharist. And like the Eucharist, Adam is covered; the simile presents him as an animal covert, an animal hidden under a covering, but which through moving signifies its presence. Similarly, Eucharistic body in the Mass appears under the sensible covering of bread and wine; yet the sacramental sign (act plus word) reveals the hidden presence of God.
If Adam himself now reveals truth instead of concealing it, so too do the signs he makes, his words. Here Dante-Poet revises the fallen Adam’s attempt to hide himself from God. Dante’s question as to Adam’s identity reflects God’s question regarding the fallen Adam’s whereabouts: *Vocavitque Dominus Deus Adam, et dixit ei: Ubi es? Qui ait: Vocem tuam audivi in Paradiso, et timui, eo quod nudus essem, et abscondi me.* In Genesis, Adam hides himself and only reveals his presence to God at the latter’s inquiry (at least in intent; God obviously knows the answer ahead of time). In *Paradiso* XXVI, Adam reveals himself even before Dante-Pilgrim asks his question; and when the pilgrim asks Adam to read his mind so that he need not take time articulating questions, the first man demonstrates an eager willingness to respond to Dante’s speech even *before* he asks further questions. The inclination to hide which the fallen Adam had has been transformed into a desire to communicate, to reveal. Furthermore, inasmuch as Dante-Pilgrim now shares in God’s divine nature, Adam is revealing himself to God—not in shameful fear after hiding, but at once and in willingness. Adam’s self-revelation responds to God’s request in Dante, a covert (or *covert* “covered”) divine mandate to speak. Adam’s revelatory words are thus functionally prophetic. Prophetic speech rewrites fallen speech. Adam figures the prophetic *sacramentum et res*, who as sign and reality can make true *sacramenta tanta*, that Dante-Pilgrim must become—and Dante-Poet claims to be.

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153 Genesis 3.9-10.
2.8 Sanctus: The Poet as Eucharist

If Dante is or is becoming a poet who is *sacramentum et res*—that is, a Eucharistic poet—then it follows that he must receive some divine sanction of his speech, and ideally some affirmation of his status as both sign and participatory reality. The closest candidate for such approbation occurs immediately before Adam’s appearance, at the close of the blind pilgrim’s speech to John:

\[
\text{Si com’ io tacqui, un dolcissimo canto}
\]
\[
\text{risonò per lo cielo, e la mia donna}
\]
\[
\text{dicea con li altri: “Santo, santo, santo!”}^{154}
\]

_Santo, santo, santo_ alludes to the biblical and liturgical phrase, _Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus_, which in the Biblical books of Isaiah and the Apocalypse marks a theophany. By invoking the theophanies of the biblical prophets, Dante seems to suggest that he, too, has a prophetic vision of God at this point; however, the only figures around him are human souls, though of course God’s presence is evident to the pilgrim. It is at least possible, then, that Dante’s vision consists of these blessed souls, and especially the soul which is the object of this scene’s revelation—Adam.

The first biblical occurrence of the _Sanctus_ is in the Old Testament, at the theophany of Isaiah. Just before Isaiah receives his prophetic commission, he sees two seraphim attending God in his temple, singing:

\[
\text{Paradiso 26.67-69.}
\]
Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus, Deus exercituum; plena est omnis terra gloria ejus.\textsuperscript{155}

At this moment, the protagonist Isaiah exclaims:

\begin{quote}
Væ mihi, quia tacui,
quia vir pollutus labiis ego sum,
et in medio populi polluta labia habentis ego habito,
et regem Dominum exercituum vidi oculis meis.\textsuperscript{156}
\end{quote}

Dante echoes this scene in his own. Whereas Isaiah exclaims \textit{quia tacui} just after hearing the \textit{Sanctus}, Dante-Poet writes \textit{Sì com’ io tacqui} just \textit{before} the pilgrim hears the hymn. Both link their silence (\textit{tacui/tacqui}) and the \textit{Sanctus}; but Isaiah breaks his silence and professes unclean lips, i.e. speech, while Dante-Poet ends his speech (as Dante-Prophet) and his speech is applauded (by means of the \textit{Sanctus}, no less). Isaiah’s speech is only beginning; Dante’s is drawing to an end, and his silence calls attention at this moment to the fact that he has \textit{not} been silent—he \textit{has} spoken out. His speech is already pure and divinely approved.

Dante does not situate only himself in the theophanic scene from Isaiah; he does the same to Beatrice. The poet draws on an image in Isaiah’s account: after the latter confesses his silence and incapacity for pure speech, one of the seraphim approaches him:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{155} Isaiah 6.3.
\textsuperscript{156} Isaiah 6.5.
\end{quote}
Et volavit ad me unus de seraphim, et in manu ejus calculus, quem forcipe tulerat de altari, et tetigit os meum, et dixit:
Ecce tetigit hoc labia tua,
et auferetur iniquitas tua, et peccatum tuum mundabitur.  

The seraph purifies Isaiah’s lips with the sacred coal from the altar of the Lord. In

Paradiso XXVI, Beatrice serves a similar function. She had been sent to Dante from
Heaven (back in the Purgatorio), and now, as St. John says, she has la virtù ch’ebbe la
man d’Anania, the power to heal Dante’s sight. And like the seraph healing Isaiah, she
heals Dante-Pilgrim at the singing the Sanctus. Dante not only sets himself up as
revelatory prophet in this scene, he positions Beatrice in the role of angel, literally “one
who is sent,” on the prophet’s behalf.

In Isaiah’s scene, of course, there are actually two angels; it would be significant,
therefore, if we were to find two angel-figures also in Dante’s account. Such seems to be
the case if we consider the other biblical source for the Sanctus, the New Testament
book of the Apocalypse, in which four angelic beings, called animalia “living creatures,”
sing before the throne of God in Heaven. The author of the Apocalypse writes:

...et ecce sedes posita erat in cælo, et supra sedem sedens. ... Et in conspectu
sedis tamquam mare vitreum simile crystallo: et in medio sedis, et in circuitu
sedis quatuor animalia plena oculis ante et retro. Et animal primum simile leoni,
et secundum animal simile vitulo, et tertium animal habens faciem quasi
hominis, et quartum animal simile aquilæ volanti. Et quattuor animalia, singula
eorum habebant alas senas: et in circuitu, et intus plena sunt oculis: et requiem

157 Isaiah 6.6-7.
non habebant die ac nocte, dicentia: Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus omnipotens, qui erat, et qui est, et qui venturus est.\(^{158}\)

In the *Comedy*, Beatrice, John, and *li altri* take over the role of the *animalia* as singers of the *Sanctus*. This is particularly significant in the case of John: by shifting him from the role of author/protagonist to that of singer of the *Sanctus*, Dante opens up the role of Apocalyptic protagonist—and theophanic prophet—for himself. Nor is this all; after John’s final question to the pilgrim, Dante-Poet records:

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Non fu latente la santa intenzione
de l’aguglia di Cristo, anzi m’accorsi
dove volea menar mia professione.\(^{159}\)
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Dante terms John *l’aguglia di Cristo*, the Eagle of Christ, drawing attention to John’s link to the eagle in sacred art. The four *animalia* entered Christian art early on as symbols for the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Initially, which creature was associated with which evangelist was somewhat variable; by Dante’s time, though, the association of each creature with one of the four evangelists was well established. John’s connection with the eagle, in particular, was historically one of the most stable.\(^{160}\) As John-*animal-aguglia* joins in the *Sanctus*, he links Dante’s hymn back to its occurrence in Revelations—and Isaiah. He is the other primary angelic figure in Dante’s scene.

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\(^{158}\) Revelations 4.2, 6-8.

\(^{159}\) *Paradiso* 26.52-54.

Comparing Dante’s *Santo* scene to the biblical occurrences of the *Sanctus*, we can see that he has cast himself in the role of prophet, and the other souls—especially Beatrice and John—in the role of the *Sanctus*-singing spirits. Who, then, is cast in the role of the manifestation of God, the central aspect of theophanic scenes? The most evident subject of revelation in this scene is Adam, the man suddenly revealed to Dante’s sight when it is restored by grace. Adam seems an appropriate image for God considering that:

Christ, who is God, is the “New Adam,” and the old Adam is now remade after the image of this new Adam.

Adam, as a member of the heavenly court, now participates in God-qua-res, that is, in his divine nature.

In other words, Adam can appear in God’s role because he is both an image of God—*sacramentum*—and through participation also divine—*res*. And if Adam is *sacramentum et res*, and if Dante-Pilgrim in seeing him also sees himself, then Dante, too, is *sacramentum et res*—a sign of the divine and a sharer in its divinity.

The use of the *Sanctus* in this context reveals a connection to a third source of the *Sanctus*, the Mass. In Dante’s time, the *Sanctus* was sung by a choir just after the Preface at the beginning of the Roman Canon,\(^{161}\) the prayer climaxing with the

consecration of the Eucharistic bread and wine—that is, the transformation of the sacramentum tantum into the sacramentum et res. This Sanctus reads as follows:


Liturgical scholar Josef Jungmann notes in his book, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, that the text of the Mass’ Sanctus serves to remind the community of believers of two things. The first part—Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth. Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.—recalls the theophanies of Isaiah and Revelation; it reminds the Christian that he or she participates in the liturgy of Heaven. The second part—Osanna in excelsis. Benedictus, qui venit in nomine Domini. Osanna in excelsis.—recalls the words with which the crowds greeted Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

According to Jungmann, this second half reminds the Christian that he or she is destined for the Heavenly Jerusalem. The Sanctus in the Mass thus signifies that all Christians form part of a community that exists both on Earth and in Heaven—the mystical body of Christ, the union of all who are sacramentum et res.

In short, Dante’s Sanctus works with Adam’s appearance to support Dante’s claim to a divine poetic. As for Isaiah and John, the Sanctus marks for Dante a vision of God; unlike theirs, however, his theophany is of God revealed in the mystical body of Christ.

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163 Jungmann 2.135.
Christ, the unity of all believers with and in God. The key consequence is that, as a member of the Church, he is himself united to the mystical body; consequently, and also unlike the biblical theophanies, Dante is united to his own vision. He sees the divine, and yet in a mystical sense he is also divinized—seeing Adam as *sacramentum et res*, he sees himself as such as well. United to Christ and his Church, Dante sees fulfilled in himself the Sanctus’ promise of divine unity. He thus becomes a new kind of prophet, capable of perfectly communicating the divine reality which he has seen because he is united to it—the speaker of true *sacramenta tanta* because he is *sacramentum et res*.

2.9 Dante’s Sacramental Poetic

_Human-as-*sacramentum et res_* permeates Dante’s Adam episode. As shown above, Dante collapses the distinctions between God and human, and between human and sign. Adam who ate the apple becomes an apple; Adam who wore the leaf becomes Dante who is a leaf; Adam who wore the animal’s covering becomes a covered animal; and so on. With this principle in mind, we can penetrate further into Dante’s description of Adamic language which he places in Adam’s mouth. As Adam describes the *sacramenta tanta* of speech, through him Dante-Poet describes the human person as *sacramentum*, too.

2.9.1 Leaves as Signs—and Men

With respect to Adam’s simile of words as leaves, an argument can be made that Dante-Poet intends us to understand the leaves as men, too. Here are Adam’s words:
Opera naturale è ch’uom favella;  
ma così o così, natura lascia  
poi fare a voi secondo che v’abbella.  
Pria ch’i’ scendessi a l’infernale ambascia,  
I s’appellava in terra il sommo bene  
onde vien la letizia che mi fascia;  
e El si chiamò poi: e ciò convene,  
ché l’uso d’i mortali è come fronda  
in ramo, che sen va e altra vene.  

Language, in short, changes its words like a tree changes its leaves; so much of Dante’s  
meaning is agreed on among scholars. It is also agreed that Dante’s model for this scene  
is Horace’s *Ars Poetica*:

> ut silvae foliis pronos mutantur in annos,  
> prima cadunt; ita verborum vetus interit aetas,  
> et iuvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque.  
> debemur morti nos nostraque...

In both passages, the poets compare words to leaves; and given Dante’s previous  
technique in this canto, one might argue that Dante-Poet implicitly follows Horace in  
comparing humans to leaves/words as well. Indeed, Dante does this elsewhere in the  
*Comedy*:

> Come d’autunno si levan le foglie  
> l’una appresso de l’altra, fin che ‘l ramo  
> vede a la terra tutte le sue spoglie,  
similemente il mal seme d’Adamo

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164 *Paradiso* 26.130-138.

Here the leaves (foglie this time, like the folia of Genesis that Adam used to cover himself) are the souls of the damned, explicitly described as the “bad seed of Adam.” Similar comparisons between leaves and humans occur elsewhere, especially in the Purgatorio. Given the propensity to compare men and foliage in both the poetic tradition and Dante’s own Comedy (not to mention Paradiso XXVI itself), it seems likely that such a comparison should be understood even when human beings are not the obvious subject of the simile. This seems especially probable since human nature is one theme of the episode with Adam (whose name means “man,” and whose history irrevocably influenced everyone else’s).

Thus, while mutable vernacular language is not itself a result of the fall, nonetheless in sinning Adam as-simil-ated himself to such changeable, dying signs. The wearing of the folia represented the trapassar del segno inasmuch as Adam chose not to signify the divine Word and instead selected for his image mere words. He rejected his Creator, in whose image Genesis records he had been made, and attempted to remake himself in the image of his own creations. The change of natural language has

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166 Inferno 3.112-117. This scene seems modeled, not on Horace’s simile, but on Aeneid 6.309-12 and Georgics 2.82 (cf. Fosca’s and Hollander’s comments on these lines).

implications far beyond language itself, for Dante: in the context of the Adam episode it becomes an image of fallen human nature.

2.9.2 Signs of God

The same hermeneutic sheds light on another puzzle in this passage: the shift in the word for God from I to El. In Adam’s words,

Pria ch’i’ scendessi a l’infernale ambascia,  
I s’appellava in terra il sommo bene  
ondie vien la letizia che mi fascia;  
e El si chiamò poi...

This represents a shift in Dante-Poet’s thinking from the De Vulgari Eloquentia, in which he wrote that “El” was the name of God which Adam used, since Adam’s language was Hebrew. With the poet’s change in opinion, Hebrew cannot be Adam’s primordial language; “I” must be drawn from some other source. The source and the rationale for the change are still debated. One view has “I” standing for Yahweh; another, for Jesus; still another, for the Roman numeral for “1.” Trucchi, in particular, develops the second idea as follows:

Forse egli volle attenersi all’opinione di Sant’Isidoro, che nella sua opera Originum seu Ethimologicarum istituì un confronto fra la sottilità di suono e di segno della lettera I, che pertanto si presta ad essere simbolo della spiritualità; a ciò confortato anche da Ubertino da Casale, che nell’Arbor vitae crucifixae sosteneva che I, iniziale di Iesus, significa la divinità, perchè come l’I è la vocale di mezzo, così il Verbo, figliuolo di Dio, sta in mezzo alle tre persone divine.168

While it is impossible to rule out any such meanings, it is not immediately clear that such an interpretation illuminates the way this shift in God’s name functions in the Comedy’s text. Hollander’s comment to this passage\(^{169}\) points out that “I” was the first-person pronoun in Dante’s Italian dialect, and he suggests that Dante may wish to present his vernacular as reviving Adam’s first speech; or alternatively that Dante had decided that Hebrew was too “grammatical” and Adam should speak a vernacular. Either way, Dante intends to privilege the vernacular, thus accounting for the shift.

If signs and men are interchangeable, though, we can show further implications of this passage. When Adam describes the change in the sign for God, implied is a change in the human being as sign of God. As Moevs observes,\(^{170}\) not only is I the Italian io “I,” but the paranomasia suggests the union of God and humanity; while El is the Italian Egli “he,” implying that God is other, distinct, separate. As Nardi argues,\(^{171}\) Dante no longer considers the mutability of the vernacular a consequence of the Fall; what is such a consequence, however, is humanity’s mutability—its decay from union with God to separation from God. By attempting to remake oneself in the image of one’s own signs, one consequently takes on their shifting meanings; but for one to change one’s meaning means separation from God-quaque-meaning and union instead with the decaying order of nature. Two things follow from this: death and empty signification.

\(^{169}\) Hollander Paradiso 26.134.


There is, however, a cure for disrupted, fallen signification. Christ as the Eucharist restores the double signification built into Creation as the unfallsen Adam knew it: *sacramentum tantum* (Eucharistic bread and wine) reflects *sacramentum et res* (unfallen humanity), which in turn signifies and participates in *res tantum* (God). If “you are what you eat,” if eating a mere sign—a *pomo*—makes one refer to that sign, and separates one from God and from others in God, eating the Eucharist causes one to refer to God, and to be united to him and to others in him. The Eucharist breaks the empty circle of signifiers signifying themselves to restore meaning—God-*res*—to them.

Not accidentally, then, there are several parallels between Adam-*pomo* and the Eucharist. As noted earlier, both point back to the Incarnation and forward to the perfection of the Mystical Body. Moreover, both are human persons—Adam and Christ—and persons moreover who have a history of being contrasted. From the Bible, Adam and Christ are paralleled especially in terms of their most important acts: for Adam, eating; for Christ, permitting himself to be eaten. By calling Adam *pomo*, Dante also compares Adam to something intended to be eaten, again like Christ in the Eucharist. Dante further positions his *Sanctus* so as to underscore the Eucharistic resonance of Adam: in the Mass, the *Sanctus* occurs shortly before the consecration of the Eucharistic elements, when Christ becomes present as the edible Eucharistic *sacramentum et res*; in *Paradiso* XXVI, it comes shortly before Dante sees Adam, and calls him by a name—*pomo*—that indicates edibleness. Adam, as *pomo*, appears not only as a Christ-figure, but as a Eucharistic *sacramentum et res*. The apple on the Tree of Knowledge was a symbol of Adam, the real *pomo*, who in turn was a sign of (and
participator in) God. As in the Mass, the sacramentum tantum pointed to the sacramentum et res, which in turn indicated the res tantum.

2.9.3 Three Poetics

From Dante’s Adamic imagery we can derive three contrasting poetics. The first, represented by the leaves separated from the tree, is fallen signifying: this hides the truth of who the human being is and attempts to remake it according to one’s own will. The second and third, signified in the skins that covered Adam on earth and the light that covered him in Paradise, give a “before and after” picture of two kinds of redemptive writing. The first makes use of natural signs in a natural way; yet the writing is not necessarily fallen. An example might be a commentary on the Bible, in which the subject matter is holy and edifying. Here truth is revealed, but only through mediation. The final poetic, which the light represents, provides direct access to the truth as a light source does to light, even if the light itself is tempered for its viewer or even (as in the simile of awakening and the associated Convivio passage) overwhelms the observer and thus accidentally as it were conceals. In this last case, the concealment is incidental to the observation process, whereas in the second kind of signifying concealment necessarily forms part of the observing. The “skin” poetic must by its nature conceal something from the recipient of the sign, while in the “light” poetic any concealment arises from a deficiency on the part of the observer (paralleling Dante’s description: si nescia è la sùbita vigilia/fìn che la stimativa non soccorre). Dante-Pilgrim must become
the new Adam so that he may become an illuminating sign of truth, one that provides
direct access to the reality it signifies.
CHAPTER 3:

REJECTING THE SACRAMENTUM ET RES

3.1 Dante’s Ulysses

Dante-Poet’s Adam, we have seen, arrives safely in Paradise; Dante-Pilgrim follows in his path. The journey of Adam, Pilgrim, and Poet would seem less remarkable, however, if not for the fact that the story could have ended differently. Suppose, for instance, that Adam had remained permanently in Hell—or that Dante had? In a way, they do—though under a different name. Dante’s Ulysses, it is generally agreed, is poetically akin to Adam, as well as to Dante himself; Ulysses embodies the same moral and poetic theme, but in an infernal mode.

Complementing Adam’s manifestation in Paradiso XXVI, Ulysses appears in Inferno XXVI. After an opening invective against Florence that turns into a prophecy of its impending punishment, Dante-Poet describes the descent that the pilgrim and Virgil make into Ulysses’ home: the eighth bolgia of the eighth circle of Hell, in which Fraud is punished. Here Dante-Pilgrim eagerly gazes down into the valley and perceives a collection of flames; he compares himself first to a villano watching insects, then to the biblical prophet Elisha watching the flaming chariot carry his master Elijah away. The
fires, as he correctly guesses, house damned souls; one in particular catches Dante’s attention, containing as it does the souls of Diomedes and Ulysses. The pilgrim asks to speak with them, and Virgil agrees—on the condition that Virgil do the speaking, not Dante, “ch’ei sarebbero schivi, perch’ e’ fuor greci, forse del tuo detto.”

Dante accepts this condition, and when the flame approaches them Ulysses agrees to “speak” (the flame makes sounds in a fashion analogous to a tongue). In a striking departure from the Homeric tradition, the Greek hero recounts how he abandoned Ithaca and his family. He explains that he and his crew sailed for a long time, eventually passing the Pillars of Hercules. Then Ulysses gave his men a speech that encouraged them to rush headlong into the unknown sea—a successful piece of rhetoric that subsequently resulted in their downfall. Approaching an unknown mountain, later determined to be the mountain of the Terrestrial Paradise that Dante-Pilgrim will ascend in the *Purgatorio*, Ulysses and his crew rejoiced—until a whirlwind blew up from the mountain and drowned them. So end Ulysses, his speech, and his canto.

So much about Dante’s Ulysses is clear; what is not so obvious, however, is why he is damned in the first place—a rather burning question, so to speak. With a relevance that extends far beyond this one canto, Ulysses and his sin shed light on Dante and his entire moral and poetic journey. On more than one occasion, Dante-Poet speaks of his

172 *Inferno* 26.74-75.

173 Scholars dispute whether, in Dante’s version, Ulysses left Ithaka again after his *nostos* or simply never returned home.
journey in terms that echo Ulysses’ story. At the beginning of each *cantica*, for instance, Dante uses the image of a sea journey to describe his poetry:¹⁷⁴

*Inferno I.22-27*
E come quei che con lena affannata,  
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,  
si volge a l’acqua perigliosa e guata,  
cosi l’animo mio, ch’ancor fuggiva,  
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo  
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.

*Purgatorio I.1-3*
Per correr miglior acque alza le vele  
omai la navicella del mio ingegno,  
che lascia dietro a sé mar si crudele...

*Paradiso II.1-7*
O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,  
desiderosi d’ascoltar, seguiti  
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,  
tornate a riveder li vostri liti:  
non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,  
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.  
L’acqua ch’io prendo già mai non si corse...

In the simile from *Inferno* I, the Dante compares himself to a man who, like Ulysses, has been shipwrecked—though unlike Ulysses, he has survived. In the first scene of the *Purgatorio*, the poet compares his *Comedy* to a sea voyage, transforming Ulysses’ vivid account of a literal sea venture into a metaphor. At the foot of Mt. Purgatory, however, Dante is also calling attention to his success where Ulysses failed; his “ship” has survived

¹⁷⁴ The passages that follow are so generally recognized as echoing Ulysses as to make citation pointless. For a recent treatment of some of these passages, see: Marco Ariani. “La folle sapienza di Ulisse.” *Inferno: Dante personaggio, Francesca, Farinata, Pier delle Vigne, Ulisse, Ugolino*. Rome: Bulzoni, 2006. 87-105. Cf. especially pp. 90-92.
the sea that Ulysses’ did not survive and arrived at the destination, the mountain of Purgatory, that Ulysses could not reach. The sailing metaphor continues in the Paradiso. Without plunging unnecessarily far into the plentiful textual resonances between these scenes and Ulysses’ story, we can see that there may still be the threat of shipwreck for those of us reading the poem, even though the author seems safe enough now that he has entered Paradise. If we are to survive the journey Dante leads us on—that is, if he is to convert us in the way he intends his poem to—we, too, must properly understand Ulysses—and not become like him.  

3.1.1 Segno and legno: Sin and Consequences

Understanding Ulysses requires understanding his sin. As with Ulysses himself, however, the ramifications for understanding his fault extend beyond Ulysses himself, for Dante associates Ulysses’ sin with Adam’s, the trapassar del segno which we examined in the previous chapter. This is evident from the accounts both Adam and Ulysses give of their sins:

[Adam:] Or, figliuol mio, non il gustar del legno
fu per sé la cagion di tanto essilio,
ma solamente il trapassar del segno.  


176 Paradiso 26.115-117.
Both men recount violating a divine command: Adam ate the forbidden fruit, Ulysses sailed past the Pillars of Hercules—which, as he himself notes, the pagan god erected as a warning not to do exactly what Ulysses did. Even the language of the two accounts is the same. The word legno (literally “wood,” though indicating a ship and a fruit respectively) describes the means through which each man crossed the divine boundary. Segnò/segno indicates in each case the boundary itself. Each thus violated a divine sign/boundary by means of “wood.” Both men also sinned from similar motives.

In Adam’s case, the serpent in Eden tempts the first man with the following lure:

[Serpent:] Scit enim Deus quod in quocumque die comederitis ex eo, aperientur oculi vestri, et eritis sicut dii, scientes bonum et malum.\(^{178}\)

The serpent of Genesis promises Adam and Eve that they will know, by experience, moral good and evil. Contrast this with Ulysses’ description of his own temptation:

...l’ardore
...ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto
e de li vizi umani e del valore...\(^{179}\)


\(^{178}\) Genesis 3.5.

\(^{179}\) *Inferno* 26.97-99.
Ulysses characterizes his desire as the longing to be “Knowledgeable about human vices and virtue”—practically the same desire as Adam’s. Thus both Ulysses and Adam succumbed to the same temptation, and ended by violating a divine command. There is even a veiled (and by Ulysses, probably unintended) reference to Adam in Ulysses’ speech to his companions. As Ulysses urges them to continue their fatal journey, he says:

Considerate la vostra semenza:
 fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
 ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.

Again Ulysses invokes the search for knowledge, the forbidden fruit that will be his downfall as it was Adam’s. In this quote, moreover, Ulysses also appeals to la vostra

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180 Hollander (Inferno 26.118-120) attributes this insight to Alessandra Colangeli, a student at the University of Rome.

181 Worse, he tempted others to do the same, thus resembling Satan as well. As Nardi observes:

Nella follia d’Ullisse e dei suoi compagni v’è tutto l’orgoglio umano che spinse Adamo ed Eva al “trypassar del segno” gustando il frutto della scienza del bene e del male, per essere simili a Dio: v’è anzi lo stesso orgoglio di Lucifero, che disse: “Salirò al cielo, innalzerò il mio trono sopra li astri di Dio, sederò sul monte dell’alleanza, ad aqualone, ascenderò sopra le nubi e sarò simile all’Altissimo”. [Nardi Dante e la cultura 131-2. The biblical quote attributed to Lucifer is from Isaiah 14.12-14.]

Here is yet another, albeit for our purposes minor, complication in Ulysses’ erring ways.

182 Inferno 26.118-120.
Ironically, the crew’s “seed” is that of fallen Adam, and they, following Ulysses, are following the same path that Adam did—into sin.

Yet Ulysses is in Hell, Adam is in Heaven. Similar in sin, they diverge completely in their destinations. Their journeys set out on the same path, but end in different harbors. Their diverse conclusions cause each to bear a distinctive relationship to Dante. In Paradiso XXVI, Dante is nearly at the end of his journey; Adam represents that end. The pilgrim must follow Adam to the Empyrean and become like him, a figure of Christ; the poet must become a sign like Adam in order to signify salvifically in his poem. Here in Inferno XXVI, however, Dante is following Ulysses’ journey; there is, if we pretend ignorance of the poem’s conclusion, the danger that pilgrim and poet will share Ulysses’ fate: the pilgrim will not escape Hell, and the poet will deceive his followers to their ruin. From his encounter with Ulysses, therefore, Dante must learn how Ulysses erred—and take the other path, the path that Adam took through Hell and not merely to it.

3.1.2 Ulysses’ Missing Sin

Yet for all the importance Dante assigns to Ulysses’ damnation, neither Dante nor Ulysses ever tells us explicitly what Ulysses’ fault is. While most regions in Hell have a clear statement of the sin each punishes, the Ulysses canto presents instead a “laundry list” of Ulysses’ sins. One fault that we have already seen is his unrestrained

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passion for knowledge; another is Ulysses’ violation of one sacred boundary and the attempted violation of another (the Pillars of Hercules and the mountain of Eden, respectively). Virgil gives several different reasons for Ulysses’ (and Diomedes’) presence here:

...dentro da la lor fiamma [i.e. di Ulisse e Diomede] si gome
l’agguato del caval che fé la porta
onde usci de’ Romani il gentil seme
Piangevisi entro l’arte per che, morta,
Deïdamia ancor si duol d’Achille,
e del Palladio pena vi si porta.\textsuperscript{184}

Here Virgil names classical accounts—the Trojan Horse, the luring of Achilles to war and death, and the theft of the sacred Palladium—that indicate morally errant behavior on Ulysses’ part. All involve deception in some way, so we might expect this to be key to understanding Ulysses’ sin. By contrast, Ulysses’ self-description gives other sins that seem equally indicative of his character—and indeed, are part of the series of choices that led to his destruction:

...Quando
mi diparti’ da Circe, che sottrasse
me più d’un anno là presso a Gaeta,
prima che sì Enēa la nomasse,
né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta
del vecchio padre, né ‘l debito amore
lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,
vincer potero dentro a me l’ardore
ch’i’ ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto
e de li vizi umani e del valore...\textsuperscript{185}

\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Inferno} 26.58-63.
As numerous scholars have pointed out, Ulysses functions as an anti-Aeneas\textsuperscript{186} here. For our analysis, the key inversion of Aeneas concerns Ulysses’ disregard for familial piety: whereas Aeneas took care of his family on his journey, Ulysses abandoned his to make his voyage; Aeneas is also sailing under divine injunction to find and found Rome, while Ulysses violates a divine command to satisfy his own quite literal lust.

The picture is further complicated by Dante-Pilgrim’s encounter in \textit{Inferno} XXVII with Guido da Montefeltro. Guido is in the same \textit{bolgia} of the Eighth Circle, so his cardinal sin should coincide with Ulysses’. Yet the Guido episode serves to raise further questions. In one respect, Guido seems to avoid one of Ulysses’ key moral failures:

\begin{quote}
Quando mi vidi giunto in quella parte
di mia etade ove ciascun dovrebbe
calar le vele e raccoglier le sarte,
ciò che pria mi piacëa, allor m’increbbe,
e pentuto e confesso mi rendei...\textsuperscript{187}
\end{quote}

The similarity to Ulysses’ voyage in this metaphor paradoxically emphasizes the key difference: Ulysses did not stop sailing when he should have; Guido did—he repented and entered a Franciscan monastery. Yet Guido is here in the same \textit{bolgia}. According to

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Inferno} 26.90-99.


\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Inferno} 27.79-83.
his account of his damnation, Pope Boniface VIII called on Guido to advise him in plans that the pontiff admitted were sinful. He persuaded Guido to participate by promising the monk that he had the power to absolve sins (which he did) at the same moment that they were committed (which he did not). Guido therefore advised him, and was surprised at death when a demon appeared and dragged him off to Hell for “consiglio frodolente.” This sin, then, if it is the key sin of the bolgia (as most Dante scholars seem to think), also applies to Ulysses—but neither Ulysses nor Dante ever affirm that such is the case.

In short, the canto lists numerous sins, highlighting several, but never explicitly setting up one as Ulysses’ key fault. We thus have an excess of sins, any one of which could be Ulysses’ capital crime but none of which is ever stated to be. Yet on the other hand, by the very structure that Dante-Poet himself has created in the Inferno, there must be a single fault punished in Ulysses. We are thus left to work out the nature of the sin from the following clues:  

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188 Inferno 27.98-123.

189 Other scholars provide similar enumerations of Ulysses’ sins:

He has deceived and misadvised both Greeks and Trojans [i.e., deceptive speech as noted in the list above].... He has already lingered too long with Circe, a neglect of marital affection and duty [i.e., neglect of family]. He has further displaced natural affections—those of a skipper for a crew, a king for a people, a child for his parent, a parent for his child, and a husband for his wife—in favor of a passion that he could not or would not control [i.e., wrong or disordered passion for knowledge]. He has transgressed the limits set by Hercules (and by God) for human voyages to the west [transgression of divine boundary]. He has used an admirable and in other circumstances noble and proper argument... to deceive those who have every reason to trust him
Ulysses’ location in the Eighth Circle of Hell, where Simple Fraud is punished.

His location in the Eighth bolgia of the Eighth Circle, alongside Guido da Montefeltro who is damned for giving “consiglio frodolente.”

Ulysses’ given faults: deceptive speech/rhetoric, theft (of the Palladium), neglect and abandonment of his family, and wrong desire or disordered passion for knowledge.

The similarity to Adam’s sin as the transgression of a divine boundary.

Ulysses’ similarity to Dante.

While Ulysses’ primary sin need not necessarily account for all of these features, nonetheless a theory that accounts for more of them will be more satisfactory, ceteris paribus. Of the numerous views that have been put forth as to the nature of Ulysses’ sin, most address some of these points. None, however, has accounted for all of the preceding features. To facilitate a review of these interpretations, they are grouped into four categories below.

Both to speak the truth and to see them home [deceptive speech/rhetoric]. [Edward Peters. Limits of Thought and Power in Medieval Europe. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001. 77-78.]

Another formulation runs as follows: “Ulysses is endowed with Dante’s own thirst for knowledge and experience, his readiness to defy an interdict, his command of persuasive speech” (Patrick Boyle. Perception and Passion in Dante’s Comedy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 292). We thus have four elements from the current study’s enumeration above, namely the similarity to Dante (1) manifested in Ulysses’ wrong desire for knowledge (2), transgression of a boundary (3), and (at least potentially) deceptive speech (4). Both lists, for all their differences, nonetheless overlap our outline of Ulysses’ faults as given earlier.
3.1.3 The Romantic Ulysses: “What sin?”

The first position we shall examine regarding Ulysses’ sin claims that Ulysses does not, in fact, sin at all—or at least, that his sin is only incidental to how Dante-Poet intends us to read him in the *Comedy*. The *Romantic view* holds that, although in Hell, Ulysses should not be read as a fallen figure, but rather as a positive one. Fubini, in this camp, writes:

In tal modo il lettore viene gradatamente portato in un mondo che non è quello infernale, e preparato ad ascoltare le parole di un nobile spirito, il “grande solitario di Malebolge”: invano commentatori si provano a dissipare quell’aura di antica grandezza di cui Dante ha avvolto la sua eccelsa invenzione… . Una grande chiarezza intellettuale, un intimo, intensissimo e pur dominato ardore: è questo Ulisse o Dante? L’uno e l’altro, perché Ulisse è, come tutti sanno, anche un ritratto del poeta, una di quelle figure nelle quali Dante si è compiaciuto di riconoscere se medesimo e che hanno perciò tra gli altri personaggi della *Commedia* un singolare rilievo.190

Ulysses, far from being a hellish figure, is a “noble spirit,” an image of the positive qualities of Dante himself. In a similar vein, Momigliano writes:

Ci avviciniamo al grande episodio. Fin qui l’andamento del canto era slegato: troppe immagini, anche, almeno qua e là, vive; troppa erudizione. Mancava il soffio che fa della pagina una sola unità poetica: solo ci rimaneva nella mente, come un preludio che attendeva di essere ripreso, quell’epigrafe morale. Attraverso questa preghiera insistente e ardente cominciamo a sentire un interesse dominatore. Il ricordo dei grandi fatti, eternati dalla poesia antica, infiamma Dante: di qui quella preghiera intensa, che nasce da uno spirito di preumanista: Dante, nonostante le apparenze, non condanna le frodi di Ulisse e

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di Diomede, ma le esalta, esaltato dal ricordo della poesia classica, e ne fa l’introduzione all’eroica leggenda che egli sta per inventare e celebrare.  

Here Ulysses becomes an image of the great poems of antiquity, among which Dante’s Comedy is about to enter. And in fact, much about Ulysses does seem inspiring. As Hollander puts it, “Ulysses’ final flourish not only won over his flagging shipmates, it has become a rallying cry of Romantic readers of this scene, from Tennyson to Primo Levi. What can be wrong with such desires, so fully human?”

3.1.4 The Astute Ulysses: The Wrong Kind of Cleverness

The problem with this position is precisely le apparenze which Momigliano does not explain: the fact that Ulysses is in Hell, and the fact that his desires correspond to those of Adam and Eve, fallen humans—not to mention Lucifer, a fallen angel. For these reasons, few find this view tenable today. Most commentators since the 14th century, in fact, have considered Ulysses guilty of something; the question is, “Guilty of what?” A number of early critics, and a handful of modern ones, describe the mariner’s moral


192 Hollander Inferno 26.118-120.
undoing as *astutia*.\textsuperscript{193} Dante’s *Convivio* describes this sin in terms that could apply to Ulysses:

Convienesi adunque essere prudente, cioè savio; e a ciò essere si richiede buona memoria delle vedute cose, buona conoscenza delle presenti e buona provedenza delle future. E sì come dice lo Filosofo nel sesto dell’Etica, «impossibile è essere savio chi non è buono», e però non è da dire savio uomo che con sottratti e con inganni procede, ma è da chiamare astuto; ché, sì come nullo dicerebbe savio quelli che si sapessere bene trarre della punta d’uno coltello nella pupilla dell’occhio, così non è da dire savio quelli che bene sa una malvagia cosa fare, la quale facendo, prima sé sempre che altrui offende.\textsuperscript{194}

At this point, then, Dante understood *astutia* as being knowledgeable (*savio*) in evil means, not good ones—the opposite of the virtue of *prudentia*. Ahern, in one of the more extensive treatments of the subject,\textsuperscript{195} argues that Dante-Poet carried this category of sin over into the *Comedy* as well and applied it to Ulysses. Ahern also points out that the sin usually ascribed to this *bolgia*, fraudulent counsel, was not considered a significant category of sin in the Middle Ages, whereas *astutia* was. Moreover, both

\begin{quote}

The authors of the following article also seem to subscribe to this view: Robert Hollander and William Stull. “The Lucanian Source of Dante’s Ulysses.” *Studi Danteschi* 63 (1991/1997): 1-52. 49.


\textsuperscript{194} *Convivio* 4.27.5. *Astutia* (from Dante’s *astuto*) would seem to translate Aristotle’s *deinotes* “cleverness” (via a Latin translation, most likely) in the *Ethics* 6.12.9-10 et al.; this however Aristotle uses to mean the faculty of seeing how to accomplish ends, whether it is used for good or evil. *Deinotes* thus carries no sense of moral deficiency, as does Dante’s use of *astuto*.

\textsuperscript{195} Ahern 283-4.
\end{quote}
Ulysses and Guido da Montefeltro were known as astuti; Dante-Poet could therefore have built these two cantos on a tradition familiar to his contemporaries.

While to the best of my knowledge no one has raised significant objections to this interpretation, one might question whether astutia comprehensively characterizes the sin of the ottava bolgia. In the first place, astutia is not in an obvious sense a form of fraud—the sin punished in the Eighth Circle. Moreover, no obvious correlation appears between astutia and Adam’s Original Sin, to which Ulysses’ error has been compared. In what sense is astutia a trapassar del segno, a violation of the boundary that the divine segnò? How, too, would it apply to Dante and his poetry? In short, how does astutia fit with the thematic requirements that link Inferno XXVI to its counterpart in the Paradiso?

3.1.5 The Transgressive Ulysses: The Folle Volo

The relation between Ulysses’ sin and Adam’s is the focus of another position (or rather collection of similar positions). Its proponents characterize Ulysses’ primary fault as the folle volo, a phrase deriving from Ulysses’ own words: “...volta nostra poppa nel mattino,/de’ remi facemmo ali al folle volo....”¹⁹⁶ Ulysses’ journey, his “foolish flight,” symbolizes his cardinal sin: transgression of a divine boundary, motivated either by hubris or curiositas (a sinful desire to know), or both. Usually, the transgressed boundary is seen as the limits of what human beings are supposed to know. Nardi’s

¹⁹⁶ Inferno 26.124-5.
quote above\textsuperscript{197} falls into this category, as does Padoan’s explication of Ulysses’ sin as the “sregolato desiderio di conoscenza.”\textsuperscript{198} Mazzotta offers a view similar to Nardi’s: “...the sins of Adam and Ulysses consist in their having trespassed beyond the limits respectively of the Garden and the world.”\textsuperscript{199} Peters argues slightly differently:

Here, it seems to me, is the essence of Dante’s strongest sense of the \textit{vitium curiositatis}: it is the pursuit of objects of knowledge that are improper \textit{for the pursuer}. Dante is much more interested in lives led according to the proper observation of the ages of man (and woman) and to the status to which an individual has been called. Any violation of these (as in the \textit{twisted natures} of \textit{Paradiso} 8, or the case of Ulysses) will lead to the loss of the \textit{good of intellect} (\textit{Inferno} 3:18)\textsuperscript{200}

Peters differs from the previously positions in that he qualifies Ulysses’ \textit{curiositas} as being wrong specifically for Ulysses, not for everyone; and he also considers it only part of Ulysses’ final tally of sins.\textsuperscript{201} Kablitz, in turn, links Dante’s rejection of Ulysses’ \textit{curiositas} with his poetics:

Il canto rappresenta le conseguenze dell’incontro con i peccatori contra la verità: il pellegrino e autore della \textit{Commedia}, in opposizione al peccato contro il quale si confronta nell’ottava bolgia, si rivolge ad una verità che proviene da Dio e, con

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{197} Pg. 91, footnote.
\item \textsuperscript{199} Mazzotta \textit{Dante, Poet of the Desert} 125.
\item \textsuperscript{200} Peters 85.
\item \textsuperscript{201} \textit{Ibid}. 77-8, 87.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
ciò, si distanza da un erroneo atteggiamento nei confronti della verità, ossia da quella curiositas alla quale egli era ancora completamente legato. ... [Q]uesto canto... fa di lui l’ultimo dei profeti... 202

Dante-Poet’s purpose in this canto, according to this interpretation, is to display the pilgrim’s encounter with Ulysses-quaquacuriosus so that the pilgrim might realize his own sin against truth, thus making possible his repentance and transformation into Dante-Poet. Perspectives such as these illuminate the triadic relationship between Ulysses, Adam, and Dante.

The folle volo interpretation is not without its detractors, however. Boitani objects:

...[I]s he [Ulysses] being punished for his hubris too, his limitless thirst for knowledge? Because he wanted to “see everything?” Respondeo dicendum quod, according to Dante, Aristotle, Plato and many others are not, for the same desire (as witnessed in Purgatorio III, 34-43), in Hell, but in Limbo. Nor does Virgil, in all the ambiguity of his words to the “greater horn,” [i.e. Ulysses] make any mention of hubris. 203

If Ulysses is damned simply for his desire for knowledge, then he is literally out of his depth. To these objections might be added another: how is the folle volo an example of Fraud, the overarching category of sin in the Eighth Circle? It is obvious that deceitful speech forms part of Ulysses’ transgression of the divine boundary; but it is not so


203 Boitani “Dante’s Dangerous Journey’s” 82.
obvious that deception is at the heart of his voyage (unless one argues, as to the best of my knowledge no one has done, that Ulysses’ primary sin is self-deception, a defrauding of himself).

3.1.6 The Persuasive Ulysses: Fraudulent Speech

The most persistent school of thought on this issue, therefore, considers Ulysses’ sin to be fraudulent speech—either as a “fraudulent counselor” or as a rhetor who abused his persuasive power. “L’Ulisse dantesco è un malo consigliere...,”204 Padoan states; Baldelli similarly maintains that Ulysses’ speech to his men, convincing them to transgress the Pillars of Hercules, is fraudulent counsel.205 Supporters of this interpretation point to Guido da Montefeltro’s account in Inferno XXVII, in which he narrates that he was consigned to the same location as Ulysses for consiglio frodolente. On the rhetorical side, Bosco and Reggio (and many others) point out that the language in this canto contains many allusions to the high style of speech.206 To cite an example:

Poi che la fiamma fu venuta quivi
dove parve al mio duca tempo e loco,
in questa forma lui parlare audivi... 207

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204 Padoan 197.
206 Bosco/Reggio Inferno 26.76-78.
207 Inferno 26.76-78.
At this moment, when Virgil is about to speak to Ulysses, the latinate _audivi_ signals the presence of high oratory. So too does Virgil’s attention to the “time and place,” a reference to the rhetorical concept of the _kairos_, or the critical moment that determines one’s rhetoric. Moreover, Ulysses’ account begins _in medias res_, in the middle of the story—the traditional starting point of epic, a form of high style composition. Ulysses himself raises the theme of rhetoric with his speech to his companions:

> Li miei compagni fec’ io si aguti,  
> con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,  
> che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti;  
> e volta nostra poppa nel mattino,  
> de’ remi facemmo ali al folle volo,  
> sempre acquistando dal lato mannino.²⁰⁸

As has been noted by other critics, Ulysses’ apparent deprecation of his speech as _picciola_ is really a self-compliment: it only took a “little” speech to stir his crew irresistibly towards their goal! In other words, Ulysses is claiming to be an excellent rhetorician: this was only a small sample of his work, and see what it accomplished!

Arguing for this rhetorical reading of _Inferno_ XXVI, Mazzotta’s treatment thereof in _Dante, Poet of the Desert_ stands out (along with his “Poetics of History” and “Canto XXVI”) among the numerous rhetorical analyses of this canto. Mazzotta tabulates numerous rhetorical references: the image of the tongues of fire, which had a tradition as a symbol of rhetoric; the formal décor in speech between Virgil and Ulysses; the

²⁰⁸ _Inferno_ 26.121-126.
allusions to epics (the *Aeneid*, *Thebaid*, and *Achilleid*) throughout the encounter; and, of course, Ulysses’ traditional status as a successful orator. According to Mazzotta, the rhetorical stature of the Ulysses episode serves a key purpose in Dante’s self-presentation of his poetics: it throws into doubt the poet’s sense of the power of language. In other words, it raises the question whether language can do what it claims to do—signify truth—let alone fulfill what Dante requests of it. Thus Mazzotta writes:

Commentators have traditionally stressed that the flames Dante sees in Canto XXVI are a pointed parody of the descent of the pentecostal tongues of fire upon Christ’s disciples, and that Ulysses’ sin of evil counseling is primarily a sin against the good counsel of the Holy Spirit. It might be added within this context that the production of sound through the metaphor of the wind (88) ironically recalls Acts 2:2 in which the descent of the Spirit is described as occurring in tongues of flames and to the sound of a mighty wind. The allusion to the inspirational *afflatus* prepares a sustained reflection on Ulysses’ language and its relation to the prophetic word. It prepares, more important, a reflection on Dante’s own poetic language, wavering as it does between prophecy and rhetoric.

Into the theme of Ulysses’ verbal fraud, Mazzotta draws the theme of prophecy and the status of Dante’s own poetics. He also makes a further connection: “Dante’s own authority... is continuously caught between the elusive claim of speaking with prophetic self-assurance and the awareness that this can be a supreme transgression.”

209 Mazzotta *Poet of the Desert* 71-72.

210 Ibid.


212 Mazzotta “Poetics of History” 41.
According to Mazzotta, Ulysses’ (and potentially Dante’s) transgression—his *folle volo*—can be understood in terms of the tendency of language to deceive. Conceiving of Ulysses’ sin as fraudulent speech would thus seem to account for a number of the canto’s features; it also fits with the traditional concept of him as both rhetor and counselor.

In recent scholarship, however, many objections have been raised to the “fraudulent speech” position. Boitani argues that Ulysses’ rhetoric-laden speech could hardly be part of his sin, including as it does references to reliable—i.e., truthful—authorities such as Aristotle and Genesis.\(^{213}\) As for being a fraudulent counselor, Porena, Pagliaro and Fubini both argue that this does not comprehensively account for all the features of Dante’s characterization of Ulysses.\(^{214}\) Kablitz, further, points out that nowhere in the *Comedy* does Dante treat Ulysses as a fraudulent counselor—the term comes from Guido da Montefeltro, who applies it only to himself;\(^{215}\) moreover, as Ahern observes, “A Black Cherub, as quoted by Guido da Montefeltro (XXVII, 116) is the sole authority for this name [i.e., fraudulent counsel].”\(^{216}\) The authority of the “Black Cherub,” a demon fallen from the second-highest angelic choir, need not be of the

\(^{213}\) Boitani “Dante’s Dangerous Journeys” 81.


\(^{215}\) Kablitz 62.

\(^{216}\) Ahern 275.
greatest reliability. Ahern also argues, “Fraudulent Counsel can not be defined to
describe the three crimes of Ulysses and Diomedes, Ulysses’s account of his last voyage,
and Guido’s advice to the pope.” Kablitz disagrees slightly, admitting that some of
Ulysses’ sins according to Virgil could be construed as a form of counsel; but stealing the
Palladium could not. Musa argues against attempts to fit Ulysses’ sins into the
definition of “fraudulent counsel,” concluding, “Dante, for reasons nobody knows, has
left a huge gap: anxious to fill it, scholars have invented a category quite applicable to
Guido, and then applied it mechanically to Ulysses.”

3.1.7 Conclusion: Incomplete Answers

Of the criteria mentioned earlier, only some are met by the views just explored.
The Romantic school recognizes the importance of Ulysses for understanding the
Comedy as a whole, but falls afoul of the criterion that Ulysses is in Hell. The astutia
theory accounts for the sins explicitly attributed to Ulysses, but not for the relationship
between his sin and Adam’s. The folle volo views explain why Ulysses is in Hell, how his
sin is a transgression like Adam’s, and how Ulysses’ journey images Dante’s project; but
they fail to account easily for Ulysses’ presence in the circles of Fraud. And the
“fraudulent speech” school sheds light on the deceptive rhetoric of Ulysses and its
relationship to Dante’s project, as well as Ulysses’ location in Hell, but does not

217 Kablitz 63.

illuminate the Adamic nature of Ulysses’ sin. Persuasive speech plays a key role in the canto, thus supporting the view that Ulysses’ sin is one of speech; but he commits many other sins—\textit{astutia}, \textit{curiositas}, the theft of the Palladium, the trespass of the divine boundary, etc.—all of which seem to find some support in the canto, and which cannot easily be sheltered under the umbrella of “fraudulent speech.”

3.2 \textit{Res, Signum, and Sacramentum}: Signification and an Integrative Approach to Ulysses’ Sin

Of the four positions laid out above, only three require further treatment. The Romantic view is currently not widely held, and if the argument of this chapter is accurate, it will suffice as a response to the Romantic idea (since Ulysses, it will be argued in this analysis, is a sinful and negative figure). Remaining are: the fraudulent speech view; the \textit{folle volo} view, which maintains that Ulysses sinned primarily in his transgressive journey, not his speech; and the \textit{astutia} view, in which Ulysses—though intelligent—lacked prudence. All of these have their strengths, all have their weaknesses. It is possible to unite them through a new, integrative approach, one which uses the strengths of each to support the gaps in the others; the result is a more comprehensive interpretation of this part of the \textit{Inferno}.

Such an integration can be found if we analyze Ulysses’ episode in terms of signification. On the one hand, Ulysses’ deceptive speech uses words to lead others to their downfall, or at least to manipulate them to his own ends; it thus constitutes a
wrong use of verbal signs. As Boitani makes clear, Ulysses uses truthful sources in his speech; whereas Boitani implies that his speech cannot therefore be sinful, however, it is at least as likely that Ulysses uses reliable and even true authorities to deceive and manipulate, and thus his speech is sinful. Herein lies the common ground between Ulysses’ speech and his journey: the latter, like the former, also consists of a misuse of a sign; for Ulysses, at the Pillars of Hercules, sees the sign that should tell him to turn back, and knowingly continues in the morally-wrong direction.

The same holds true if we examine Ulysses’ alleged astutia in the same way. There is, admittedly, this difference between the preceding views and this one: whereas the folle volo and fraudulent speech positions focus on Ulysses’ sinful deeds, the astutia view focuses on Ulysses’ sinful disposition—an interior condition of his mind. Yet here again, the specific kind of mental disposition that Ulysses has consists of an erroneous approach to signification. Adam’s sin serves as a helpful parallel: as we saw in the previous chapter, Adam’s sin was a refusal to read the sign that signified that he was himself a sign of God; in other words, he treated the sign as merely a divinely-ordained boundary, not a sign. Had he approached the sign as a sign, reading would have led him away from transgression and, further, toward a greater reality—in fact, the greatest reality. Approaching the sign as merely a boundary, on the other hand, was not enough to prevent him from violating it.

Boitani “Dante’s Dangerous Journeys” 81.
Ulysses seems to manifest the same intellectual misperception of the divine command as a boundary only, not as (more importantly) a sign; consequently, he crossed it. If he had treated it as a sign, however, then, like an unfallen Adam he would have read the deeper meaning—to sail in the opposite direction—and thus implicitly to return to his family, as seen in the earlier quote from Ulysses himself. Ulysses’ journey is the path of sin, which stands opposed to his family, the path of virtue. Hercules’ sign, like God’s sign in Eden, is thus more than a boundary; had Ulysses obeyed and turned back, he would have arrived at a path that, even if it fell short of Heaven, might have brought him at least to Limbo and the eternal avoidance of active punishment. Like Adam’s fruit, Ulysses’ boundary is more than a boundary warning one from the wrong path—it is a sign pointing to the right one.

Furthermore, just as Adam’s fruit was a sign of his own nature as a divine sign, so Ulysses’ sign also indicates the divinely-signifying power of human nature. Ulysses describes his family as father, son and wife. The triple personhood of his family mirrors the triple personhood of the Trinity, especially when we consider that as love is predicated specifically of Penelope, so too is love predicated specifically of the Holy

\[\text{220} \text{ It might be objected that virtuous Christians were known to abandon their families in persuit of holiness; cf. Christ’s words: } \text{Si quis venit ad me, et non odit patrem suum, et matrem, et uxorem, et filios, et fratres, et sorores, adhuc autem et animam suam, non potest meus esse discipulus} (\text{Luke 14.26}). \text{ That such criticism does not apply to the case of Ulysses seems evident, however, when the episode is viewed in light of Ulysses’ pagan context. As shown by Dante’s contextualization of this scene against the } \text{Aeneid, Ulysses’ story should be read in terms of the pagan Roman virtue of familial piety. Aeneas, a virtuous pagan in Dante’s view, followed the best path he knew—Ulysses should have, but did not. Later, Christian revelation revealed an alternate understanding of family relationships and virtue.} \]
Spirit, who is the love between the Father and the Son. Thus if Ulysses had returned home, he would have discovered father, son, and love—a sign of God in human nature. It is possible, then, that he would have succeeded where Adam failed, observing the truth about himself as a sign with the potential to share in the divine nature.

Such a sign, like the Edenic fruit, is a sign of the potential union between God and humanity, the union first and foremost realized in the Incarnate Christ. We can now better understand Adam’s explanation of his fall, when he says that it was not the eating of the fruit that led to his expulsion but rather trespassing the sign. To violate the boundary is not simply a matter of breaking a divine command, although it is of course that; it is a denial of the end of human nature, of the latter’s raison d’être. Human nature intrinsically signifies—it is the greatest sign, both because of what it signifies (God) and because of its relation to what it signifies (it can share in God’s nature). To reject the signifying capacity of the human being is to reject the possibility of this union between sign and signified—it is to deny sign and meaning altogether. Mazzotta comes close to this when he writes:

Ulysses’ brief address is set within the imagined area beyond the known world, an open and unbounded region. The strategy of isolating language in a spatial

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221 The parallel between the Trinity and Ulysses’ family is not, of course, perfect. Nor should we expect it to be: Dante repeatedly brings up the theme of the signs of God, not always perfectly readable, which God leaves in the cosmos. See, for example, Paradiso XXXIII.49ff., and also Hollander’s comment on vv. 52-54.
vacuum discloses its peculiar feature. There is no necessary correspondence
between res and signa, between things and their signs, nor is a sign the
receptacle of a reality. 222

“Res and signa”—meanings and signs—are disjoined, as Mazzotta notes. We can go
even further, though, to see the disjunction between res and sacramenta, between
even humanity and its meaning. What is at stake is not just the status of human
language, but of human destiny. In our analysis of Adam, we saw that sacramentum and
res must be united; here the question is not whether they must be, but how they are to
be united. In other words, what is the path to proper signification?

3.2.1 De ventre inferi clamavi: Jonah and the Return from the Underworld 223

Over the Ulysses narrative Dante-Poet has cast the shadow of a possible solution
to his dilemma—a journey that begins like Ulysses’ with a rebellion against God and a
descent into Hell, but which continues with a return to the world of the living. This is the
story of the biblical prophet Jonah. Receiving a divine order to go to Nineveh and
foretell its impending punishment, Jonah instead found passage on a ship heading in the
opposite direction. 224 God, however, sent a storm that threatened to sink the ship, and

222 Mazzotta “Canto XXVI” 352.

223 A note for the sake of clarity: I try in these analyses to treat biblical personae as historical
realities described accurately in the Bible, since such is the Comedy’s perspective (whether or not Dante
himself believed this); this does not imply that my own point of view is the same. If the “fiction of the
Comedy is that it is not a fiction,” as Singleton put it, so too it also asks us to treat (at least temporarily) as
historical its background narratives—the Bible, the Aeneid, etc.

224 Jonah 1.1-3.
Jonah confessed his sin to his shipmates and convinced them that they could save the ship—by throwing him overboard. They did so, and Jonah was famously swallowed by a giant marine animal. Three days later, the creature spit Jonah up on the shore near Nineveh and the prophet carried out his divine mission. When the Ninevites repented, however, God did not punish them after all. Jonah was disgusted (the Ninevites and Israelites were not on friendly terms) and complained to God, who responded with a defense of his own mercy. Thus ends the book of Jonah.

Several parallels between the stories of Jonah and Ulysses suggest that Dante had the biblical story in mind when he penned his own account. Each took a ship in the direction opposite from the one he should have, in defiance of a divine command. As divine punishment for their crimes, both men faced marine storms. Both were swallowed by waves, going down to the underworld. Jonah, in fact, describes his submarine fate in Hellish terms: *de ventre inferi clamavi; abyssus vallavit me.* He also

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225 Jonah 1.4, 13-16.

226 One of the other puzzles in this canto is, “Whence did Dante draw his version of Ulysses’ tale?” Certainly he did not get it from Homer, from whose version Dante has drastically departed. The parallels—and contrasts—between the book of Jonah and *Inferno* 26 seem, in my opinion, to indicate one obvious source for Dante’s basic Ulyssean plot. Of course, other aspects of this canto and its protagonist have been demonstrably drawn from many other sources, both Christian and classical; this confluence of sources may be why scholars have had difficulty in recognizing the similarities between Ulysses and Jonah.

227 Jonah 2.3, 6.
employs phrases that might well have come from Ulysses’ mouth: *flumen circumdedit me; circumdederunt me aquæ usque ad animam; pelagus operuit caput meum.* \(^{228}\) Unlike Ulysses, however, Jonah repented. Ulysses went down with his ship and men; Jonah, by contrast, sacrificed his life for the good of the sailors and the boat. God thus saved his life, and Jonah fulfilled the former’s command. Even so, Jonah’s complaint at the end of the story—and God’s response—show that Jonah’s obedience is reluctant; it does not come, as it were, from the heart. His repentance is not complete. Such a partial, reluctant conversion corresponds to a partial, reluctant reading of God’s command. Jonah’s complaint following the sparing of Nineveh runs as follows:


On the one hand, then, Jonah looked beyond the immediate command to its deeper meaning: conversion. God’s goal was not the destruction of Nineveh, any more than it was his goal that Adam not eat fruit or Ulysses not leave the Mediterranean; God could have prevented all of these quite easily through his omnipotence. Instead, each command leads to a deeper truth about one’s self in relation to God—if read properly.

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\(^{228}\) Jonah 2.4, 6.

\(^{229}\) Jonah 4.1-3.
Jonah, however, read the meaning as it applied to Nineveh, but not to himself; he understood that God wished conversion from the Assyrians, but not that God also wished it from Jonah. Jonah’s partial reading thus shows a possible alternative ending to Ulysses’ story: a partial repentance that opens at least the possibility of salvation.

If Dante must choose between Ulysses and Jonah, the safer choice is clearly the latter. The pilgrim reflects, albeit subtly, Jonah’s moral journey as initially similar to but ultimately divergent from Ulysses’ path. Consider, for instance, the character trait that Ulysses and Dante-Pilgrim both share in this canto. We have already seen *l’ardore* that burned within Ulysses; the Greek extends this zeal to his shipmates as well (*Inferno* XXVI.121-126, quoted earlier). Ulysses’ eagerness in his journey is thus intrinsic to his downfall. Eagerness for his journey also characterizes Dante-Pilgrim in this scene—and almost results in his fall, too. Approaching the eighth *bolgia*, the poet says:

> Io stava sovra ‘l ponte a veder surto,  
> sì che s’io non avessi un ronchion preso,  
> caduto sarei giù sanz’ esser urto.  

Eagerness to see, know, and experience the *bolgia* (and its sin and sinners) is generally considered by Dante scholars to cause the pilgrim literally to (almost) slip. Such eagerness seems reflective of Ulysses’ desire to see, know, and experience the world

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231 *Inferno* 26.43-45.
and its vices (and virtues), and so nearly all commentators consider his lack of balance an image of a moral lapse in the pilgrim. Hollander writes:

The protagonist’s excitement at the prospect of seeing Ulysses is evident (Ulysses has not been identified yet, but the poet seems to be taking a liberty in allowing his character to fathom who is about to appear). In his reckless abandon to gain experience of this great sinner, he resembles Ulysses himself.232

Pietrobono draws a similar connection to that of Hollander:

Tanto è il fascino segreto da cui si sente attrarre verso uno di quei fochi che, sanz’esser urto, senza che nessuno gli desse la spinta, solo per suo naturale istinto, poco mancò non cadesse giù nella bolgia. Confessione evidente, mi sembra, della inclinazione a commettere la stessa colpa di Ulisse col pericolo di finire in quella bolgia.233

Carroll is almost as specific when he argues, “It sounds like the recollection of some critical moment when he almost fell into that crafty use of his intellectual powers which would have carried him down to ‘this blind world’. ” So too Rossetti: “Ciò esprime la gran propensione che avea a piegarsi verso quel peccato per desio di vendicarsi; e che, se non si fosse ritenuto, gli sarebbe ito incontro quasi di proprio peso.” Other scholars take Dante’s imbalance in a more general moral way. Trucchi236 presents Dante’s

232 Hollander Inferno 26.43-45.
233 Pietrobono Inferno 26.45.
234 Carroll Inferno 26.43-45. See also comment on vv. 16-24.
236 Trucchi Inferno 26.43-45.
eagerness as a sign of the ease with which men with genius fall into sin; Fallani believes that Dante is so taken with the sight of the bolgia that he forgets his danger of falling. Berthier explains, “Il poeta quindi manifesta il desiderio di apprendere sempre meglio cosa sia il peccato”—a desire that, as we recall from earlier, motivated the sins of both Adam and Ulysses. Francesco da Buti takes the image as meaning that one must work tirelessly to keep from falling morally. We have, thus, an image of Dante exemplifying one of the same faults as Ulysses—but not falling, as he did. The near-fall suggests a moral failing that was repented of, an almost Ulyssean journey that took a turn for the better and brought Dante, like Jonah, back up.

Dante-Poet also resembles Jonah in this canto. He opens Inferno XXVI with the following prophecy addressed to Florence:

Godì, Fiorenza, poi che se’ si grande che per mare e per terra batti l’ali, e per lo ‘inferno tuo nome si spande! Tra li ladron trovai cinque cotali tuoi cittadini onde mi ven vergogna, e tu in grande orranza non ne sali. Ma se presso al mattin del ver si sognà, tu sentirai, di qua da picciol tempo, di quel che Prato, non ch’altrì, t’agognà. E se già fosse, non sarìa per tempo.

Fallani Inferno 26.45.


There are several uncertainties with regard to this passage, including the exact import of the reference to the town of Prato; clearly, however, Dante is prophesying that Florence will soon be punished for its sins. Such a prediction echoes (and expands on) the theme of Jonah’s preaching—*Adhuc quadraginta dies, et Ninive subvertetur*—promising as it does the approaching divine retribution to be visited upon a specific city. Like Jonah, Dante also seems to long for the *dies irae*. Effectively, the poet sets himself up preemptively as Jonah, not Ulysses, as if to show that despite similarities between himself and the Greek hero, there is a key difference. Dante can find salvation; like Jonah, he will return from the underworld, and for the same purpose—to preach repentence.

3.2.2 *Pentere e volere insieme*: Guido, Balaam, and the Failure of Conversion

Dante, then, despite his initial similarity to Ulysses, appears to set himself up as more like Jonah; if Dante is another Jonah, however, is this sufficient for his poetic and moral salvation? There is another figure in the eighth *bolgia* who—like Jonah and

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241 Cf. Hollander’s commentary on vv. 8-12.

242 Jonah 3.4.

243 Not all commentators agree on this point. A few suggest that Dante sorrows to consider the coming punishment; however, this seems to me to be contrary to the obvious reading of these lines and to the tone of the entire poem.

122
Dante began to follow Ulysses’ path, then seemingly converted and reformed his life.

Yet he nonetheless resides with Ulysses in eternal damnation. He is Guido da Montefeltro, whom we saw earlier as the one who was damned for *consiglio frodolente*.

Guido’s story is effectively an extended meditation on conversion gone wrong.

He begins his account as follows:

\[ Io fui uom d’arme, e poi fui cordiglier, \\
credendomi, si cinto, fare ammenda; \\
e certo il creder mio venìa intero, \\
se non fosse il gran prete, a cui mal prenda!, \\
che mi rimise ne le prime colpe; \\
e come e quare, voglio che m’intenda. \]

\[244\]

At first a man of war, Guido became later a friar; his intention to convert is evident. As we noted earlier, Guido describes his own life in metaphorical terms that echo Ulysses’ literal voyage, thus drawing a parallel between the two. Guido, however, did what Ulysses did not—he halted his voyage, curbed his passions, and retired to the monastery. To all appearances he repented of his previous life. In all this, he also resembles Jonah—and therefore Dante. That his conversion was incomplete, however, is suggested at his death when he meets a demon; the latter states:

\[...assolver non si può chi non si pente, \\
né pentere e volere insieme puossi \\
per la contradizion che nol consente.\]

\[245\]

\[244\] *Inferno* 27.67-72.

\[245\] *Inferno* 27.118-120.
What Guido thought was repentance, then, was not; otherwise, he would not have acquiesced to serious sin when he knew it to be so. What he does not clearly state is what the root of his failed conversion may have been.

As with Dante’s description of Ulysses, the poet begins his account of Guido with a simile. Whereas the simile of Elijah/Elisha clearly refers to biblical prophets, in this one the reference is subtler, like the presence of Jonah in *Inferno* XXVI; yet it seems to refer to another biblical prophet who can shed light on Guido the way Jonah did for Ulysses.

Come ‘l bue cicilian che mugghiò prima col pianto di colui, e ciò fu dritto, che l’avea temperato con sua lima, mugghiava con la voce de l’afflitto, si che, con tutto che fosse di rame, pur el pareva dal dolor trafitto; così, per non aver via né forame dal principio nel foco, in suo linguaggio si convertian le parole grame. Ma poscia ch’ebber colto lor viaggio su per la punta, dandole quel guizzo che dato avea la lingua in lor passaggio, udimmo dire...\(^{246}\)

The overt reference in these words, to the *bue cicilian*, recalls the story of the Sicilian king Phalaris who killed people by placing them inside a bronze bull; when the bull was heated, the screams of the victims came out distorted, sounding like the bellowing of a real bull. The classical allusion, however, gives way starting at line 16 to a biblical one: the “bull” begins to speak. For the Sicilian bull turned human utterances into animal

\(^{246}\) *Inferno* 27.7-19.
sounds; this fire, by contrast, shifts from animal-like sounds to human utterances. This conversion of speech mirrors a story from the book of Numbers, the account of the prophet Balaam and his famous speaking donkey.

According to the Bible, Balaam, though not an Israelite, received prophetic inspiration from God. While the Israelites were en route on their Exodus journey from Egypt to Canaan, the king of Moab, Balak, grew afraid of them, and he sent messengers to Balaam promising immense material compensation if Balaam would come and curse the Israelites for him. Balaam consulted God, who commanded him not to go with Balak’s messengers. A second time Balak sent messengers; again Balaam consulted God. This time God gave his permission to go, but warned Balaam not to curse the Israelites, and to say only what God allowed. Balaam set out to meet Balak, and here the donkey enters the scene. Apparently God was displeased with Balaam’s manner of departure, for he sent an angel to kill him. Balaam could not see the angel; fortunately for him, however, his donkey could, and the animal refused to go on. Balaam beat the donkey several times, at which point the donkey’s mouth uttered human words and the beast asked Balaam to justify the beatings in light of the animal’s heretofore impeccable service. Then God opened Balaam’s eyes and permitted him to see the angel standing in front of him with drawn sword. Balaam repented, and God repeated his warning to only speak what he was permitted to. Balaam finally met with Balak, who took him to a hill overlooking the Israelites. Three times Balak asked Balaam to curse them, and three times Balaam, under God’s inspiration, blessed them instead. Disgusted, Balak turned to
depart, but Balaam prophesied yet again, this time with a prophecy that (according to medieval exegesis) foretold the coming of the Messiah.\footnote{Numbers 22-24. A non-exhaustive list of medieval interpretations that read Balaam’s prophecy as foretelling Christ includes: Aquinas Summa 2b.172.6; Durandus Rationale divinorum officiorum 6.16.2; Salimbene de Adam Cronica 352; Bernard of Clairvaux Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary 2.17. Aquinas’ interpretation is especially interesting, as he regards Balaam as a “prophet of the demons,” yet who nonetheless could at times prophecy the truth. See Bibliography for information on these sources.}

In addition to the similarity between Balaam’s donkey and Guido’s “bull,” Guido’s story shares several key details with Balaam. Both were true speakers: Balaam foretold the Incarnation, Guido gave successful advice to the pope; for each, events unfolded as they predicted. Also like Balaam, Guido took the wrong course at first, but repented. Like Guido, however, Balaam then fell through giving sinful—though accurate—counsel. Two Biblical passages record Balaam’s second error:

Iratusque Moyses principibus exercitus, tribunis, et centurionibus qui venerant de bello, ait: Cur feminas reservastis? nonne istæ sunt, quæ deceperunt filios Israël ad suggestionem Balaam, et prævaricari vos fecerunt in Domino super peccato Phogor, unde et percussus est populus?\footnote{Numbers 31.14-16.}

Sed habeo adversus te pauca: quia habes illic tenentes doctrinam Balaam, qui docebat Balac mittere scandalum coram filiis Israël, edere, et fornicari...\footnote{Apocalypse 2.14.}

From these verses it appears that, even though he did not curse the Israelites, he still plotted their demise and gave counsel that led to their harm. Balaam thus became
proverbial in the Old and New Testaments as a negative figure, one who gives
destructive counsel and leads others to sin and ruin. According to Numbers, he met his
end, ironically, at the hands of the very people he blessed four times. 250

Balaam’s second fall appears rooted in this disposition: he feared God’s
punishment for disobedience, yet still desired Balak’s promised reward. He thus hit on
what seemed a plausible solution: bless the Israelites, but give advice that would seem
to undermine them. On the surface, he has kept God’s command; the Bible makes clear,
however, that this did itself constitute a trespass of God’s will. Balaam consequently
worked against the people from which would come the Incarnation, even as he
prophesied that very event. In other words, this prophet treated God’s command as a
boundary, instead of reading the command—his own prophecy of the Incarnation—and
changing his life accordingly. Even as he tried to toe the line—God’s line—he crossed it.
Similarly, Guido feared God’s punishment, but also desired Boniface’s good will; he thus
decided to perform an act that, though sinful, seemed to avoid the first and gain the
second. As Dante-Poet makes evident, Guido’s sin was still sin, and punishable as such.
He, too, treated God’s command as a boundary that he could, with some adroitness,

250 Numbers 31.1-2, 7-8:
Locutusque est Dominus ad Moysen, dicens: Ulciscere prius filios Israël de Madianitis, et sic
colligeris ad populum tuum. ... Cumque pugnassent contra Madianitas atque vicissent, omnes
mares occiderunt, et reges eorum, Evi, et Recem, et Sur, et Hur, et Rebe, quinque principes
gentis: Balaam quoque filium Beor interfecerunt gladio.
avoid crossing, instead of considering it as a sign pointing to a deeper good awaiting him.

Therein lies the disposition that leads to the damnation of Ulysses and Guido and threatens Jonah and Dante. As long as God’s commands are treated as boundaries for external actions only, they will effect no change within—no true conversion. A temporary, Jonah-like reprieve from Hell is not sufficient for final salvation.

3.2.3 Colui che si vengiò con li orsi: Elijah, Elisha, and Becoming the Segno

Fortunately, Inferno XXVI and XXVII include prophetic figures who, in Dante-Poet’s hands, promise a way out of the Ulysses/Guido dilemma and point towards a path to total conversion. Two of these appear in the second of canto XXVI’s two famous opening similes. As the pilgrim gazes down at the flaming souls, the poet describes the sight:

E qual colui che si vengiò con li orsi vide ‘l carro d’Elia al dipartire, quando i cavalli al cielo erti levorsi, che nol potea sì con li occhi seguire, ch’el vedesse altro che la fiamma sola, sì come nuvoletta, in sù salire: tal si move ciascuna per la gola del fosso, ché nessuna mostra ‘l furto, e ogne fiamma un peccatore invola.251

251 Inferno 26.34-42.
Elijah and Elisha, the two men referred to in this passage, appear in the Old Testament books of I and II Kings; both became proverbial as powerful prophets. According to the biblical author(s), Elijah’s list of accomplishments includes: stopping all rain in the land for three years, then bringing it back through prayer; calling down fire from heaven on two separate occasions; slaying 450 idolatrous prophets; and being carried off to heaven in a fiery chariot.\textsuperscript{252} Elisha, Elijah’s successor, began his prophetic career by repeating one of Elijah’s miracles (parting the Jordan River) and cursing a group of boys who mocked him, with the result that two bears appeared and killed forty-two of them; among other deeds, he then went on to raise another boy to life, cure and cause leprosy, blind an entire army, and continue Elijah’s mission of advising and converting the Israelites.\textsuperscript{253}

Dante’s simile both parallels and contrasts the biblical prophets with the current canto. Dante-Pilgrim, in the position of Elisha, is gazing down, not up, and at the damned, not the saved. Elijah contrasts obviously with Ulysses, for the same reason that the former goes to Heaven, the latter to Hell. The contrast between these two has long been recognized. Pietrobono, for instance, states:

...Elia, obbedendo agli ordini di Dio, percuote con il mantello il Giordano e il fiume si apre al suo passaggio, monta sopra un carro di fuoco e, lieve come

\textsuperscript{252} 1 Kings 17.1-7; 18.41-45; 18.36-48; 1.9-12; 18.40; 2 Kings 2.11-12.

\textsuperscript{253} 2 Kings 2.13-14, 23-24; 4.18-37; 5; 6.18-23; et al.
nuvoletta, varca dalla terra al cielo; al contrario di Ulisse che fida solo nella ragione, e naufraga.  

Pietrobono observes the obvious contrast between Elijah’s power to open the sea and ascend to heaven vs. the sea that closes over Ulysses and the latter’s descent into Hell. Kablitz observes that Elijah is Ulysses’ anti-type. Lansing builds on Philip Damon’s reading of Ulysses as fallen Adam vs. Elijah as the risen Christ, arguing that Ulysses represents the fallen human person—Elijah, the redeemed one.

If Elijah is redeemed humanity, Adam forgiven as it were, then he is humanity remade in the image of Christ; he represents an alternative path to that chosen by Ulysses—the path of the sign rather than rejection of the sign. Dante, in fact, presents Elijah in terms reminiscent of Christ at his Ascension. In Acts 1, we read:

Et cum [Christus] hæc dixisset, videntibus illis, elevatus est: et nubes suscepit eum ab oculis eorum. Cumque intuerentur in cælum euntem illum, ecce duo viri astiterunt juxta illos in vestibus albis, qui et dixerunt: Viri Galilæi, quid statis aspicientes in cælum? Hic Jesus, qui assumptus est a vobis in cælum, sic veniet quemadmodum vidistis eum euntem in cælum.

Christ was taken up to heaven in a cloud, such that at a certain point the apostles were unable to see in on account of the nubes. Dante, likewise, describes Elisha as unable to

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254 Pietrobono *Inferno* 26.34.
255 Kablitz 77.
257 Acts 1.9-11.
see the assumed Elijah on account of the fire *come nuvoletta*—a cloud, not a whirlwind as in the original version. Both the reference to the cloud and the detail that the observers could not see the departing man are missing in the Old Testament account of Elijah’s assumption, but present in the New Testament story of the Ascension.\(^{258}\)

Dante thus depicts Elijah as a sign of Christ, with Elisha playing the role of apostle. Elisha would then be an image of the person who sees the sign (Christ/Elijah) and who should read it. This positive view of Elisha, however, contradicts a more prevalent negative interpretation of Dante’s depiction of him, the interpretation found in Frankel’s influential “The Context of Dante’s Ulysses: The Similes in *Inferno* XXVI, 25-42”. While her reading of canto XXVI has much merit, including a subtle and extensive reading of the *villano* simile, her negative reading of Dante’s Elisha—grounded in what appears to be a misinterpretation of the relevant biblical account—interprets Elisha as a conceited man who wishes to surpass the status of his master, and who moreover fails to do so, thus becoming a Ulysses-figure.

Frankel gives several reasons to support her view. Her primary argument for Elisha’s conceit is his request just before Elijah is assumed:

```italian
Cumque transissent, Elias dixit ad Eliseum: Postula quod vis ut faciam tibi, antequam tollar a te. Dixitque Eliseus: Obsecro ut fiat in me duplex spiritus tuus.
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\(^{258}\) Among others, Chimenz and Kablitz have observed these alterations of the older biblical story to connect *Inferno* XXVI with the New Testament one; cf. Chimenz *Inferno* 26.34-39; Kablitz 75, 80.
Qui respondit: Rem difficilem postulasti: attamen si videris me quando tollar a
te, erit tibi quod petisti: si autem non videris, non erit. 

Elijah asks Elisha to request a final gift from him, and Elisha asks for a “double portion”
of his prophetic spirit. Elijah gives a conditional assent: if Elisha sees him taken to
Heaven, he shall receive it; otherwise, he shall not. Frankel interprets Elisha’s request as follows:

Not only does Elisha disregard Elijah’s demand to be left alone in the sacred
moment of his translation, he also takes improper advantage of his master’s
generosity by asking for a “double” portion of his spirit, conceitedly aspiring at
being even more than the prophet so uniquely privileged by God.

In other words, Frankel takes “double portion” to mean “twice as much as Elijah’s
portion.” She concludes that this is an inordinate request for personal status, stemming
from the disciple’s arrogance. Note that Frankel is engaging in biblical exegesis here, not
Dantean interpretation; since Dante does not refer to the “double portion,” the
relevance of her comments here is clearly contingent on the accuracy of her
interpretation of those parts of the Bible that Dante does refer to (although Frankel
makes this interpretation a major premise of her argument, not a supporting one).
Nevertheless, since she stresses her interpretation of the “double portion” (and it is her
biblical interpretation at this point, which she then implies must also have been

259 2 Kings 2.9-10.
260 Frankel “Context of Dante's Ulysses” 111.
Dante’s), it is worth mentioning that the biblical significance of “double portion” is quite different from the way Frankel portrays it. The Mosaic Law legislated that after a man’s death, his heirs should divide up his property equally—with the exception of the eldest son, who received an amount twice that of any other share. The “double portion” was thus a sign of honor, but neither an unusual one nor a sign of inordinate conceit. Thus we read in Deuteronomy:

> Si habuerit homo uxores duas, unam dilectam, et alteram odiosam, genuerintque ex eo liberos, et fuerit filius odiosæ primogenitus, volueritque substantiam inter filios suos dividere, non poterit filium dilectæ facere primogenitum, et præferre filio odiosæ: sed filium odiosæ agnoscat primogenitum, dabitque ei de his quæ habuerit cuncta duplicia: iste est enim principium liberorum ejus, et huic debentur primogenita. ²⁶¹

The law here protects the right of the first-born son to his double portion of his father’s property, even if his father loves another son more. In this context, it is again obvious that “double portion” means “twice as much as any other heir” and not “twice as much as the father’s property,” which would be ridiculous. Elisha requested less of Elijah’s spirit than the older prophet had, not more; Elisha would be recognized as Elijah’s prophetic heir, but still subordinate to him in both position and power. Since Dante does not interpret this passage, however, we simply do not know his understanding of it; interpretations of Elisha’s request in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were varied.

²⁶¹ Deuteronomy 21.15-17.
As Frankel herself admits, the Bible does not provide much support for the interpretation of Elisha that she attributes to Dante; we therefore must rely on Dante’s own words to interpret his Elisha, and on this point the poet is silent.

Working from the questionable premise of Elisha’s conceit, Frankel proceeds to argue that, at least in Dante’s interpretation of the biblical story, Elisha did not in fact see Elijah assumed into Heaven. She forms this conclusion starting from an important lacuna in the Latin Vulgate:

The problem in this episode is to understand whether Elisha saw Elijah himself during the ascent and hence had his demand granted or whether, on the contrary, the denial of his request was signified by the fact that he saw only the fire and not the translated prophet himself. … The Vulgate omits the object in the key passage: “Heliseus autem videbat et clamabat pater mi pater mi … et non vidit eum amplius.” … [But] Dante’s statement is explicit: Elisha could not see anything except the flame alone. In his interpretation therefore, Elisha did not see Elijah and thus implicitly did not receive what he requested.

Frankel argues that the Latin text does not say explicitly whether Elisha saw Elijah and the chariot, or only the chariot; she maintains that Dante-Poet, for his part, clearly subscribes to the latter view that Elisha did not see Elijah ascending and hence did not have his request fulfilled. If Elisha were, in Dante’s view, making a conceited request with the aim of becoming greater than Elijah, this might be tenable; this depends, however, on the premise that Dante has already demonstrated a negative view of

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262 Frankel “Context of Dante’s Ulysses” 113.

263 Ibid. 111-2.
Elisha, which he has not. The Vulgate, apart from the specific quote Frankel cites above, presumes that Elisha did receive Elijah’s spirit as requested, implying that the former saw the latter’s assumption. Thus, immediately after Elijah’s departure, for example, Elisha parts the Jordan River (as Elijah had done shortly before), suggesting that he can accomplish the same miracles as Elijah; the other prophets who are present then exclaim, *Requievit spiritus Eliae super Eliseum.* In other words, both those present in the account and the story itself indicate that Elisha did become Elijah’s prophetic heir; he thus had his request granted, and therefore must have seen Elijah within the flames. The book of Sirach also suggests as much, when the author writes: *Elias quidem in turbine tectus est, et in Eliseo completus est spiritus ejus.*

But this is the Bible, not the *Comedy.* Dante is free to revise the biblical accounts, as he does on occasion; the question at hand is how Dante depicts Elisha at the critical moment. And as Frankel points out, Dante writes that Elisha *nol potea si con li occhi seguirc* Elijah; she concludes that Dante’s interpretation is that Elisha could not see Elijah—period. In fact, the text does not say so much. It simply acknowledges that *at a given point* Elisha could not see Elijah—not that he failed to see him through the entire translation. Such a point is to be expected even if Elisha *could* see his master in the chariot at first: as Elijah recedes into the distance, his figure will eventually disappear

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264 2 Kings 2.15.

265 Sirach 48.13.
and be swallowed up in the flaming chariot carrying him. Such an interpretation also fits the pattern of allusions to the Ascension in this simile: the disciples could see Christ ascending at first, and watched him until “nubes suscepit eum ab oculis eorum.” It is not necessarily the case, then, that Dante is interpreting the entire episode of Elijah’s translation in the way Frankel suggests; it is only obvious that he refers to the latter part of it when Elijah was no longer visible.

Frankel, perhaps because of the inconclusiveness of Dante’s statement on Elisha’s sight (and the nonexistence of any statement about the “double portion”), in fact finds her primary evidence for her interpretation of Dante’s Elisha elsewhere. She focuses on the poet’s reference to Elisha’s curse that resulted in the death of many children: E qual colui che si vengiò con li orsi…. Frankel writes:

It is of course difficult to ascertain Dante’s motivation in mentioning this episode. If by so doing he intends to project an unfavorable light on Elisha, he would find scant support in the Bible. In fact, Elisha is described as going on to fulfill his mission as a prophet and accomplishing many extraordinary deeds, among which there is even the resurrection of a dead child (II Kings 4:8-37). And yet, among all these deeds, Dante chose to remember a gift not of life but of death: the slaying of the 42 children.266

266 Frankel “Context of Dante’s Ulysses” 113. Other interpreters have also struggled with this allusion. Vellutello and Cristoforo Landino (respective comments on Inferno 26.34-42) tried to explain its strangeness by explaining that the boys had called into question Elisha’s account of Elijah’s assumption—that is, they accused him of lying. This detail is not in the Bible, and I have been unable to locate any possible source for it.
As Frankel observes, Dante uses this one shocking incident—using divine power to cause bears to kill young boys—to refer to Elisha. Frankel argues from this that Dante is setting Elisha against Elijah, the latter as a morally upright prophet and the former as a morally fallen one (and a symbol of both Ulysses and Dante). However, she seems to overlook that her “good prophet” Elijah could be equally shocking:


In the narrative of II Kings, both prophets could call down divine punishment, even if not absolutely necessary; and when we consider that Elijah was apparently in no real danger, 268 the proportionality between Elijah’s punishment and the threat to him also seems out of balance. Whatever justification the biblical author (or Dante) might have seen (or not seen) in these events, it is difficult to sustain Frankel’s contrast of a “good Elijah” and “bad Elisha.”

267 2 Kings 1.9-12.

268 2 Kings 1.15ff.
There is, moreover, another satisfactory reason for Dante’s use of the bear episode here. Struggling with the same perplexity over the episode that Frankel highlights, later biblical commentators interpreted it as a mystical foreshadowing of the Crucifixion. Thus Augustine writes:

...[l]n Regnorum libro caluum Elisaeum irriserunt pueri, dicebantque post illum: Calue, calue, processerunt ursi de silua, et comederunt pueros male ridentes, et plangendos a parentibus suis. Significauit hoc factum prophetia quadam, futurum Dominum nostrum Iesum Christum. Ille enim a Iudaeis irrintentibus uelut caluus irrisus est, quia in Caluariae loco crucifixus est.²⁶⁹

For Augustine, then, this story foreshadowed the Crucifixion, with Elisha as a Christ-figure. This interpretation makes possible a different, perhaps more satisfactory, interpretation of Dante’s Elisha. Elisha is to the apostles as Elijah is to Christ: as the apostles follow Christ and so become like him (as signs thereof), so Elisha follows Elijah and becomes like him (as his heir). The Christological implications of this relationship are evident in light of Augustine’s interpretation of Elisha—the Old Testament prophet too becomes a sign of Christ. If the apostles/Elisha become signs of Christ, and Dante-Pilgrim is Elisha (in the tenor of the simile), then he too could become a sign of Christ.

²⁶⁹ Augustine Ennarationes in psalmos 84.2. Cf. also 46.2; 83.2. In the latter location, Augustine compares the boys to the Jews who, crucifying Christ, sunt possesi a daemonibus et deuorati. Fosca (Inferno 26.34-42) and Kablitz (82) located these citations before me.
3.2.4 Linguae ignis: Pentecost and the Path to Conversion

That path—the path of following the sign instead of transgressing it—lies hidden in plain view, as it were. Dante gives no indication of how Elisha was to become like Elijah; yet he does allude to the key event that transformed the apostles into signs of Christ: Pentecost. The biblical account of Pentecost runs as follows:

Et cum complerentur dies Pentecostes, erant omnes pariter in eodem loco: et factus est repente de cælo sonus, tamquam advenientis spiritus vehementis, et replevit totam domum ubi erant sedentes. Et apparuerunt illis dispertitæ linguae tamquam ignis, seditque supra singulos eorum: et repleti sunt omnes Spiritu Sancto, et cœperunt loqui variis linguis, prout Spiritus Sanctus dabat eloqui illis. 270

Just before his Ascension, Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. Ten days later, as the apostles prayed, a sound like a mighty wind was heard, and “tongues of fire” appeared on their heads. All of them began praising God in languages otherwise unknown to them. Apparently, they spoke loudly enough that quite a large crowd gathered to hear them:


What shocked the hearers was that the apostles were praising God in a way that transcended linguistic boundaries; everyone who heard them understood them to be speaking in their own languages. Astonished, the audience asked, “What does this mean?”—thus seeking the deeper meaning of the portent. Immediately after, Peter addressed the crowd and convinced several thousand to convert. As understood by the theology contemporary with Dante, this was the birth of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Holy Spirit transforming many individuals into a single entity with one bond—a shared participation in Christ’s divine nature. Pentecost thus marks the first transformation of the Christian follower into the sacramentum et res, into the sign of the Incarnation.

Pentecost-qua-sign demands a search for deeper meaning; for those who read/follow it, like the Pentecost audience, conversion follows—conversion into the Sign. For Dante, this total conversion into the sacramentum et res is the path he seeks.

This interpretation suggests that the Pentecost theme in this canto is somewhat more important than has been generally noticed. Many have observed that the Pentecost tongues of fire find reflection in the flames that look like and speak like tongues, and one could add that the wind that heralded the Holy Spirit’s appearance is mirrored in the whirlwind that drowned Ulysses. Just as Pentecost follows the

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271 Acts 2.5-12.
Ascension, moreover, so Dante’s encounter with Ulysses follows his allusions to the Ascension in his Elijah/Elisha simile. Yet nearly all critics seem to consider these allusions of minor importance. Fosca says, “Ricordiamo che alcuni commentatori vedono nella punizione dell’ottava bolgia una inversione infernale della Pentecoste (Dono delle Lingue).”\textsuperscript{272} Apparently Fosca does not consider the allusions important enough to cite those “few commentators.” Pezard comments at some length on the similarity between the Pentecostal and Infernal fires, but only to note that the contrapasso is an appropriate inversion of the biblical event.\textsuperscript{273} Kablitz briefly takes up the same point, arguing that parodying Pentecost is an appropriate contrapasso for the sin of seeking a truth that is not proper to one (his version of the folle volo school of thought).\textsuperscript{274} Boitani also notes connections between Pentecost and this canto, but without going deeply into them.\textsuperscript{275}

A couple of commentators do inspect the relationship to Pentecost somewhat further. Cassell argues, “False counsel reverses divine counsel, the fifth step towards true wisdom, the very gift parodied by the punishment within tongues of fire; the

\textsuperscript{272} Fosca Inferno 26.85-89.
\textsuperscript{274} Kablitz 78.
\textsuperscript{275} Boitani “Dante’s Dangerous Journeys” 75.
punishment is a reversal of the Pentecost, itself a five times ten.”

Taking consiglio frodolente to be the bolgia’s sin, Cassell observes that (good) counsel is the fifth of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. This seems to be one of the few attempts to integrate fully the Pentecost theme with the rest of the canto, though of course Cassell’s identification of the bolgia’s fault differs from the one presented here, for reasons given earlier. Mazzotta carries the same point further:

Commentators have traditionally stressed that the flames Dante sees in Canto XXVI are a pointed parody of the descent of the pentecostal tongues of fire upon Christ’s disciples, and that Ulysses’ sin of evil counseling is primarily a sin against the good counsel of the Holy Spirit. It might be added within this context that the production of sound through the metaphor of the wind (88) ironically recalls Acts 2:2 in which the descent of the Spirit is described as occurring in tongues of flames and to the sound of a mighty wind. The allusion to the inspirational afflatus prepares a sustained reflection on Ulysses’ language and its relation to the prophetic word. It prepares, more important, a reflection on Dante’s own poetic language, wavering as it does between prophecy and rhetoric.

Mazzotta notes the details that others have, while adding an additional one (the sound of the flame vs. the descent of the Holy Spirit); he attempts to integrate them into his interpretation of the canto, too. He also connects Elijah to Pentecost in Dante’s account,


277 The entire list runs as follows: fear of the Lord, piety, knowledge, fortitude, counsel, understanding, and wisdom. Cassell claims to find parodies of the entire list in Inferno XXVI.

278 Mazzotta “Canto XXVI” 354. Like Fosca, he does not give references for the anonymous “commentators” to which he refers.
noting that in both biblical stories fire from Heaven is associated with prophetic speaking.279

Dante, however, seems to intend Pentecost to be a central element of this 

bolgia, not the side issue of Inferno XXVI that it has been treated as thus far, for the 
Pentecost theme extends through both canto XXVI and XXVII, appearing at least twice in 
Dante’s encounter with Guido, not just his meeting with Ulysses. In Dante’s simile 
descriving Guido’s speech (quoted earlier), the poet writes that at first the damned soul 
speaks its own language, a fact reminiscent of the division of languages of Babel. Then 
Dante finds himself capable of understanding the words. Babel has given way to 
Pentecost.

The second allusion requires deeper analysis. Dante-Poet reports the words that 
Guido speaks as follows:

O tu a cu’ io drizzo
la voce e che parlavi mo lombardo,
dicendo ‘Istra ten va, piú non t’adizzo,’
perch’ io sia giunto forse alquanto tardo,
non t’incresca restare a parlar meco...280

Istra ten va, piú non t’adizzo—these words constitute Virgil’s dismissal of Ulysses, as 
quoted by Guido. Yet they are not Italian, but rather the Lombardian dialect of Guido’s

279 Mazzotta Dante: Poet of the Desert 91-92. See also: Hollander Allegory in Dante’s Commedia 118 n. 2. “...Elijah is the prefiguration of the Gift of Tongues to the Apostles.”

280 Inferno 27.19-23.
own hometown; Guido quotes Virgil as speaking in Lombardo, while the rest of his speech is in Italian. This has puzzled the commentary tradition, since it appears to contradict Virgil’s own words to Dante before speaking to Ulysses:

Lascia parlare a me, ch’i’ ho concetto
ciò che tu vuoi; ch’ei sarebbero schivi,
perch’ e’ fuor greci, forse del tuo detto. \(^{281}\)

Virgil appears to claim to speak with Ulysses in the high style, which would imply using either Greek or Latin. Paradoxically, if Guido claims correctly to have heard Virgil speaking a vernacular dialect, then Virgil was in fact using the low style. (Both statements, it might be added, also appear to contradict the reader’s own experience of “hearing” Virgil and Ulysses converse in Dante’s Italian.)

The critical response to this dilemma has been varied. On the one hand are those who seek to reconcile this contradiction within Dante’s narrative. So, for instance, Chiappelli\(^{282}\) argues that Virgil switches to Lombard dialect just as he dismisses Ulysses, in order that the harsh contrast of the low style against the high style might warn Dante-Pilgrim not to be deceived by Ulysses’ powerful rhetoric. Vellutello\(^{283}\) proposes that Virgil only uses the high style to capture Ulysses’ attention and acquiescence, and begins to use Lombardian once this is accomplished. Along similar lines, several commentators

\(^{281}\) Inferno 26.73-75.


\(^{283}\) Vellutello Inferno 27.16-21.
note that in Dante’s time lombardo could be synonymous with “northern Italian,” and thus would be appropriate for Virgil (who was himself a Lombard in this sense).\textsuperscript{284} Several others argue that Guido describes Virgil’s language as lombardo not on account of the words he uses, but because of his accent or pronunciation;\textsuperscript{285} among these Torraca concludes that Guido has translated Virgil’s words into his own dialect.\textsuperscript{286}

On the other hand are commentators who permit Dante to violate the internal rules of his narrative for an extra-narrative purpose. Del Lungo\textsuperscript{287} and Mattalia\textsuperscript{288} suggest that we should not read too much significance into this moment, with the latter proposing that Dante is simply indulging his interest in Italian dialects. Others argue that the mechanics of the scene—which introduces a new character from Lombardia—require it.\textsuperscript{289} Still others argue that Dante-Poet intends a contrast between the Ulysses episode and the Guido one: for Momigliano,\textsuperscript{290} the contrast is in the tone; for

\textsuperscript{284} Trucchi \textit{Inferno} 27.19-21; Grabher \textit{Inferno} 27.19-21; Steiner \textit{Inferno} 27.19-21; Grandgent \textit{Inferno} 27.21; Francesco Torraca \textit{Inferno} 27.19-21; Scartazzini \textit{Inferno} 27.21; Longfellow \textit{Inferno} 27.21; Tommaseo \textit{Inferno} 27.19-21.

\textsuperscript{285} Torraca supra; Tozer \textit{Inferno} 27.21; Poletto \textit{Inferno} 27.19-24; Berthier \textit{Inferno} 27.16-24; Grandgent supra.

\textsuperscript{286} Sapegno (\textit{Inferno} 27.20-21) comes to a similar conclusion.


\textsuperscript{288} Mattalia \textit{Inferno} 27.21.

\textsuperscript{289} Grabher supra; Steiner supra; Lodovico Castelvetro \textit{Inferno} 27.19-23; Chimenz \textit{Inferno} 27.20-21.

\textsuperscript{290} Momigliano \textit{Inferno} 27.19-21.
Sapegno, it lies in the shift from myth to history. Finally, Mazzotta argues to an opposing conclusion, that Dante-Poet wants to break down—not build on—linguistic barriers, in this case barriers of style.

If we interpret this event in light of Pentecost, however, we can propose a solution that reconciles this paradox within the narrative exigencies of these two cantos as well as according to the poetic purposes of Dante’s poem. So much the poem gives us: Virgil speaks to Ulysses in the high style (Latin or Greek), Ulysses responds in kind, and Guido da Montefeltro hears them in his Lombard dialect. Whatever language the characters speak, each listener hears his own language—as with the audience at Pentecost. There is no need to invoke shifts of language that Dante-Poet does not mention, or to suggest that the event—clearly calculated from the previous canto—is superficial. Most other interpretations can be reconciled within this one without contradiction: Guido heard Virgil speaking in a way familiar to him (though Virgil did not know it); the words are useful for introducing the Lombard character; the tone does create a sharp contrast with the previous scene, a contrast that signals the presence of Pentecost; and the lack of generic boundaries that Mazzotta observes is found to be rooted in the Pentecostal absence of linguistic boundaries.

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291 Sapegno Inferno 27.20-21.
292 Mazzotta Poet of the Desert 88-89.
Thus, as the only positive prophetic image that bridges both *Inferno* XXVI and XXVII, Pentecost contrasts with both Ulysses and Guido da Montefeltro (unlike Elijah and Elisha, who appear only with Ulysses). It is the path of those who, faced with the Incarnation-*segno*, do not reject it *qua* sign but accept it and thus become that sign. As sharers in the Incarnation-*sign*, these people—the Mystical Body—can speak inspired words that are signs guaranteed to refer to *the* Sign. The words are unlike the true words of Ulysses and Guido (and the inspired words of Jonah and Balaam) because the speakers themselves are unlike these men. Those who participate in Pentecost follow the path that the Sign points out and paradoxically become signs to that path.²⁹³ In this they resemble Elijah and Elisha in Dante’s simile, both of whom serve as Christ-figures; but Pentecost stands as a more complete figuration, since it is a direct participation in the reality of the Incarnation.

### 3.3 *A questo segno*: Reading, Writing, and the Incarnation

What is the fundamental fraud of Ulysses and Guido? Simply this: rejecting the unification of *sacramentum et res* and helping others to do so. All of Ulysses’ deceptions, impiety, and wrong desires merely reflect the fundamental rejection of the

²⁹³ Incidentally, Pentecost resolves one of the tensions that Mazzotta leaves unresolved in interpreting Ulysses. Mazzotta, it will be remembered, drew a dichotomy between *signa* and *res*, arguing that for Ulysses (and for Dante) there is ultimately no correspondence between signifier and signified. Yet Pentecost is the event that turns fallen human beings into *sacramentum et res*—that is, it creates a union between signifier and signified. It serves, not to equate Dante with Ulysses, but to contrast them.
sacramentum et res. His words hide and misuse meanings; yet he has prior to this rejected the ultimate Meaning. His desire for knowledge is wrong because he has already rejected the proper end of knowing, God-qua-meaning/res. His abandonment of his family is an abandonment of human nature as a sign of God. So, too, is Guido’s consiglio frodolente a rejection of true conversion—a rejection of the transhumanizing signification rooted in the Incarnation. At the base of this rejection lies the explanation of the sin of Adam, the origin of all sin and the complete opposite of the Incarnation’s grace: refusing to read God’s signs. From this stems the failure to see the res behind the signs, to understand one’s own nature as destined for divine union, to choose to become a sign oneself.

For the pilgrim to succeed in his journey, he must learn to see and read the signs he encounters in light of the Incarnation. Even in Hell, Ulysses and Guido are signs to him. Ulysses and Diomedes, joined in one flame, are two persons in one physical instantiation of the nature of fire; they thus pervert the Incarnation with its two natures and one person. Guido da Montefeltro, as we have already seen, still manages to resemble Pentecost, the extension of the Incarnation to the rest of humanity. For the pilgrim to conclude simply that they did something God forbade to them is not enough; rather, the pilgrim must see that, in disobeying, they failed in something interior. They failed to convert, to become signs of the Incarnation, and they failed because they did not read the signs that they encountered. Together, these two serve as a warning to the
pilgrim that how one understands signs—how one reads—can determine one’s eternal fate.

To the poet falls the task of teaching his readers to read the same way. It is not sufficient for us to look at the acts that damned these men, as if Heaven could be lost or gained by mere outward deeds. If such were the case, no conversion would be necessary—and hence no Incarnation or Pentecost. The poet’s job, therefore, is to teach us to read for conversion. His allusions to the various prophetic figures—whether good (Elijah, Elisha, Pentecost), bad (Balaam) or questionable (Jonah)—function as the poet’s commentary on the scene for our benefit. The pilgrim does not explicitly encounter them; with the exception of Jonah, they only appear in the similes that the poet has included. Alongside Ulysses and Guido, they are further hints of the Incarnation among the damned, echoes of Heaven in Hell.

Hints they are, and therefore subtle. Later, however, Dante confirms his poetic in these two cantos more openly. In one of Beatrice’s speeches on the Incarnation in

*Paradiso* VII, Ulysses makes a cameo:

> Per non soffrire a la virtù che vole
> freno a suo prode, quell’ uom che non nacque,
> dannando sé, dannò tutta sua prole;
> onde l’umana specie inferma giacque
> giù per secoli molti in grande errore,
> fin ch’al Verbo di Dio discender piacque
> u’ la natura, che dal suo fattore
“That man who was not born” is Adam; the “Word of God” is Christ. On the surface, Beatrice’s words describe Adam’s sin and its effects, which were then reversed in the Incarnation. Under the surface, however, is Ulysses, for Beatrice’s speech echoes the lost soul’s own words:

Noi ci allegrammo, e tosto tornò in pianto;  
ché de la nova terra un turbo nacque  
e percosse del legno il primo canto.  
Tre volte il fé girar con tutte l’acque;  
a la quarta levar la poppa in suso  
e la prora ire in giù, com’ altrui piacque,  
infin che ‘l mar fu sovra noi richiuso.  

The repeated rhyme structure—nacque/acque/piacque and naque/giacque/piacque—reveal Ulysses in Beatrice’s speech. His sin, like Adam’s, is the reverse of the Incarnation: he denies the potential for human-divine union; Christ fulfills it. Beatrice fills in the all-important meaning that Ulysses leaves out: Ulysses does not name God, referring to him as simply “another”; Beatrice names God as the “Word.” She thus presents the Incarnate Christ in his nature as sign; Ulysses’ omission of God’s identity is also a denial of the Word, of Sign. Dante-Poet reinforces this point moments later when Beatrice says:

294 Paradiso 7.25-33.
295 Inferno 26.136-142.
Veramente, però ch’a questo segno
molto si mira e poco si discerne,
dirò perché tal modo fu più degno.²⁹⁶

This terzina occurs in her explanation to Dante-Pilgrim of the appropriateness of the Incarnation for humanity’s salvation. Questo segno, “this sign,” is the Incarnation—that is, the ultimate example of the union of sign and meaning. It is, in her words, a sign at which many look, but which few understand—that is, many see it, but few grasp its meaning, the path to conversion. Ulysses and Guido fell into this category: both looked at a sign, a sacramentum tantum, of the sacramentum et res, and both failed to read its meaning. Both failed, too, for the same reason—failing to treat the sign as a sign in the first place, perceiving it only as a boundary. Caveat lector, Dante might say—let the reader beware.

²⁹⁶ Paradiso 7.61-3.
CHAPTER 4:

THE HEART OF DANTE’S POETIC MATTER

4.1 Dante-Pilgrim’s Declaration to Bonagiunta

In *Purgatorio* XXII-XXVII, Dante-Poet presents an extensive treatment of poetics through all six cantos (with a possible question mark in the case of canto XXV);\(^{297}\) one might consider this the poetic heart of the *Comedy*, so to speak. Near the center of this arch, in the middle of *Purgatorio* XXIV, occurs the key moment of the poetic discussion—and, for many critics, the key poetic moment of the *Comedy*. As Dante-Pilgrim passes through the terrace of the Gluttons, he encounters Bonagiunta, an old acquaintance of his. The following conversation ensues:

\(^{297}\) *Purgatorio* XXV consists largely of Statius’ discourse on human embryology and the formation of shade bodies after death. Some scholars interpret this as a metaliterary comment on poetry; others remain skeptical of such an approach. For positions in favor, see:


Much of the meaning in this passage is debated. Nevertheless, several things seem immediately obvious. In the first place, Bonagiunta is asking about Dante’s poetics as developed in the Vita Nova, in which the poem Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore plays a key role. In his earlier work, when Dante first wrote poetry of Beatrice, he desired something from her—her greeting. When at a certain point Beatrice refused to greet him, Dante then decided to write of her selflessly, without the intention to gain anything in return.299 Dante inaugurated his “poetics of praise” with the poem Donne ch’avete

298 Purgatorio 24.49-63.

intelletto d’amore, the same poem that Bonagiunta mentions in the Purgatorio. When Beatrice died in the Vita Nova, Dante resolved to continue writing in her praise, though taking a hiatus at the end so that he might acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to do so worthily. Dante thus presents himself in the Vita Nova as the discoverer of a new kind of love poetry, the poetics of praise; these are the same poetics that Bonagiunta refers to here.

Second, after the pilgrim’s response, Bonagiunta undergoes a poetic “conversion.” The Lucchese poet understands Dante’s poetics in a way he never did while alive—and why Dante’s poetry has been superior to his own and those of two other Italian lyric poets, Giacomo da Lentini (’l Notaro) and Guittone d’Arezzo. Third, and most importantly from a critical standpoint, Dante-Pilgrim’s response itself is a key statement about Dante’s poetics—some would say the key statement. Love inspires him; he takes note, and writes accordingly. In short, this moment is fraught with import for Dante’s treatment of the theme of poetry.

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300 Vita Nova 19.
301 Vita Nova 42.
4.2 The Critical Problem

That said, what does Dante-Pilgrim mean? Is this a statement of Dante-Pilgrim’s poetics at that moment in his journey? Dante-Poet’s poetics at the time of writing? Both? Does this poetic apply to the *Vita Nova*, the *Comedy*, or both? These two problems—whether the poetics described are the poet’s, and whether they indicate a continuity between the poetics of the *Vita Nova* and those of the *Comedy*—have generated several diverse schools of opinion on the matter (and worked their way into other conversations surrounding the *Comedy*, such as whether a poetic school of *stilnovismo* ever existed; cf. note 12 below).

Among those who interpret this passage as Dante’s final word on his poetics (whom we may call the “complete” school), some perceive a break between the *Comedy*’s poetics here described (presumably) and those of the *Vita Nova*; others see a continuity between the two works. (At least one critic in the “complete” school, as we shall see, has also argued that this passage represents the poetics of both the *Comedy* and the *Vita Nova*. By contrast, those who argue for a shift between the poetics of the pilgrim in *Purgatorio* XXIV and those of the poet (the “incomplete” school) interpret these words either as referring to the *Vita Nova*’s poetics inasmuch as these must be left behind, or as referring to the *Comedy*’s poetics insofar as they must be developed further.

The “complete” school seems the larger of the two groups. Most scholars appear to take it as a given that, though the words come from the pilgrim, they might as well be
spoken by the poet.\textsuperscript{303} Those who do undertake to support this position explicitly are confronted with the following paradox: the pilgrim’s moral development and poetic development are supposed to proceed together, yet here the unperfected pilgrim is supposed to profess the (perfected) poet’s poetics. Hollander suggests\textsuperscript{304} that the 

\textit{Comedy} need not be completely logical—sometimes the poet is constrained by circumstances to violate the internal rules of the narrative. In this case, Hollander interprets the pilgrim’s comment as the poet’s recantation of material composed prior to the \textit{Comedy} but after the fictional date of the pilgrim’s journey—namely the \textit{Convivio}. The poet, in this view, is constrained to use the pilgrim to reject ideas that the poet had once espoused but now rejects. Thus the pilgrim can, albeit rarely, function as a mouthpiece for the poet even when it would be illogical from a narrative perspective.

It is possible to belong to the “complete” school, however, without subscribing to the continuity between the poetics of praise of the \textit{Vita Nova} and the \textit{Comedy’s} poetics. Baranski maintains that the \textit{Vita Nova}’s poetics still work within the commonplace

\textsuperscript{303} Works included in my bibliography that seem to take this perspective include: the commentaries of Anna Leonardi, Giacalone, Momigliano, Torraca, Fallani, Carroll, and Campi; Baranski “Notes on Dante”; and the following additional articles:


framework of the *genera dicendi*, while the *Comedy’s* poetics reject it.\(^{305}\) Thus the pilgrim’s statement, taken as an explanation of the poet’s perspective, cannot be in line with the poetics of praise any more than the *Comedy* is:

Rather than taking Bonagiunta’s allusion to *Donne ch’avete* as a cue to elaborate on his poem or to confirm the interpretation offered by the *Vita Nuova*, the pilgrim seizes the opportunity to reject the poetry of his youth, including Bonagiunta’s celebration of this, and to announce his new sense of literature, which... stems from the experiences of his eschatalogical journey.\(^{306}\)

Thus the pilgrim’s statement is a break with the past, not in continuity with it as above; thus the contingency of the poet’s poetics on the pilgrim’s entire journey is preserved. It is not clear whether Baranski consciously attempts to circumvent the paradox just noted; the following distinction, however, could serve that end:

By returning the exchange between the pilgrim and Bonagiunta to its primary narrative level, we can appreciate both the achievements of *Donne ch’avete*—its *novitas* and superiority in relation to the preceding Italian literary tradition—and its limitations in relation to the “sacrato poema” [i.e., the *Comedy*]. At the same time, when we remember that, beyond the local narrative functions of any of the *Commedia’s* metaliterary statements, there exists a much broader discourse bent on clarifying the poem’s extraordinary artistic radicalism, then, what is narratively tightly focused can take on much wider dimensions. Thus, if we consider Bonagiunta’s “dolce stil novo” from such a viewpoint, it becomes clear that it can stand as an excellent shorthand definition of the *Commedia*.\(^{307}\)

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\(^{305}\) Baranski “Notes on Dante” 25.

\(^{306}\) Ibid. 29.

\(^{307}\) Ibid. 33-34.
By distinguishing between the immediate meaning of the character’s words in the narrative context and their general application to the poem as a whole (an application of which Bonagiunta is of course unaware), one could argue that the pilgrim’s words also have the same kind of double meaning: a narrative one and a metanarrative one. Thus the pilgrim’s poetic declaration could have one meaning to the pilgrim—an “incomplete” meaning—and also a more complete one as applied to the poet’s technique.

One could also subscribe to the “complete” school and circumvent the paradox by rejecting the necessary correlation between Dante’s moral and poetic developments. In this camp, Mazzotta recognizes differences between the old poetics of Dante and the new, but also discerns a significant similarity: the inadequacy of Dante’s poetics to accomplish his aims. Arguing that Dante’s poetics belong to the same category as Guinizzelli’s, the so-called stil novo style, he points out that Guinizzelli’s poetics are mirrored in the Comedy in the speech of Francesca da Rimini (famously with the Lustful in Inferno V). The same kind of poetry that Dante-Pilgrim praises in Purgatorio XXIV

308 Mazzotta Poet of the Desert. Mazzotta presents his understanding of Dante’s critique of Guinizzelli’s poetry on pg. 196; the explicit association of Guinizzelli with the Vita Nova does not come until pg. 208.

Hollander, Mazzotta and Pertile subscribe to the existence of a stil novo school of poetry, including at least Dante and one or more of his contemporaries. Many scholars, though not all, agree that there was such a school; these differ however on who was included in it. Pertile includes Guinizzelli; Hollander limits the school to only Dante and Cino da Pistoia for sure (Hollander Purgatorio 24.55-63). Among those who question the existence of such a school, at least as usually understood, are Guido Favati Inchiesta sul dolce stil novo 147 et passim; Baranski “Note on Dante” 27-29; Emilio Bigi “Genesi di un concetto storiografico,” especially 370-371; Cocito “I problemi di una terzina dantesca” 178. See Bibliography for more information.
cannot ensure salvation if one of its adherents is also damned; in other words, this
cannot be the salvific poetry that Dante-Poet seeks (and claims to write elsewhere in
the Comedy). Therefore,

From a moral standpoint, the ‘new’ poetry can be as ‘courtly’ and worldly as the
old poetry that Dante is intent on seeing superseded. ... As Dante formulates his
poetics of love he dramatizes both his desire to be a poeta-theologus and his
awareness that his poetry, like Guinizzelli’s, falls short of this desire.310

The pilgrim’s poetics at this point in the journey, then, are complete in a sense; yet they
do not indicate a sufficient break with the past, but rather continuity. In other words,
there can be no poetic conversion—no poetic inspiration can attain Dante’s
aspiration.311 In effect, then, this variant of the “complete” school overcomes the moral-
poetic paradox described earlier by jettisoning the equivalence of the moral and poetic
conversions: Dante-Pilgrim may experience a complete moral conversion, but not the
same degree of poetic transformation, since that is apparently impossible.

In contrast to these views is the “incomplete” side, which holds that the pilgrim’s
statement is not to be understood as the poet’s poetics. One version of this opinion

309 Mazzotta Poet of the Desert 196.

310 Mazzotta Poet of the Desert 196-7, 226.

311 There is some difference between the Vita Nova’s poetics and the Comedy’s for Mazzotta,
who makes the case for the Incarnational school of thought mentioned in Chapter 1—namely that Dante
is articulating his poetics here in terms of the Holy Spirit incarnating Christ in Mary’s womb. Mazzotta
presents Dante as realizing that his poetics, even when described in salvific terms, will always be
holds that there is a break between the poetics of the pilgrim’s statement and the poet’s poetics. Pertile, who seems the most outspoken critic in this camp,\textsuperscript{312} holds that the stil novo encompasses both Guinizzelli’s poetry and Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore, and thus finds Francesca’s imitation of Guinizzelli in Hell to be a critique of Dante’s own stilnovismo.\textsuperscript{313} “What [Bonagiunta] hears now in the praeens narrati, and failed to understand in the past, are Dante’s poetic principles up to the present fictional time, the year 1300, the principles that made and still make of the pilgrim a stilnovista.”\textsuperscript{314} If this is the case, he argues, these poetic principles must also be those of the pilgrim whom Virgil found lost in the dark wood in Inferno I, i.e. before his conversion began. Pertile sums up the problem as follows:

Dante the character speaks to Bonagiunta as though there were unbroken continuity between Donne ch’avete and his present situation: as though, that is, no change had occurred in his life in the intervening ten years or so. But, only some twenty terzine earlier, the same character was telling Forese how he spent most of those ten years living a life of which, having just been through “la profonda notte d’I veri morti” (XXIII 121-22), he now feels utterly ashamed. Does this mean that stilnovismo coexisted with moral degradation?\textsuperscript{315}

It does—if we assume a continuity between Dante the stilnovista, Dante-Pilgrim in Inferno I, and Dante-Pilgrim in Purgatorio XXIV. This is an assumption that critics such as

\textsuperscript{312} Pertile “Dante’s ‘Comedy’” 56.

\textsuperscript{313} Ibid. 53-69.

\textsuperscript{314} Ibid. 62.

\textsuperscript{315} Ibid. 62.
Hollander do not share, arguing that the poetics Dante means to reject in the Comedy—the poetic dimension of Inferno I’s dark wood—are the poetics of the Convivio, not of the Vita Nova. In response, Pertile argues at length that the poetics of the Convivio do not matter for our understanding of the Comedy,316 and Hollander responds in turn arguing that they do.317

There is another possibility within the “incomplete” camp, though: that the poetics as described by Dante-Pilgrim are incomplete, but to some extent good—just like Dante-Pilgrim’s moral condition at this point in Purgatory—thus preserving the parallel between the pilgrim’s moral development and his poetic one. This position has been taken up, though not extensively, by Fosca in his comment on the same passage.318

...[M]entre ascende il sacro monte, il pellegrino-poeta non è ancora autore del poema sacro: come è noto, egli riceverà la solenne investitura soltanto dopo avere conquistato l’innocenza. Questo significa che egli, se è ora a buon diritto scriba Dei [cf. Paradiso X.27], non ha ancora le carte in regola per ricevere il conferimento della grande missione: infatti egli ha scritto dietro ispirazione divina nel modo della “loda”, un modo che si basa sulla esaltazione della divina creatura, considerata tramite che conduce al Creatore, ma non ha ancora scritto poesia in esaltazione dell’intero creato, cioè in diretta lode di Dio.319

317 Hollander “Dante’s ‘dolce stil novo’ and the Comedy” 276 and note.
318 Fosca Purgatorio 24.52-60.
319 Ibid.
The pilgrim has only used his poetry to praise creatures as a way to God; he has not yet praised God himself, the goal of the Comedy and thus its poetics. Thus, although the pilgrim’s poetics are necessarily good, Fosca would have it that they are still developing into the poetics of the poet—a difference of continuity, and not of rupture.

4.3 Sacramental Poetics of the Pome and Legno

Interestingly, within the immediate context of this very statement to Bonagiunta, Dante-Poet alludes to key elements of the sacramental poetics analyzed in the previous chapters. As Dante-Pilgrim prepares to leave the Terrace, he encounters the tree mentioned earlier, which he describes with the (as we saw in chapter on Adam) poetically-loaded word pomo:

...[P]arvermi i rami gravidì e vivaci
d’un altro pomo, e non molto lontani
per esser pur allora vòlto in laci.\(^{320}\)

Moments later, however, a mysterious voice describes the tree as a legno:

“Trapassate oltre sanza farvi presso:
legno è più sù che fu morso da Eva,
e questa pianta si levò da esso.”\(^{321}\)

The altro pomo turns out to be descended from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, also described as a legno (in Paradiso XXVI and, we shall see, in Purgatorio XXXII). The

\(^{320}\) Purgatorio 24.103-5.

\(^{321}\) Purgatorio 24.115-117.
role of that Tree in the Fall would seem to imply that the *legno* is consistently used as a negative image, whereas *pomo* is contrasted as a positive image. This also appears consonant with the earlier analysis of *Paradiso* XXVI, in which the two terms seemed to be contrasted: the *legno*, according to Adam, was the fruit/tree that he ate, mistaking it for the real *pomo*; the latter, according to Dante-Pilgrim, was Adam himself. In *Inferno* XXVI, we saw *legno* occur again (this time without *pomo*) as a reference to the ship that made Ulysses’ sin possible; we also saw that it served as a bridge linking Ulysses’ trespass with Adam’s. That the same words appear also in *Purgatorio* XXIV suggests that Dante here continues the same poetic theme that we explored in the previous two chapters. An analysis of these terms as used in this canto, in light of Dante’s sacramental poetics, can shed further light on the poetic context of the pilgrim’s statement to Bonagiunta, and thus aid in interpreting that key passage.

There is, however, one initial problem that must be resolved. At first glance, the preceding *terzina* appears to conflate the two terms *legno* and *pomo* to one and the same tree, contrary to the distinction that Adam and Dante make in Paradise. An examination of the other uses of *pomo/pome*\(^{322}\) throughout the *Comedy* can help to resolve this paradox. We can then explore the significance of these terms in relation to the statement addressed to Bonagiunta.

\(^{322}\) I shall forgo at this time an analysis of *legno*, for two reasons: it has been analyzed more than *pomo*, which has to the best of my knowledge never received an in-depth study; it also appears significantly more often in the *Comedy* than *pomo*, and so would require looking at an inordinate number of passages.
4.3.1 Non pomi v’eran: The (Lack of) Pomi in Heaven and Hell

There are only two uses of *pomo* in the *Inferno* (actually, both are in the plural *pomi*). The first occurs in Dante’s description of the forest of Suicides:

> Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;
> non rami schietti, ma nodosi e ‘nvolti;
> non pomi v’eran, ma stecchi con tòsco.\(^\text{323}\)

Dante-Poet here describes the fate of the Suicides themselves, being transformed into trees of a sort. The poet specifically highlights the fact that these are without *pomi*, just as they are without *fronda*. As we saw in our discussion of *Paradiso* XXVI, these two terms were used to describe the members of the *orto*, that is, the Mystical Body of Christ; their absence here suggests an hellish inversion of the Mystical Body.

A similar absence of *pomi*—this time metaphorical ones—is highlighted in the second use of the term in Hell:

> Lascio lo fele e vo per dolci pomi
> promessi a me per lo verace duca;
> ma ‘nfino al centro pria convien ch’i’ tomì.\(^\text{324}\)

In this statement to fellow Florentine Jacopo Rusticucci, Dante-Pilgrim refers to promises made by *lo verace duca*, that is, Virgil as his guide. Which promises are these? Singleton suggests that “‘dolci pomi’ corresponds to... the goal of the journey as

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\(^{323}\) *Inferno* 13.4-6.

\(^{324}\) *Inferno* 16.61-63.
promised by Virgil (Inf. I, 118-22). Virgil, at the beginning of the pilgrim’s journey, explained to him:

io sarò tua guida,  
e trarrotti di qui per loco eterno;  
ove udirai le disperate strida,  
vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti,  
ch’a la seconda morte ciascun grida;  
e vederai color che son contenti  
nel foco, perché speran di venire  
quando che sia a le beate genti.  
A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire,  
anima fia a ciò più di me degna:  
con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire…

Virgil makes three assertions to Dante: the Roman poet will lead him through Hell, then serve in the same capacity through Purgatory, and finally will leave him with Beatrice for his ascent to Heaven. These are indeed promises made to Dante, and so could be the pomi referred to in Inferno XVI; however, only two of them could be described as dolci, namely the journeys through Purgatory and Heaven. Hell is decidedly not dolce, and so is thereby excluded from the pomi, a fact supported by Dante-Pilgrim’s explanation that before he attains the pomi he must first (pria) pass through the center (il centro), i.e. Hell at the center of the world and universe. Thus, whether referring to literal pomi or metaphorical ones, Dante dissociates the term from Hell; each excludes the other.

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^325 Singleton Inferno 16.61-63.

^326 Inferno 1.113-123.
Nonetheless, by the simple mention of them in Hell, the *pomi* have something of a presence there. What is more, the kinds of “*pomi*” — apples and promises — both carry a signifying value that foreshadows what is to come. The apples function as a premonition (even by their absence) of the *pomo* who is Adam in *Paradiso* XXVI. The promises, for their part, are signs of the reality they promise. Thus, even in the *Inferno* appear *sacramenta tanta* of salvific realities that Dante-Pilgrim will later encounter.

In Paradise, there are also two occurrences of *pomo/e*, but one occurrence does not shed immediate light on the current discussion. This comes in *Paradiso* XVI:

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Quel de la Pressa sapeva già come
regger si vuole, e avea Galigaio
dorata in casa sua già l’elsa e ‘l pome.327
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Here *pome* means, not “apple,” but “pommel,” part of a sword-hilt. The only use in Paradise of the word *pome/pomo* for “apple” is the one we looked at in our chapter on Adam, where it refers to Adam. Adam, it will be remembered, was the true *pomo* “apple,” and the *legno* of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was a sign of him. The *legno* there was meant to be read, not eaten; Adam failed to read it and thereby come to a true knowledge of himself, choosing instead to eat it. In thus plucking the sign of himself from the *legno*, he effectively plucked himself from the *orto* of union with God. Here Adam was the *sacramentum et res*, signified by the *legno* (a *sacramentum tantum*) and in turn signifying and united to God (the *res tantum*).

327 *Paradiso* 16.100-102.
Thus, in the *Inferno* we find that *pomo/pome* refers exclusively to *sacramenta tanta*; in *Paradiso* XXVI, the word refers instead to a person, Adam, and specifically one who is *sacramentum et res*. If this shift in meaning is intentional, then in the *Purgatorio*’s occurrences of *pomo* we should expect to find some clue to Dante’s intention. In fact, there are no less than seven uses of the word, six of them clustered in Dante’s six-canto treatment of poetry. Three occur before the *pomo-legno* paradox in *Purgatorio* XXIV, and three after. Let us examine these two groups before returning to *Purgatorio* XXIV and resolving the paradox with an eye to interpreting the pilgrim’s poetic claim.

4.3.2 The First Three *Pomi* of Purgatory

When Dante-Pilgrim first enters the terrace of Gluttony, as when he enters every terrace, he hears *exempla* of the virtue opposed to the particular vice purged therein. He also sees a tree, and in describing it he uses the word *pomo*, for the first time since his reference in Hell to the *dolci pomi* promised to him:

Ma tosto ruppe le dolci ragioni
un alber che trovammo in mezza strada,
con pomi a odorar soavi e buoni...\(^{328}\)

Chi crederebbe che l’odor d’un pomo
si governasse, generando brama,
e quel d’un’acqua, non sappiendo come?\(^{329}\)

\(^{328}\) *Purgatorio* 22.130-132.

\(^{329}\) *Purgatorio* 23.34-36.
Di bere e di mangiar n’accende cura
l’odor ch’esce del pomo e de lo sprazzo
to che si distende su per sua verdura.\textsuperscript{330}

Thrice in two cantos, Dante-Poet describes this tree\textsuperscript{331} as a \textit{pomo} or as having \textit{pomi}; clearly the term is used carefully at this point. This tree, like the other,\textsuperscript{332} serves as part of the purgation of the gluttons: the souls fulfill their sentence as they hunger for the food denied them (and thirst for water that drips down onto the tree from above).

\textit{Are these the dolci pomi promessi} mentioned in the \textit{Inferno}? As Dante points out, these \textit{pomi} are most desirable: they are \textit{soavi e buoni, generando brama}, and \textit{di mangiar n’accendono cura}. Every mention of them highlights how \textit{dolci} they do in fact appear. In their desirability, however, they of course mirror another fruit: \textit{Vidit igitur mulier quod bonum esset lignum ad vescendum, et pulchrum oculis, aspectuque delectabile}.\textsuperscript{333} Eve, just before eating the forbidden fruit of Eden, observes just how

\textsuperscript{330} \textit{Purgatorio} 23.67-69.

\textsuperscript{331} Critics are divided over the nature of this first tree, not to be confused with the one Dante-Pilgrim will encounter later in canto XXIV as he leaves the terrace. Some argue that the first plant, like the second, is derived from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (most recently Leonardi \textit{Purgatorio} 22.131). I am inclined to side with the other significant party of critics, who interpret it as derived from the Tree of Life (for example, Hollander \textit{Purgatorio} 22.130-135; Scartazzini \textit{Purgatorio} 22.131). It may be noted that, whereas the tree derived from the Tree of Knowledge is associated with examples of vice, the first tree is associated with the terrace’s virtuous exempla, perhaps supporting the idea that it is derived from the Tree of Life.

\textsuperscript{332} Porena argues (\textit{Purgatorio} 24.116-117) that there are in fact more than two trees here. Scholarship remains divided on this point. For our purposes, however, it suffices that Dante-Poet draws a contrast between these two trees and only these two, whether there are others nearby or not.

\textsuperscript{333} \textit{Genesis} 3.6.
desirable the fruit is; she even does so in three separate phrases (*bonum ad vescendum, pulchrum oculis, aspectuque delectabile*), corresponding to the three *terzine* with which Dante describes his *pomi*. Dante-Pilgrim, like Eve, is focused on the appearance and desirability of the fruit, not their meaning. He is failing to read the *sacramenta tanta* as signs indicating the *sacramentum et res*, just as Adam failed to read in this way just before the Fall.

These *pomi*, like the fruit of Eden, are meant to be read, not eaten. As the souls of the gluttons hunger for the fruit denied them, their desire deepens; yet their deepened desire cannot just change in terms of quantity—it must also receive a new object. The souls are not merely denied fruit now so as to receive it later; rather, they are learning to distinguish between these *pomi* and the true *pomo* of Paradise, the *pomo* that they can become. Deprived of eating, they learn to read. This Dante-Pilgrim must learn, too.

### 4.3.3 *Vinto al pome*: At the Wall of Fire

After these three occurrences of *pomo* (and the fourth at the problematic passage in *Purgatorio* XXIV), there are no more until *Purgatorio* XXVII, when the word is used twice on either side of the wall of fire that marks the boundary between Purgatory proper and Eden. The first occurs when Virgil tries to persuade Dante to enter the flames; the Roman makes two attempts, but the pilgrim remains immobilized in fear.
Then Virgil plays his ace card: *Or vedi, figlio:/tra Bëatrice e te è questo muro.* Beatrice awaits! Suddenly Dante-Pilgrim overcomes his fear, at which point Dante-Poet draws attention to Virgil’s response:

> Ond’ ei crollò la fronte e disse: “Come! volenci star di qua?”; indi sorrise come al fanciul si fa ch’è vinto al pome.\(^{335}\)

Dante-Pilgrim, on the verge of entering Eden, is “conquered by an apple”—the very event that caused Adam’s expulsion *from* Eden.\(^{336}\) Yet Dante reverses the effect of Adam’s Fall. Adam, by his account in Paradise, was conquered by the *legno*; Dante-Pilgrim is conquered by the *pomo*. In the four previous occurrences, *pomo/pome* indicated something that did not have an obvious referent (a tree). We know, of course, that the trees have poetic significance; they are not, however, signs in their essence, as Beatrice’s name is. In this latter case, the “*pomo*” is now a name, an obvious *sacramentum tantum*, and one moreover that signifies a *sacramentum et res* (Beatrice), just as the *pomo* of Eden signified Adam. *Pomo/pome* does not yet refer to the *sacramentum et res* itself, as it will when Dante-Pilgrim meets Adam, but the sacramental nature of its signification has become more overt.

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\(^{334}\) *Purgatorio* 27.35-36.

\(^{335}\) *Purgatorio* 27.43-45.

\(^{336}\) Moevs 218.
This more “sacramental” use of *pomo/pome* coincides with Dante’s successful reading of it as a *sacramentum tantum*. That is, in reversing Adam’s conquest in the Fall, Dante-Pilgrim reverses the misreading of Adam that led to the Fall. As noted in the chapter analyzing Adam, the first man saw the *legno*-apple, the merely natural apple that served as a *sacramentum tantum* signifying Adam, but did not read it; he treated the sign as the reality, and chose the sign over the reality. His eating was a failure of reading. Dante, on the other hand, hears Beatrice’s name—a *sacramentum tantum* signifying a *sacramentum et res*—and follows it, intellectually and physically, towards the reality it signifies. Only thereby is he capable of crossing the fire, of entering into Eden, of finding—and becoming—the *sacramentum et res* and true *pomo*.

### 4.3.4 Quel dolce pome: Beyond the Wall of Fire

On the other side of the fire, Dante-Pilgrim rests from his journey and sleeps one last night. When he awakes, Virgil exhorts him to continue his journey, exciting his desire with the words:

> “Quel dolce pome che per tanti rami cercando va la cura de’ mortali, oggi porrà in pace le tue fami.”

Most commentators interpret the *pome* here as happiness in one form or another; such seems evident from the context, as well as from the echo of *dolci pomi promessi a me* in

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337 *Purgatorio* 27.115-117.
quel dolce pome. What exactly this happiness is, however, varies from interpretation to interpretation. So Jacopo della Lana, the Anonymus Lombardus, and the Anonimo Fiorentino all argue that the pome is Beatrice, who is also happiness (at least for Dante).³³⁸ (The Chiose cagliaritane³³⁹ argue that it is Beatrice, period.) Francesco da Buti³⁴⁰ takes it to be Jesus Christ and the heavenly host. A long line of critics³⁴¹ from the author of the l’Ottimo Commento (1333) to Tozer (1901) interpret the word as simply referring to celestial happiness, i.e. the Beatific Vision. In particular, Landino and Vellutello argue that, as a pome is the end for which a gardener works, so the beatitude of Heaven is the end for which humanity works. At the end of this dynasty, Trucchi


³⁴⁰ Francesco da Buti Purgatorio 27.109-123.

³⁴¹ L’Ottimo Commento Purgatorio 27.115; Benvenuto da Imola Purgatorio 27.115-123; Johannis de Serravalle Purgatorio 27.109-117; Landino Purgatorio 27.115-117; Vellutello Purgatorio 27.115-117; Gabriele Purgatorio 27.115-117; Daniello Purgatorio 27.115-117; Torquato Tasso Purgatorio 27.115; Venturi Purgatorio 27.115-116; Lombardi Purgatorio 27.115-117; Portierelli Purgatorio 27.115-117; Costa Purgatorio 27.115; Tommaseo Purgatorio 27.115-117; Andreoli Purgatorio 27.115-117; Bianchi Purgatorio 27.115-116; Campi Purgatorio 27.115-117; Hermann Oelsner Purgatorio 27.115; Tozer Purgatorio 27.115. See Bibliography for more information.
(1936) suggests that the *pome* could be either Beatrice or the vision of God, but is probably the latter.\textsuperscript{342}

It would seem then that Beatrice is the *pome*, since Dante-Pilgrim will indeed see her that day—the high point of the *Purgatorio*’s action. If the *pome* is Beatrice, however, then how can she, as *pome*, be said to be that which all men seek? The answer is simple if we understand her as *sacramentum et res*. All men seek the *res*; they do not all seek it *qua* united to Beatrice. She is the *sacramentum* in which Dante encounters the *res*; other men will encounter it in other *sacramenta*. (Or not encounter it, in some cases: the words are spoken by Virgil, who has no chance of so experiencing the *res*.

Virgil’s words suggest happiness; they do not, in and of themselves, suggest sacramentality, and quite possibly Virgil himself is unaware of such a possibility.) Dante-Pilgrim, however, experiences great desire at Virgil’s words\textsuperscript{343}—desire that, we know well from the rest of the poem, is a desire for Beatrice as well as for God. Or rather, as he will put it later, it is a desire for one of *le fronde onde s’infronda tutto l’orto/de l’ortolano eterno*—for Beatrice-in-God. The plural *dolci pomi promessi* of the *Inferno* have become one *dolce pome*. Two goods—Beatrice and the Beatific Vision—are found to be in fact one single good. Dante’s desire for Beatrice is desire for God.

\textsuperscript{342} Trucchi *Purgatorio* 27.115-120.

\textsuperscript{343} *Purgatorio* 27.118-123.
There is another school of thought on this verse, however. Starting towards the middle of the 19th century, an interpretation appears suggesting that the *pome* actually refers to earthly happiness, not the happiness of heaven.\(^{344}\) In particular, the comments of Casini and Barbi, Giacalone, and Fosca all argue that: Dante is arriving in the Earthly Paradise of Eden; Eden represents the natural happiness, perfect but inferior to that of Heaven, lost at the Fall; therefore the *pome* refers to this happiness that all men seek and can attain even without Christ. (Because “happiness” in the commentaries could now refer to either that of heaven or that of earth, it is not clear in some of the more recent commentaries\(^{345}\) which kind of happiness is understood.)

This view is also reconcilable with the others in terms of sacramental signification. The happiness of Eden, as seen from our analysis of *Paradiso* XXVI, is not merely a naturally perfect human condition; it is also a state of union with God, of being *sacramentum et res*. Thus it too lies in the continuity of happiness we have just seen.\(^{346}\)

\(^{344}\) Grandgent *Purgatorio* 27.115; Casini and Barbi *Purgatorio* 27.115; Scartazzini and Vandelli *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Grabher 27.115-117; Momigliano *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Porena *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Chimenz *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Giacalone *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Bosco and Reggio *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Leonardi *Purgatorio* 27.115; Fosca *Purgatorio* 27.115-117.

\(^{345}\) Longfellow *Purgatorio* 27.115; Poletto *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Torraca *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Mestica *Purgatorio* 27.115-117; Steiner *Purgatorio* 27.115; Pietrobono *Purgatorio* 27.115; Sapegno *Purgatorio* 27.115; Mattalia *Purgatorio* 27.115-116; Fallani *Purgatorio* 27.115-117. Singleton’s comment (*Purgatorio* 27.115) is also unclear in this regard, but elsewhere Singleton distinguishes between active happiness (perfected in Eden) and contemplative happiness (proper to Heaven): “The Goal at the Summit.” *Delta* (Naples) 11-12: 61-76. 63 et passim.

\(^{346}\) Contrary to the view of earthly happiness as understood by some critics, such a state is not attainable without Christ, the *sacramentum et res par excellence*; if it were, Virgil would be in Eden, not in Limbo.
The natural happiness of Eden is nothing other than being a *pome/pomo* like Adam prior to the Fall, different in degree but not in kind from Adam’s current condition in Paradise.

**4.3.5 Pomo and Melo: The Transfigured Tree of Knowledge**

We thus turn our attention to the final *pome* of the *Purgatorio*. In canto XXXII, deep within the garden of Eden, Dante follows Beatrice and the rest of the procession with her to a tree devoid of any leaves or fruit. During this time, Beatrice is standing in a cart drawn by a Griffon. When they reach the tree, the Griffon draws the cart to the tree and binds the two together, whereupon the tree breaks forth into new foliage. The company then sings a hymn so heavenly that Dante swoons. When he awakes, he compares himself to the apostles at Christ’s Transfiguration:

```
Quali a veder de’ fioretti del melo
che del suo pome li angeli fa ghiotti
e perpetüe nozze fa nel cielo,
Pietro e Giovanni e lacopo condotti
e vinti, ritornaro a la parola
da la qual furon maggior sonni rotti,
e videro scemata loro scuola
cosi di Moïsè come d’Elia,
e al maestro suo cangiata stola;
tal torna’ io, e vidi quella pia
sovra me starsi che conducitrice
fu de’ miei passi lungo ‘l fiume pria.347
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347 *Purgatorio* 32.73-84.
Here occurs the word *pome*, within the simile; its meaning would seem to be fairly straightforward, given that one may compare it to the original Transfiguration scene to elucidate the comparison Dante is trying to make.


Following this Gospel description (or one of the parallel texts), most commentators interpret Dante’s simile in a way resembling the following: the *melo* (“apple-tree”) is Christ; the *fioretti* are the foreshadowing of heavenly contemplation, the foretaste experienced at the Transfiguration; the *pome* is the heavenly contemplation of the Beatific Vision itself. 349


349 As in the comments to this passage by: the Anonymus Lombardus, Benvenuto da Imola, Francesco da Buti, Landino, Lombardi, Portirelli, Andreoli, Bianchi, Scartazzini, Campi, Poletto, Tozer, Torraca, Grandgent, Mestica, Steiner, del Lungo, Scartazzini and Vandelli, Grabher, Trucchi, Momigliano, Porena, Sapegno, Mattalia, Chimenz, Fallani, Singleton, Bosco and Reggio, Pasquini and Quaglio, Leonardi, della Lana, Pietro Alighieri (commentary of 1359-64), the Anonimo Fiorentino, Veillutello, Daniello, Casini and Barbi, Pietrobono, and Fosca. Tommaseo differs from the rest insofar as he considers the *fioretti* to be Christ’s miracles.
That the *fioretti*-foreshadowing precedes the *pome*-Beatific Vision, as many of the commentators note, seems difficult to disagree with. This reading has deeper implications, though. Dante-Pilgrim actually encounters the *pome* in *Paradiso* XXVI, in the person of Adam-*pomo*; since Adam is *sacramentum et res*, Dante’s vision of Adam (as noted in the relevant chapter) is a vision of God. This implies two things. First, there is a connection between this simile and *Paradiso* XXVI, and so our analysis of the latter may aid our understanding of the current text. Given that the *pome* of *Purgatorio* XXXII is equivalent to the *pomo* of *Paradiso* XXVI, we may infer that Dante implicitly presents in the earlier passage what he makes explicit in the later one: the *pome/pomo*, the glory of Christ in Heaven, consists of people. Not just any people, moreover, but those who are members of the Mystical Body, who are *sacramentum et res*. That the Beatific Vision thus presented consists of such a communion of persons is also suggested when Dante equates the *pome* with *le nozze* “the wedding.” As Tommaseo and others observe, this refers to the “wedding feast of the Lamb” described in the Apocalypse—the wedding, that is, of Christ to his Church, the Mystical Body. Moreover, in the same canto that depicted Adam-*pomo* attached to Christ, we also saw the metaphor of the *fronde* attached to the *orto*-Christ; this corresponds perfectly to the image of the *pome* and the

350 Tommaseo *Purgatorio* 32.73-75.

351 Apocalypse 19.7: *Gaudeamus, et exsultemus: et demus gloriam ei: quia venerunt nuptiae Agni, et uxor ejus praeparavit se.* Tommaseo’s comment to line 75 cites this verse as the ninth of the chapter, not the seventh.
melo-Christ. Both the melo and the orto signify Christ, both the pome and the fronde signify those united to him.

The second implication is that, just as Dante-Pilgrim encounters the pome/pomo within the literal narrative of the poem, it seems likely that he also encounters the fioretti within the narrative, and not just within the simile. In other words, the pilgrim must encounter fioretti that function as a prefigurement of his encounter with Adam-pomo in Paradiso XXVI, a Transfiguration-like foretaste of Heaven. The most natural candidate for this prefigurement is likely the transfiguration experience that Dante-Pilgrim undergoes just before his allusion to the Gospel’s Transfiguration—that is, witnessing the transformation of the Tree of Knowledge that occurs when the Griffon attaches the Cart to the Tree. The Apostles in the Gospel perceive a supernatural transformation (the Transfiguration) of something apparently ordinary but really extraordinary (the pre-Resurrection Christ) as a foretaste of heavenly glory (the Beatific Vision). Likewise, Dante-Pilgrim perceives a supernatural transformation (the renewal) of something apparently ordinary but really extraordinary (the Tree of Knowledge) as a

352 See Jeffrey Schnapp. The Transfiguration of History at the Center of Dante’s Paradise. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. 110, 114. Schnapp makes the connection between the Transfiguration, Purgatorio 32 and Paradiso 26 ahead of me, but does not go into as much detail on the connection with the latter canto; he rather focuses on the link between the others and Paradiso 14. Similarities between Purgatorio 32 and Paradiso 26 (some of which also occur in Paradiso 14) include: the presence of or allusion to the same three apostles as those present at the Transfiguration, a vision of the Church-qua-Mystical Body of Christ, the loss and restoration of the pilgrim’s sight, and the hearing of a hymn (cf. Schnapp 115-116).
foretaste of heavenly glory (the encounter with Adam/the Mystical Body). The *legno* of Eden, in other words, is a symbol of Christ,353 the *melo*.

We are now in a position to interpret the Transfiguration of the Tree. Christ is symbolized by the *orto*, the *melo*, and the *legno*; the members of his Mystical Body are symbolized by the *fronde*, the *pome*, and the *ramora* of the Tree of Knowledge. Thus the Tree of the Fall and its branches paradoxically symbolize the Church, the Mystical Body, Christ who is *sacramentum et res* by nature and those (the *pome*) who are *sacramentum et res* by participation in him. The transformation of the Tree represents the transformation of human beings into this condition of participation, their glorified state in the Mystical Body that is perfected in Heaven—*trasumanar*. The transfiguration of the tree represents the transhumanization of the “*pome*” of the Church—including Dante himself.

4.3.6 Objections: Interpreting the Tree and Cart

At this point, classical Dante scholarship may raise several objections. Many scholars, who hold that the Tree is something else, will object that this conflicts with more traditional readings of the Tree. Furthermore, one might ask how the tree can be the Church: after all, the cart that the griffon binds to it is almost universally recognized

353 One should distinction here between two kinds of symbols used in the *Comedy*. One kind is literal in the poem and has meaning to the reader (Beatrice, for example); the other has an overt symbolic function within the literal narrative (i.e., to the pilgrim, not just to the poet). I am using symbol in this second sense while speaking of the Tree, the Cart, and the other elements in this scene.
as representing the Church—how can the animal bind the Church to itself? What could this mean? Finally, how can the tree be Christ, when many scholars take the griffon to be Christ’s representative in the scene? Or in what sense can Christ be said to innovarsi? Why would Christ need to be renewed?

Let us start by examining the previous interpretations of the Purgatorio XXXII legno. Most scholars\(^\text{354}\) agree that, on a literal level, the legno is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil mentioned in the Book of Genesis,\(^\text{355}\) from which Adam and Eve ate and thereby sinned. (Only a handful of early comments, including della Lana’s,\(^\text{356}\) the Anonymus Lombardus’,\(^\text{357}\) the Anonimo Fiorentino’s,\(^\text{358}\) and the Chiose cagliaritane,\(^\text{359}\) argue that the legno is in fact the Tree of Life.) In support of this interpretation, it may be noted that there are other allusions to the Fall in this passage—more specifically, references that reverse that unhappy event. At lines 31-32, Dante observes that l’alta selva [è] vòta,/colpa di quella ch’al serpente crese. The Fall of Eve is thus noted—only to be reversed moments later:

\(^{354}\) Including: Benvenuto da Imola Purgatorio 32.37-39; Francesco da Buti Purgatorio 32.28-42; Johannis de Serravalle Purgatorio 32.37-42; Portirelli Purgatorio 32.34-51; Poletto Purgatorio 32.37-39; Torraca Purgatorio 32.37-39; del Lungo Purgatorio 32.37-39; Oelsner Purgatorio 32.38; additionally, nearly all of the other critics cited in this section.

\(^{355}\) Genesis 2.9, 17; 3.

\(^{356}\) Della Lana Purgatorio 32.38-42.

\(^{357}\) Anonymus Lombardus Purgatorio 32.38-39.

\(^{358}\) Anonimo Fiorentino Purgatorio 32.37-39.

\(^{359}\) Chiose cagliaritane Purgatorio 32.37.
Forse in tre voli tanto spazio prese
disfrenata saetta, quanto eramo
rimossi, quando Bëatrice scese.\(^{360}\)

As Fosca\(^{361}\) points out, this indicates humility on Beatrice’s part. We might further observe that Mary, in her humble acquiescence to the divine will, was traditionally seen as reversing Eve’s sin.\(^{362}\) Thus Beatrice in her humble act at the Tree reenacts the role of Mary: she symbolically “undoes” Eve’s sin. Shortly thereafter a similar reversal occurs of Adam’s sin. The company with Beatrice approaches the legno:

\[
\text{Io senti’ mormorare a tutti “Adamo”;}
\text{poi cerchiaro una pianta dispogliata}
\text{di foglie e d’altra fronda in ciascun ramo.}\(^{363}\)
\]

Here Adam’s sin is recalled at the exact point where it occurred. This recollection contextualizes the event that follows:

\[
\text{E [il grifon] vòlto al temo ch’elli avea tirato,}
\text{trasselo al piè de la vedova frasca,}
\text{e quel di lei a lei lasciò legato.}\(^{364}\)
\]

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\(^{360}\) *Purgatorio* 32.34-36. Notice that crese is rhymed with scese, thus aligning (antithetically) the acts of both Eve and Beatrice.

\(^{361}\) Fosca *Purgatorio* 32.31-36. Cf. also Scartazzini *Purgatorio* 32.36.

\(^{362}\) Dante-Poet contrasts Mary’s humility in *Purgatorio* 10.34-45 with the pride of the figiuoli d’Eva (and implicitly of Eve herself) at *Purgatorio* 12.70-72. The first occurs in the positive exempla of humility on the Terrace of Pride; the second comes amidst the negative examples in the same place; cf. also *Paradiso* 29.34 and *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.4.2 for other references to Eve’s arrogance. That Mary reversed Eve’s sin is stated explicitly in *Paradiso* 32.4-6: La piaga che Maria richiuse e unse,/quella ch’è tanto bella da’ suoi piedi/è colei che l’aperse e che la punse.

\(^{363}\) *Purgatorio* 32.37-39.

\(^{364}\) *Purgatorio* 32.49-51.
The Griffon attaches the cart to the Tree. The phrase *quel di lei* is usually taken to mean that the Cart was derived from the wood of the tree, much like the Cross derived from the Tree of Knowledge according to legend. Another possibility, not incompatible with the first, is that the Cart represents or is analogous to the apple that Adam plucked. Both the Cart and the apple have their origin in a *legno*; later the Cart, too, will be torn away from the *legno* in a new version of the Fall. Here the linking of the Cart to the *legno* can be seen as reversing Adam’s sin in plucking the apple from the *legno*. If the Griffon is taken to represent Christ, a common though not universal interpretation, then the meaning of this act can further be understood as Christ reversing the Fall of Adam. All of these similarities may be taken to indicate either that this *legno* is the Tree of Knowledge, or that it represents or parallels it; given that Dante situates it within the literal garden of Eden, it seems more likely that this *legno* should be understood as the Tree of Knowledge itself.

A greater variety of opinions exists as to the *legno*’s allegorical meaning. While nearly all commentators acknowledge some symbolism of justice or law in the Tree, there the similarity ends. One school argues that the tree represents some natural good, proper to a perfected human condition of the sort consistent with Eden but not with

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365 Francesco da Buti (*Purgatorio* 32.43-51) is among the earliest references to this story. More recently, Pietrobono (*Purgatorio* 32.37-39), Torraca (*Purgatorio* 32.37-39), and Leonardi (*Purgatorio* 32.38) all refer to it and cite Mussafia *Sulla leggenda del legno della croce*.

366 *Purgatorio* 32.158.
Heaven. So Andreoli identifies the Tree as “La Morale,” and Grabher as natural law. Mattalia equates it with the wisdom necessary for natural perfection but not for salvation. Trucchi suggests that “l’unità della famiglia umana fu spezzata, e la pianta rimase dispogliata.” Despite the negative connotations surrounding the Tree on account of the Fall, these critics also emphasize the positive aspects of the Tree. We are implicitly reminded that the Tree itself was good, created directly by God. Therefore, the Tree is capable of a significance beyond the Fall.

Another school claims that the Tree represents a supernatural good. Francesco da Buti argues that the Tree indicates divine grace. More recently, Nardi argues,

La pianta altissima dell’Eden... significa in senso morale la “giustizia di Dio,” cioè la “rectitudo voluntatis propter se servata,” la quale ha il suo primo fondamento nel volere divino. ... Ora questa pianta fu “dispogliata di foglie e d’altra fronda in ciascun ramo” per la colpa del primo uomo, che disobbedendo a Dio offese la giustizia; ma s’innovò e rinverdì per la redenzione del Cristo, ossia quando il Grifone legò ad essa il timone del simbolico carro.

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367 Andreoli Purgatorio 32.38.
368 Grabher Purgatorio 32.37-42.
369 Mattalia Purgatorio 32.38.
371 Francesco da Buti Purgatorio 32.43-51.
In this view, Nardi has been followed by Sapegno\textsuperscript{373} and Steiner\textsuperscript{374}. Scartazzini also cites (without siding with) two critics\textsuperscript{375} who see in the Tree a symbol of the Church. This Tree-\textit{qua-}Church position, though far from widely held, unites some of the strengths of the other previously mentioned positions. Since the Church is the fruit of Christ’s salvation, this view fits the previous analysis that the events at the Tree represent the reversal of Adam’s sin through Christ’s salvific work. Since the Church is also the vehicle of God’s justice and salvation, this interpretation also subsumes the “natural good” and “divine grace” schools of interpretation. Only two major views seem more difficult to harmonize with the Tree-\textit{qua-}Church: that the Tree is more likely to represent the Empire, and that the Church is represented instead by the Griffon’s Cart.

That the \textit{legno} represents Empire—that is, the Roman Empire and later the Holy Roman Empire—was until recently a very contested interpretation. Arguing for the Tree-\textit{qua-}Empire, Carroll\textsuperscript{376}, Tommaseo\textsuperscript{377}, and Pasquini and Quaglio\textsuperscript{378} point out that tall trees are used in the biblical books of Ezekiel and Daniel\textsuperscript{379} to represent the empires of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{373} Sapegno \textit{Purgatorio} 32.38-39.
\item \textsuperscript{374} Steiner \textit{Purgatorio} 32.38-39.
\item \textsuperscript{375} Scartazzini \textit{Purgatorio} 32.38. I have been unable to confirm these citations, inasmuch as one is in German (which I don’t read) and the other appears inadequately documented.
\item \textsuperscript{376} Carroll \textit{Purgatorio} 32.34-42.
\item \textsuperscript{377} Tommaseo \textit{Purgatorio} 32.37-39.
\item \textsuperscript{378} Pasquini and Quaglio \textit{Purgatorio} 32.38.
\item \textsuperscript{379} Ezekiel 31; Daniel 4.
\end{itemize}
Assyria and Babylon. Scartazzini\textsuperscript{380} and Tozer\textsuperscript{381} also defend the Empire interpretation, and more recently Armour’s *Dante’s Griffin and the History of the World*\textsuperscript{382} argues in-depth for this position.

Arguing against the Tree-qua-Empire are Chimenz,\textsuperscript{383} Singleton,\textsuperscript{384} and most recently Fosca\textsuperscript{385} and Pertile. Pertile’s book *La puttana e il gigante* explores the question as part of its detailed analysis of Dante’s Eden in light of the biblical Song of Songs, a subtext underlying much of the action in this part of the *Comedy*. Pertile develops an extensive response to Armour\textsuperscript{386} (among others) that the Tree is not the Empire.

Analyzing how medieval biblical exegetes interpreted the palm tree in the Song of Songs (on which Dante’s *legno* seems to be based), he states:

\textsuperscript{380} Scartazzini *Purgatorio* 32.36 et passim.

\textsuperscript{381} Tozer *Purgatorio* 32.37-39.


\textsuperscript{383} Chimenz *Purgatorio* 32.38-39. The primary argument given by Chimenz, Singleton and Fosca (see next two notes for references) is that later in this canto an eagle will attack the tree, and this eagle is generally recognized as being the symbol of the empire. It would make little sense to have the empire attacking itself in this image. As Bosco and Reggio (*Purgatorio* 32.37-39) point out, however, “Ciò non toglie che il simbolo della giustizia divina non contenga in sé anche il concetto che essa trovi la sua attuazione sulla terra nella Monarchia universale. Ciò che è contraddittorio, come s’è detto, è il farne senz’altro il simbolo dell’Impero.” In other words, two separate interpretations—divine justice and earthly imperial justice—could coexist in the same image.

\textsuperscript{384} Singleton *Purgatorio* 32.37-39.

\textsuperscript{385} Fosca *Purgatorio* 32.37-39.

\textsuperscript{386} Of note are Pertile’s responses to two of Armour’s key arguments: contrary to Armour’s assertion (*Armour Dante’s Griffin* 15-45), Pertile documents that the griffon was not always a negative symbol in Dante’s time (Pertile 145-7); Pertile also argues that *il seme d’ogne giusto* (*Purgatorio* 32.48) refers to a person (every just man) not justice in the abstract (Pertile 157-162), as Armour takes it (*Armour* 202). The reader is referred to both texts for more on this subject.
Così la palma è non solo la Chiesa, l’anima, Maria, il giusto, tutti significati afferenti alla Sposa [in the Song of Songs]; ma anche Cristo e la croce, che afferiscono allo Sposo. In questo accavallarsi di significati l’esegesi non vedeva nulla di contraddittorio o eccessivo, perché tutto quanto si trova nella Scrittura può riferirsi ugualmente sia a Cristo e alla croce, che al “corpo” di lui, la Chiesa.  

Emphasizing the polyvalence of this image to biblical commentators, he adds:

Qui si tocca con mano, e in tutte le sue apparenti contraddizioni logiche, la straordinaria adattabilità e polivalenza dell’albero della Scrittura: che è insieme albero della conoscenza e albero della vita, ma anche albero della prevaricazione, della maledizione e della morte; albero della croce e della resurrezione, e della trasgressione e dell’obbedienza alla legge; albero della natura umana prima florido, poi spoglio, poi restaurato al suo primitivo rigoglio; albero della Sinagoga e dell’antica legge, e albero della Chiesa e del vangelo.

There is thus a rich polysemeity to the image which served as Dante’s source. Pertile argues that this tradition of interpretation carries over into Dante’s Tree, a conclusion that seems likely enough given Dante’s professed interest in polysema, and he concludes that Dante has united the biblical image with its exegetical tradition so well that “testo sacro a glossa fanno tutt’uno.” To date, no one seems to have responded to Pertile’s critique of the Tree-qua-Empire position. (Incidentally, Pertile asks why


387 Pertile La puttana 182.
388 Ibid. 185.
389 Ibid. 188.
390 Pertile “L’albero che non esiste” 167.
Dante seems to make the legno of canto XXXII a palm tree instead of an apple tree, given that Adam is traditionally depicted as eating an apple. According to our analysis earlier, however, Dante’s tree is a melo, an apple tree. Poetically, therefore, the legno is at once a palm tree and an apple tree, which resolves Pertile’s paradox.

What Pertile observes about the polysemeity of the image of the palm tree in the Song of Songs applies equally well to Dante’s legno. There is “nothing contradictory” in all of these meanings inhering in the one image because of the unity between Christ (and his Cross) and his Church, his Mystical Body (cf. first of the two quotes immediately above). What is predicated of the former can often be predicated of the latter, so closely are they united. Pertile does not expand on this point, but it seems clear that it is precisely this unity—the crucial sacramentum et res of sacramental signification— that permits the coherence of the legno’s multiplicity of meanings.

Yet if the Tree is taken as the Mystical Body of Christ, what are we to make of the Cart-qua-Church, part of the usual interpretation given this passage? Is there a contradiction between these two interpretations? This problem disappears if we make a distinction between the Mystical Body as a whole and the visible Church Militant on

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391 To clarify a potential point of confusion: I have been arguing that, for Dante, the union of God and Man (and therefore the Mystical Body of Christ) is the sacramentum et res term in the signification equation, and that God in himself is the res tantum. This is analogous to, but not exactly the same as, the sacramental signification of medieval Eucharistic theology, in which the Mystical Body would be the res tantum represented by the Eucharistic sacramentum et res. Because Dante presents Man as (potentially) sacramental, Man takes the place of the Eucharist in this version of sacramental signification. Of course, there is no contradiction between the two ideas, merely a (potentially confusing) difference in terminology.
Earth; if the Tree represents the Church in the former sense, the Cart is the Church in the latter sense. So it is that the Cart, not the Tree, is symbolically corrupted by the Donation of Constantine and dragged off to Avignon. Both of these historical events disrupted the visible, structured Church, but cannot be said to have so affected the Mystical Body as a whole, especially as it exists in Purgatory and Paradise.

Finally, if the Tree-qua-Mystical Body is also a Tree-qua-Christ, what are we to make of the usual interpretation of the Griffon-qua-Christ? Again the problem may be avoided if we make a distinction: if the Griffon is Christ in the latter’s accomplishment of the act of redemption—the Incarnation and Crucifixion—then the Griffon represents Christ incarnate in his natural body; the Tree, for its part, represents Christ as the head of the Mystical Body. The difficulty thus resolved, we can also see how Christ can be said to innovarsi: the renewal of the Tree represents the recovery of souls who may participate in Christ’s divinity in a way analogous to that of the leaves participating in the life of the Tree.393

392 Purgatorio 32.124-126, 158-160.

393 Pertile argues, quite convincingly, that the yoking of the Cart to the Tree and the latter’s subsequent refloowering represent the extending of grace to the gentiles. I think that this is part of the image’s interpretation; as noted earlier, I would add that the refloowering can be seen as occurring in an extended sense any time Transfiguration (i.e., trasumanar) takes place.
4.4 Conclusion

In light of this analysis, the pattern we began looking at in Dante’s use of the word *pomo/pome*, especially in relation to *legno*, can thus be seen to hold. Up to the Wall of Fire in *Purgatorio* XXVII, *pomo/pome* only refers to *sacramenta tanta*. After the Wall of Fire, the last three uses of the word in the *Comedy* refer to people: Beatrice in canto XXVII, the Mystical Body in canto XXXII, and Adam in *Paradiso* XXVI. Not just any people, moreover: they are all *sacramentum et res* by participation.

Such a progression depicts a development of signs; the most obvious reason for such a progression would be as an image of the pilgrim’s own development in terms of his understanding of signification. The absence of *pomi* in Hell suggests the pilgrim’s lack of poetic development; their misunderstood nature in Purgatory indicates an imperfect poetic understanding; finally, the *pomi* as *sacramentum et res* from the far side of the Wall of Fire to the end of Paradise represent the discovery of the sacramental poetic.

Returning to the dilemma of the *legno-pomo* in *Purgatorio* XXIV, we find the paradox resolvable in the following manner. Up until this point, Dante-Pilgrim has had a poetic, but it is imperfect—i.e., signifying, but not participatory. When the mysterious voice near the *legno* in *Purgatorio* XXIV warns Dante-Pilgrim away from the tree—

> “Trapassate oltre sanza farvi presso: legno è più sù che fu morso da Eva, e questa pianta si levò da esso.”

394 *Purgatorio* 24.115-117.
—it is warning him against committing the same mistake as Adam and Eve. Like the first couple, Dante is in danger of confusing the *sacramentum tantum* of the *legno* with the *sacramentum et res* of the *pomo* (which the *legno* represents and so resembles—*parve un altro pomo*, as the poet says); he thus runs the risk of failing to read the *sacramentum tantum* and come to understand himself as *sacramentum et res*. In other words, he is not yet aware that he himself may be a sign.

Therein appears the defect in the pilgrim’s poetic declaration. Adam’s failure, insofar as he did not recognize the *sacramentum tantum* as a sign of himself as *sacramentum et res*, is also the pilgrim’s failure in his poetic statement, which depicts him as writing signs (*sacrenta tanta*) but not as becoming a sign (*sacramentum et res*). The pilgrim makes signs as Love dictates, but gives no indication that he is aware of his own signification. Yet the pilgrim’s poetic claim is good as far as it goes; clearly it makes a deep impression on Bonagiunta, who admires how the pilgrim’s *penne/di retro al dittator sen vanno strette.* So, too, has it impressed generations of Dante commentators, especially that apparent majority who view it as the poet’s own poetic profession. Nor is this opinion far wrong: the pilgrim’s poetics are almost sacramental—only a short distance, that which lies between the Gluttons and the Wall of Fire, will accomplish their sacramentalization. Yet this distance is also critical—so critical that, as

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395 *Purgatorio* 24.103-4, quoted earlier: “...parvermi i rami grandid e vivaci/ d’un altro pomo....”

396 *Purgatorio* 24.58-59.
critics like Pertile observe, without it Dante might as well have remained in the *selva oscura* of *Inferno* I. While following close behind the Dictator does seem a good thing, there is in fact one thing infinitely superior: being united to the Dictator himself, as Dante-Pilgrim discovers at the end. From the *pomi* (plural) of the *Inferno*, Dante must move to the *pomo* (singular) of the *Paradiso*, the sign of his own movement from separation to union with God.
CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

5.1 Writing like God, with God, as God

At the outset of this analysis, we undertook to answer the following question with respect to the Comedy: How can one write like God—that is, employ signs to effect a conversion of heart? More precisely, how can Dante present himself as writing like God? According Singleton, “A poet has not God’s power and may not presume to write as He can. But he may imitate God’s way of writing.” In reexamining this claim, we focused on three figures who exemplify key moments in Dante’s moral-poetic development: Adam, Ulysses, and Dante himself (in the poet-pilgrim duality of his self-presentation). Adam we saw appear in three different guises: fallen Adam, clothed in fig leaves after eating the forbidden fruit; forgiven Adam, clothed in animal skins, sinful but contrite; glorified Adam, released from Limbo after the Crucifixion and now shining in Paradise. We saw these three stages in Adam’s life as equivalent to Dante’s development, moving from sinner to penitent to united with God. Ulysses, in turn, was

397 Singleton Elements 15.
recognized as a “failed Adam,” sinful and unrepentant, unforgiven—a figure of what Dante-Pilgrim could have been. Fallen Adam/Ulysses marks Dante’s starting point; glorified Adam marks his end.

Or put more precisely, Adam united to God serves as an image of what Dante-Pilgrim will be once he reaches his end; that is different, of course, from serving as that end itself. Indeed, Dante’s true end is also Adam’s end—and Ulysses’ end (though he failed to achieve it). For underlying the relationships between these three figures is a fourth figure, that of Christ—their telos. Dante-Pilgrim is initially like Ulysses inasmuch as he is unlike Christ, and fails to participate in the latter; yet the pilgrim is also different from Ulysses (and akin to fallen Adam) in his capacity to repent and to participate in Christ’s divinity. Later on, when he encounters glorified Adam, Dante-Pilgrim is almost in the same condition as Adam—participating fully in Christ. But not quite. That final degree of perfect participation the pilgrim only occurs in the final moments of the poem.

Dante-Pilgrim’s encounter with Christ at the end of the poem runs as follows. As Dante gazes on God, he sees the Trinity in the form of three colored circles. He then focuses on the second circle, the one poetically signifying Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity:

Quella circulazion che sì concetta pareva in te come lume reflesso, da lì occhi miei alquanto circunspetta, dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso, mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
per che ‘l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.
Qual è ‘l geomètra che tutto s’affige
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
pensando, quel principio ond’ elli indige,
tal era io a quella vista nova:
veder voleva come si convenne
l’imago al cerchio e come vi s’indova;
ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
A l’alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio disio e ‘l velle,
si come rota ch’igualmente è mossa,
l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle. 398

The pilgrim’s final act in the *Comedy* is to attempt to understand how a limited human
nature can be conjoined to the infinite divine nature (come si convenne/l’imago [human
nature] al cerchio [divine nature] e come vi s’indova). This problem399 is the focus of the
whole poem; the entire *Comedy* leads toward this moment. Since human powers are
insufficient to grasp the mystery of the Incarnation, however, Dante-Pilgrim must
receive divine assistance, and once he does he finds himself at the attainment of his
telos—he has reached perfection. He is now mosso perfectly by God, perfectly at one
with the divine will, perfectly transhumanized.

This final step that precedes his ultimate perfection is thus the contemplation of
Christ, and specifically Christ as the Incarnation, as the union of divinity and humanity,

398 *Paradiso* 33.127-145.

399 According to Carroll *Paradiso* 33.127-141, this is actually two problems: “how human nature
could be commensurate with the Divine,” and “the mode of the union of the two natures.”
as the ultimate res and its sacramentum. Just as Dante-Pilgrim’s journey thus far has been accomplished (in part) by contemplation of God in Beatrice, Adam, Bernard, Mary, and other men and woman who are sacramentum et res by participation, so now the last degree of perfection is accomplished through contemplating that which is sacramentum et res by nature. Since Dante-Pilgrim’s perfection is a participation in Christ, he too is now sacramentum et res by participation in the fullest sense.

His moral-poetic transformation is thus complete. On the moral side, his union to God is the highest degree of perfection possible for a human; on the poetic side, he is the most perfect sign of God that he can be. He has, in fact, reached the perfect poetics we saw foreshadowed in the pilgrim’s encounters with Adam and with Bonagiunta. In our analysis of Adam, we saw that the first man’s three stages—fallen, forgiven, and glorified—corresponded to three poetics. Fallen Adam corresponds to a fallen poetic practice: sinful, incapable of divinely signifying because not united to God, symbolized by the leaves separated from the tree that gives them life. Forgiven Adam is equivalent to a poetics capable of signifying truth, but only by simultaneously veiling it; the animal moving under its covering served as Dante’s image for a poetic that can only transmit truth in a mediated way. Glorified Adam, finally, reveals a poetics that reveals the truth directly, like the light shining from Adam in Paradise.

Dante-Pilgrim can be said to have passed through these poetic stages, just as he has passed through the equivalent moral stages. We have already seen his parallel to Ulysses in Inferno I:
He started out “shipwrecked” like Ulysses (read: fallen Adam), guilty of sin and thus incapable of divine signification. Midway through his journey, however, he has developed to the point that he can make his poetic claim to Bonagiunta:

\[
\text{I’ mi son un che, quando} \\
\text{Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo} \\
\text{ch’è’ ditta dentro vo significando.}^{401}
\]

As we saw in the last chapter, this poetic is “on the right track,” though not yet complete. One should be cautious of making too close a parallel between the “forgiven” poetic and the pilgrim’s poetic statement to Bonagiunta; however, since both are examples of poetics that are good but imperfect, there is a certain similarity that aligns the forgiven but not yet perfected Dante with the forgiven but not yet glorified Adam. Finally, in the passage from Paradiso XXXIII we just analyzed, the pilgrim attains a “glorified” poetics, directly participating in the Truth. Now his penne do not just di retro al dittator sen vanno strette, as Bonagiunta said; rather, since le proprie penne are insufficient of themselves to raise themselves up (also like the fronda in Paradiso XXVI),

\[^{400}\text{Inferno 1.22-27.}\]
\[^{401}\text{Purgatorio 24.52-54.}\]
God himself moves them in perfect union with himself. Dante is not just following the *dittator*—he is united to him, at one with him.

The journey ended, the poem now begins, so to speak. That is, since the pilgrim has completed his journey, he is now the poet capable of writing the poem. As *sacramentum et res*, his *Comedy* is a *sacramentum tantum*, Dante’s sacrament/divine sign. His words (so he claims) are God’s words. One can indeed, it appears, write like God, the *res tantum*—when writing with God, as God.

5.2 The Significance of the *Comedy* as Sacramental Sign

The ramifications of this line of analysis are twofold. With respect to the discussion on the nature of Dante’s poetics, we can now take the poet’s claims to divine inspiration more seriously, even as we acknowledge their poetic, fictive, nature. In other words, we need not disagree with Singleton’s adage, that “the fiction of the Divine *Comedy* is that it is not a fiction”\(^402\); yet we can now better understand how such a claim can be believable within the context of the *Comedy*.

On the one hand, this study reaffirms what we already knew about Dante’s *capolavoro*. First, the literal level of the poem is important, not something to be discarded when a disembodied or disincarnate “deeper” meaning has been decoded. Second, Dante’s poetic claims of divine inspiration play a key role in the accomplishing

\(^{402}\) Singleton *Elements* 62.
of his poetic aims, namely the conversion and divinization of his reader. In the context of modern Dante scholarship, these claims are almost so obvious as to need no elaboration. On the other hand, our study adds new relief to certain details of the aforesaid claims.

In the first place, Dante’s claim to divine inspiration can be seen as plausible—if highly unusual and creative—within the religious paradigms of his culture. It is not merely a haughty and hubristic boast, a transgression along the lines of Ulysses as some scholars argue. Nor, at least within the fiction of the poem, is it merely an imitation of God’s writing as other scholars suggest. The conversion that the poem describes on its literal level, the divinization of Dante-Pilgrim, is the same kind of conversion to be effected in the reader; thus, the conversion signified is the conversion effected by the sign. The poem thus meets Hugh of St. Victor’s definition of a sacrament: a sign that effects what it signifies.⁴⁰³ In an age when the understanding of sacramentum was much more in flux than it is today, when the “seven sacraments” were a new idea and “sacrament” could easily apply to many other things, to call the Comedy a “sacrament” would not be impossible. Certainly it would not be heretical. Even today, when the Church distinguishes much more finely between the seven “sacraments” proper and other “sacramentals,” the latter term can still be applied to the Comedy without

⁴⁰³ Colish 1.60.
theological difficulty. It is indeed, to slightly adapt Aquinas’ definition of a sacrament, a sign of a sacred reality, intended to sanctify humans. ⁴⁰⁴

From here we can see the other important consequence of this analysis. With respect to the conversation on the presence of the liturgy and the sacraments in the Comedy, the influence of these rituals on the poem can be seen to extend to Dante’s poetics as a whole, not just to particular images and/or allusions as has been assumed heretofore. Rather, as seen from our study of passages from all three cantiche, sacramentality provides an integrative framework for interpreting the entire poem. The presence of the liturgy in the poem thus would seem to be more extensive and pervasive than previously realized. Until now, there have been almost no book-length studies of liturgy in the Comedy; the sole exception is James Fiaratone’s superb From ‘Selva Oscura’ to ‘Divina Foresta’: Liturgical Song as Path to Paradise in Dante’s Commedia, which focuses on moments of liturgical music in the poem. Moreover, as indicated in the introduction to our present analysis, sacramentality in the Comedy has been dealt with only piecemeal, never analyzed in detail across the entire poem.

The Comedy merits a deeper look into these matters. To paraphrase Singleton, it may well be, at least within the poem’s fiction, that the significance of the Divine Comedy is that it does not merely signify.

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⁴⁰⁴ Aquinas 3a.60.2.
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