Statius: “Per te poeta fui”

There is no episode that dramatizes the tensions of Vergil’s predicament more fully than that of Statius, the Silver Latin poet who appears to the travelers as a newly liberated soul at the beginning of Purgatorio XXI. There are, moreover, few issues that have puzzled scholars more than that of Statius’ Christianity: “many wonder why our very Christian poet places Statius, a non-Christian, here,” says Benvenuto, who offers the explanation that “the poet could conjure conjecture from many signs—

ex multis indicis—that Statius was a Christian.”

Benvenuto’s indicia include the fact that Statius witnessed the persecution of the martyrs, along with their miracles (and, the argument goes, if Vergil who lived before Christ sensed something about Him from the songs of the Sibyl, how much more would Statius have felt, living in the time of Domitian); he further adduces a line from the Thebaid, and the fact that Statius was “honestissimus et moralissimus in omnibus suis dictis.” The pattern that Benvenuto establishes has prevailed into our century, with critics either pointing to the propitious climate in which Statius lived, or, more frequently, searching the Thebaid for passages that Dante may have construed as witnesses to his latent Christianity. Some, but not all, follow Benvenuto’s analysis to its

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right wheel of Beatrice’s chariot in the Earthly Paradise: “Quelle tre donne li fur per battesmo / che tu vedesti da la destra rota” (“Those three ladies stood for his baptism whom you saw by the right wheel” [Par. XX, 127-128]). This reference is designed to take us back mentally to the allegorical procession in the Earthly Paradise, to the place where “Tre donne in giro da la destra rota / venian danzando” (“Three ladies around the right wheel came dancing” [Purg. XXIX, 121-122]). At this point in Purgatorio XXIX, the virtues dance about the empty chariot awaiting Beatrice’s arrival; somewhat earlier in the same canto, we see Vergil for the last time, as the pilgrim, awed by the marching candelabras, turns to his guide: “Io mi rivolsi d’amarzation pieno / al buon Virgilio” (“I turned around full of amazement to the good Vergil” [55-56]). But Vergil, no longer duca or maestro, has no advice or comment to offer, since his amazement is as great as the pilgrim’s: “ed esso mi rispuose / con vista cara di stupor non meno” (“and he looked back at me with a face laden with no less wonder” [56-57]). The evocation of the purgatorial procession in the heaven of justice thus establishes a last Vergilian paradox: Vergil is a sage, and Ripheus is not, but Vergil’s ignorance—his stupor—stands in eternal contrast to Ripheus’ grace-given knowledge, the knowledge that led him away from Limbo, to baptism and ultimate salvation.
conclusion, in which the commentator puts his earlier arguments to one side in order to arrive at a purely textual reason for Statius' Christianity: "but whether he was a Christian, or whether he was not, I care little, since subtly and by necessity the poet feigns this because of the many issues he could not treat without a Christian poet, as will appear in canto XXV and elsewhere." In this remarkable passage Benvenuto goes, as he so often does, to what I believe is the heart of the matter, which is that Dante's fiction at this point requires a figure just like Statius. In fact, Dante needs a foil to Vergil, a role for which the Christianized Statius is carefully tailored, as the character who can best bring out the ambivalence of Vergil's situation: whereas Statius the epic poet is Vergil's inferior, his disciple, the Statius who became Christian is Vergil's superior, his teacher.

While Vergil was chosen for the Comedy for himself, because of the hold he exerted over Dante's imagination, Statius was chosen for Vergil, because of his mathematical suitability for the equation Dante is establishing. If one thinks of the group

be not have saved Vergil, whom he explicitly reads in an allegorical key in the Convivio, rather than Statius? Paolo also discusses the tradition of Theseus as a figura Christi in the light of the fact that Theseus is the peacemaker at the end of the Thebaid; this argument, along with the others mentioned above, could in my opinion have been used by Dante to support an a priori decision to make Statius Christian, but would not by itself have induced him to do so. In fact, Paolo's demonstration regarding the frequency with which classical authors were Christianized in the Middle Ages, so that biographies like the one Dante ascribes to Statius became veritable topos, seems to support any arguments in favor of a purely textual solution to the problem: the question is why Dante choose specifically Statius, and the answer lies not in the usual texts that were available to him, but not to us, in the economy of his poem.


27 Brugnoli points out that no other member of the reguli poetarum was available for Statius' role, since Lucan was a suicide and Ovid was "Venus' clerk" ("Stazio in Dante," p. 119).

28 Statius' translation of "quid non mortalia pectora cogis, / auris sacra famis!" ("To what do you not drive mortal hearts, accursed hunger for gold!" [Aen. III, 56-57]) as "Per che [Perche] non reggi tu, o sacra fama / de l'oro, l'appetito de' mortali?" (Purg. XXII, 40-41) has traditionally divided commentators into two camps: while one attempts to bring Statius' Italian into line with the original, the other accepts the changed significance of the Italian as intentional. In recent times, the first camp has been represented by Sapegno, whose suggested reading "(per quali opere, a quali malvagità, non conduci tu, o escrenda fame dell'oro, l'appetito dei mortali?)" (Purgatorio, p. 242) requires not only the shift from "Perche" to "Per che," but also that the terms "reggi" and "sacra" be assigned highly uncharacteristic meanings: reggere for Dante normally means "to direct" or "to govern," not "to lead," and sacro never means "accursed" in Italian (see the articles on reggere and sacro in the Enciclopedia Dantesca, respectively by Luigi Blasucci and Alessandro Niccoli). Singleton and Petrocchi

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assign to a poet one respects: like Bertran’s liberality in the Convivio, it has a poetic flavor, and, from a theological point of view, it is less offensive than avarice.\textsuperscript{25} Dante may also have felt justified in his choice of sins by a passage describing Statius’ extreme poverty in Juvenal, a poet he goes out of his way to associate with Statius in canto XXI.\textsuperscript{24} But, finally, the best reason both follow Sapegno (with the result that Petrocchi’s edition reads “Per che” instead of “Perché”) because they are reluctant to accept a deliberate misunderstanding of Vergil’s text on Dante’s part. I find more critically sophisticated the oft-quoted remark written by Francesco da Bati à propos of this passage: “A Autori usano l’altre autorità arrecarle a loro sentenza quando commodamente vi si possano arrecare, non ostante che colui che l’ha ditta l’abbia posta in altra sentenza” (La Divina Commedia nella figurazione artistica e nel secolare commento, vol. II, p. 450). Among the moderns, this position is sustained by Renucci, Dante, Disciplo e Juge du Monde Gréco-Latin, who claims that Vergil’s “auri sacra fames” is “providentiellement prise à contresens” (p. 334); further endorsers include Rendini, “L’incontro di Stazio e Virgilio,” Esposito, “Dante traduttore di Virgilio,” and Hollander, Il Virgilio dantesco. Conclusive arguments in favor of this reading are presented by R.A. Shafai, “‘Auri sacra fames’ and the Age of Gold” (Purg., XXII, 40-41 and 148-150), “Dante Studies,” 96 (1978), 195-199, who places Dante’s “sacred hunger for gold” within the context of the Golden Age, in which, as Dante specifies at the end of canto XXII, hunger made even aurors savory. The notion of a moderate and virtuous hunger is thus attested in Dante within this canto: far from being the peculiarity some modern critics have suggested (the early commentaries have no difficulty interpreting “sacra fames” in terms of the golden mean), “the entire setting is one of properly regulated hungering” (F. D. Austin, “Aurea Justitia: A Note on Purgatorio, XXII, 40 ff.”, MLN, 48 [1933], 327-330). Indeed, the theme of the Golden Age finds its purgatorial focus in this very canto by way of the quotation of Vergil’s fourth Eclogue: the souls on Mount Purgatory are engaged precisely in returning to a new “primo tempo umano” (Purg., XXII, 71), and thus in establishing a new Golden Age.

\textsuperscript{25} In Summa Theologicae, 2a2ae, q. 119, a. 3, St. Thomas asks whether prodigality is a more serious sin than avarice, and concludes that it is less serious.

\textsuperscript{24} In the seventh Satire, Juvenal describes Statius as so poor that he had to sell his play Aeneid to keep from starving (82-87). Although Juvenal’s point is that all poets are poor, Benvenuto comments that this passage may have led Dante to believe that Statius was prodigal with his means, since he knew of Statius’ popularity. Brugnoli argues for Dante’s knowledge of this satire in “Stazio in Dante”; he finds especially telling Dante’s use, in a nearby canto, of the verb esurire, “to desire to eat,” “be hungry,” used by Juvenal with reference to Statius’ potential starvation, and by Dante in his paraphrasing of the beatitude “Beati qui esurient et sitiunt justitiam” (“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice”). (We note, in passing, that Dante’s rendering, “esurendo sempre quanto ‘è giusto’” (“hungering always as much as is right”) (Purg., XXIV, 154)), is an apt gloss on the “sacra fames / de l’oro” of Purgatorio XXII, since it speaks precisely of a controlled, and therefore “sacred,” hunger.) Dante goes out of his way to introduce Juvenal into the problematic by having Vergil tell Statius that he first learned of his affection through the author of the Satires, who told him of Statius’ admiration when he arrived in Limbo (Purg. XXII, 13-15). On Statius’ prodigality and Juvenal, see also Maurizio Bettini, “Fonti letterarie e modelli semiologici in Dante: come Dante utilizzò alcuni autori latini,” Studi danteschi, 52 (1979-1980), 189-211. In “Dante and the Latin Poets,” Wicksteed notes that “Juvenal is the only contemporary author who mentions Statius, and he speaks of the dulcedo of his verse” (p. 177): once more, then, Dante constructs a variant of real life in his afterlife.

\textsuperscript{26} Chaucer’s imitation of the ending of the Thebaïd in Troilus and Criseyde (V, 1786-1792) is mediated through the closing passages of the Filocolo: like Boccaccio, Chaucer refers to a general canon of classical precursors, whereas the Thebaïd is concerned solely with its one great rival. Fidoan points out that Statius’ reference to the Aeneid as a “divina faunum” (Purg., XXI, 93) echoes the Thebaïd’s “divinam Aeneida” (“il canto XXI del Purgatorio,” Nuove letture dantesche [Florence: Le Monnier, 1970], vol. IV, pp. 327-353).
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If Statius, who never in the past was treated as different from any of the other regulati poetae, is now differentiated from his peers in so important a respect as his Christian faith, it is because he is composed, as Renucci puts it, "ad majorem Vergilii gloriam." But, as we know, whatever works to Vergil’s advantage in Dante’s poem also works simultaneously to his detriment, and so it is that Statius’ presence both glorifies Vergil and undercuts him. Statius quotes the Aeneid only in a providential mistranslation, and prefaces his more correct rendition of the fourth Eclogue with the simile of Vergil as the light-bearer, which specifies that he was unable to benefit from his own intuition: "che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova, / ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte" ("who carries the light behind him and helps not himself, but makes those who come after him wise" [Purg. XXII, 68-69]). Statius is both a living tribute to Vergil, and a means of putting the maestro into perspective; since he exists in the poem as a function of Vergil, the encounter with Statius serves retrospectively to clarify the value assigned to Vergil, not least in the original encounter with the pilgrim. The language with which Statius introduces himself is intended to echo Vergil’s language of Inferno I; the parallels between the two encounters are exact. Vergil’s first words, we remember, are entirely circumscribed by human experience and endeavor: "Non omo, omo già fui” ("Not a man, a man I once was" [Inf. I, 67]) he begins, and continues by locating himself as an individual in time, fashioning his historical coordinates with respect to genealogy, place of origin, political setting, domicile, religion, and vocation. Statius, on the other hand, says “O frati miei, Dio vi dea pace” ("O my brothers, may God grant you peace" [Purg. XXI, 13]), and does not address the topic of his earthly identity until Vergil specifically requests, sixty-nine lines later, that he do so. In reply, Statius identifies himself with the time of Titus, who, he says, with God’s help avenged the death of Christ; "’l buon Tito’ (Purg. XXI, 82) echoes “’l buono Augusto” (Inf. I, 71). But whereas the conquests of Titus are presented within a providential context, Vergil places the reign of Augustus “nel tempo de li dèi falsi e buigardi” (“in the time of the false and lying gods” [72]). The presentation of the two Emperors thus forecasts the essential difference between the two poets, a difference further reflected in the sharp contrast between the two only occurrences of the adjective famoso in the poem: on the one hand is Vergil, “famoso saggio” (Inf. I, 89); on the other is Statius, “famoso assai, ma non con fede ancora” (“famous enough, but not yet with faith” [Purg. XXI, 87]). With its strong caesura and adversative, this line retrospectively qualifies and limits the value of Vergil’s earthly fame.

Purgatorio XXI is for Statius what Inferno I is for Vergil; a debut canto, containing the drama of first presentation and recognition. Its sequel, Purgatorio XXII, is a more technical canto, in that the dramatic impact is muted and the emphasis is placed instead on making relations more precise and tightening the focus. In this sense, Purgatorio XXII corresponds to Inferno IV, where Vergil’s identity is clarified with respect to his peers; it should not surprise us, therefore, to find that canto XXII bears all the hallmarks of a second Limbo. Thus, when Vergil tells Statius that he has loved him ever since Juvenal arrived in Limbo with the news of his affection (“da l’ora che tra noi discese / nel limbo de lo ‘inferno Giovenale’ “from the hour in which Juvenal descended among us in the Limbo of Hell” [Purg. XXII, 13-14]), he is not only naming the first new classical poet to be introduced into the poem since canto IV, but also using the word limbo, which occurs only here and in the fourth canto of the Inferno. A few lines later, Vergil questions Statius about his presumed avarice, asking how such a sin could reside in Statius’ breast, “tra cotanto senno” (“amid such wisdom” [23]); his use of the expression “tra cotanto senno” echoes its only other appearance in the poem, in the celebrated verse of Inferno IV in which Dante marks his inclusion by the great poets of antiquity: “sì ch’io fui seisto tra cotanto senno” (“so that I was

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77 Paratore speaks in general terms of parallelisms between Inferno I and Purgatorio XXI; see Tradizione e struttura in Dante, p. 72.
78 On the importance of Statius’ initial greeting, see Denise Heilbronn, “The Prophetic Role of Statius in Dante’s Purgatory,” Dante Studies, 95 (1977), 53-67.
sixth amid such wisdom” [102]). As the canto progresses, its characteristics as a purgatorial Limbo become more marked. In line 97 Statius begins questioning Vergil as to the whereabouts of their fellow poets, and the result is the only long list of classical poets and personages from their poems outside of Inferno IV, a catalogue that comprises both Latin and Greek dramatists and poets.79 In his reply, Vergil specifies that those whom Statius has mentioned are to be found in the first circle of Hell, “con quel Greco / che le Muse lattar piu ch’altri mai” (“with that Greek whom the Muses suckled more than any other” [101-102]); this reference to Homer is another signpost linking this canto to Limbo, where Homer is first described. Finally, we should note that in both these cantos poetry is discussed as a craft by its practitioners: in Inferno IV, the bella scola discusses matters that Dante prefers not to relate, but which were appropriate to the place and the company, while in Purgatorio XXII he walks behind his guides, listening to the discourses “ch’a poetar mi davano intelletto” (“which gave me understanding in the making of poetry” [129]).

If Inferno IV defines Vergil as l’altissimo poeta, Purgatorio XXII defines Statius as a poet who is less high, but more Christian. In fact, one of the functions of this purgatorial Limbo is to present Statius as the one classical poet in the poem who does not belong to the real Limbo; his uniqueness in this regard becomes more striking as the canto proceeds and we realize that all his peers are in the first circle of Hell. Dante stresses the contrast between this re-created Limbo and the original: when Vergil asks Statius by what means Christianity was revealed to him, he asks “qual sole o qui candele / ti stenebraron” (“what sun or what candles took you from the shadows” [Purg. XXII, 61-62]); the use of the verb stenebraron reminds us of Limbo, where the tenebre are barely kept at bay by a light “ch’emisperio di tenebre vincia” (“that conquered a hemisphere of shadows”)

Statius: “Per te poeta fulu” [Inf. IV, 69]). Statius has come out of the shadows, and out of Limbo, as he says in his reply, because of that luciferous text, the fourth Eclogue, whose apposite passage regarding earthly renewal at the hands of a celestial progeny he now cites, concluding with the great declaration of his indebtedness to Vergil: “Per te poeta fulu, per te cristiano” (“Through you I was a poet, through you a Christian” [73]). In these words, Statius not only defines himself in relation to Vergil, but also becomes the first character in the poem after Vergil to appropriate the noun poeta, which heretofore has referred almost exclusively to the author of the Aeneid. In fact, the word makes its first appearance in the poem in Inferno I, when Vergil says “Poeta fulu” (73); after that, it is applied once to Homer, “poeta sovrano” (Inf. IV, 88), and once, in lower Hell, to classical poets in general.80 Otherwise, it is used only for Vergil; indeed, poeta gives the appearance of being little more than an alternate for duca or maestro, rather than a term whose use Dante is so carefully monitoring. In Purgatorio XXII, however, this Vergilian tag is adopted by Statius, to whom it will continue to refer in the succeeding cantos, and Vergil is—if not quite displaced—certainly joined. Where there had been one poeta guiding the pilgrim, suddenly there are two, a fact that is duly registered by some simple but telling phrases that appear toward the end of canto XXII: “Tacevansi ambedue gia li poeti” (“Already both the poets were silent” [115]), and “Li due poeti a l’alber s’appressaro” (“The two poets approached the tree” [139]). Poeta, the term used to refer to Vergil for fifty-five cantos, is now replaced by li due poeti as part of a textual design intended to reflect the historical realities of poetic influence and appropri-

79 Paratore refers to this section of the dialogue between Vergil and Statius as “un’appendice del c. IV dell’Inferno” (Tradizione e struttura in Dante, p. 38); on this aspect of Purgatorio XXII, see Roberto Mercuri, “Terenzio nostro antico.” Cultura neolatina, 29 (1969), 84-116.

80 The reference, “secondo che i poeti hanno per fermo” (Inf. XXIX, 63), although generic, regards Ovid in particular, since it is in the context of the legend of the Myrmidons. Interestingly, the Inferno’s one use of poetare, which functions according to the same rules as the noun, also applies to Ovid (“converte poetando” [XXV, 99]). If poeta is a badge of honor in the Comedy, Dante has accorded it to Ovid in a backhanded way that typifies his treatment of this poet: he singles out Ovid only under the generic cover of “i poeti.”
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postponing of reality, however, for, like poeta, savio is now an appellation Vergil must share. In the same way that il poeta becomes li due poeti, `i savio` becomes the plural `i savi` (XXIII, 8), referring, of course, to Vergil and Statius. On the other hand, when the three travelers reach the wall of fire that separates the last terrace from the Earthly Paradise, it is Vergil, not Statius, who knows how to persuade the recalcitrant pilgrim, reminding him of the beloved who waits, like Thisebe, on the other side of the wall. We note that Vergil now asks Statius, who had been between him and Dante, to go behind the pilgrim, with the result that Vergil is once more the pilgrim’s sole guide; moreover, Vergil’s wisdom in dealing with his charge is marked by a last emphatic testimonial: on hearing Beatrice’s name, Dante turns `al savio duca` (Purg. XXVII, 41). The term is used only twice more: again in canto XXVII, where we find `li miei saggi` (69), and finally in canto XXXIII, where Beatrice beckons to her companions: `me e la donna e `i savio che ristette`` (`me and the lady and the sage who remained`) [15]. This last appearance of `i savio` is emblematic of Statius’ role; for although he is `the sage who remained`, the phrasing points to the sage who does not remain—to Vergil. Thus, words that literally refer to Statius work to eclipse him and to conjure up Vergil, showing us one more time that Statius exists in the poem less for himself than for another.45

Statius, then, is a mediated figure, whose triumphs are less his successes than someone else’s failures. Perhaps this fact is best clarified by those Vergilian terms from Inferno I that his

41 Again the generic reference “li gran savi” hides a specific reference to Ovid, whose text was most likely Dante’s chief source of information regarding the phoenix. Thus Ovid is accorded both badges of honor, poeta and savio, both times generically.

42 “Savia non fui” (“I was not wise”) [Purg. XIII, 109], says Sapio of herself, while Averroes is described as someone wiser than Dante who made the same mistake regarding the formation of the human soul: “quest’ è tal punto, / che più savio di te fè già errante” (“this is such a point that it already caused a wiser than you to err”) [Purg. XXV, 62-63]. Thus, the two non-poets to be modified by this adjective are both non savio. The Paradiso’s two uses of savio / saggio are both generic. See also Michele D’Andria, “Dell’uso di ‘savio’ e ‘saggio’ nella Divina Commedia,” Aspetti letterari, 8 (1968), 9-18.
successor is not allowed to appropriate, the key terms volume and autore. Both belong to the pilgrim’s initial accolade to his newly found guide, in which he speaks of the love with which he has searched “lo tuo volume” (84), and declares “Tu se’ lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore” (“You are my master and my author” [85]). As compared to poeta and saggio, terms that describe a trajectory or progression, volume and autore are used in only two contexts: in Inferno for Vergil, and in Paradiso for God. The transition is so immense that it both heightens Vergil, the only poet who is an autore and whose book is a volume, and shrinks him by comparison with that other autore, Who is God, and that other volume, which is God’s book (volume) is used variously in the last canticle, but always with relation to texts “written by” God, for instance the book of the future, the book of justice, the universe gathered into one volume.\(^{44}\) Moreover, when God is termed an author, He is not “‘l mio autore,” but the “verace autore” (Par. XXVI, 40). It can hardly be coincidental that God should be called the verace autore precisely in Paradiso XXVI, where language and textuality are such prominent issues, and where Vergil’s name last appears as part of a periphrasis for Limbo.\(^{45}\) The lesson inherent in such a juxtaposition is obvious, but at the same time that Vergil will ulti-

\(^{44}\) Robert Hollander discusses autore and volume in “Dante’s Use of Aeneid I in Inferno I and II,” Comparative Literature, 20 (1968), 142-156. On the image of the universe “legato con amore in un volume” (“bound by love into one volume” [Par. XXXIII, 86]), see John Ainearn, “Binding the Book: Hermeneutics and Manuscript Production in Paradiso 33,” PMLA, 97 (1982), 800-809.

\(^{45}\) Paradiso XXVI constructs a discourse based on the juxtaposition of human versus divine authority in the realm of textuality; thus, in the same way that Vergil, “‘l mio autore,” gives way to God, the “verace autore,” so the “grande autorità” of the poets and philosophers of Limbo yields to the “autorità che quinci sceende” (“the authority that descends from here” [Par. XXVI, 26]), i.e. Scripture. Paradiso XXVII’s double reference to divine authorities (the “autorità” of line 47 are also scriptural) is intended to contrast with the only other use of autorità in the poem, that of Inferno IV, 113, cited above. On canto XXVI and the De Vulgari Eloquensta, see Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, “Appunti sul canto XXVI del Paradiso,” in Linguistica e retorica di Dante (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1978), pp. 223-246.

Dante: “ritornero poeta”

If Statius replaces Vergil in Purgatorio XXII when he appropriates for himself (albeit in modified form) the name poeta, the final displacement is accomplished by Dante, when he becomes the only poeta of the last canticle, announcing in Paradiso XXV that he shall return as poet to Florence to receive the laurel crown.\(^{46}\) Although that hope was never fulfilled, the impact of the phrase “ritornero poeta” remains undiminished at a textual level, since it reveals the arc Dante has inscribed into his poem through the restricted use of the word poeta: the poetic mantle passes from the classical poets, essentially Vergil, to a transitional poet, whose Christianity is disjunct from his poetic practice (and hence the verse with its neat caesura: “‘Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano”’), to the poet whose Christian faith is a sine qua non of his poetics. This is Dante himself, the poeta of Paradiso, a label that also carries some implications of a technical nature, for Dante’s restricted use of seemingly generic terms.

\(^{46}\) Poeta occurs in a general sense in the invocation of Paradiso I, in a context which clearly points to Dante; he is deploring the rarity with which either rulers or poets—“o cesare o poeta” (29)—seek the laurel crown. It is used again only in the celebrated opening of Paradiso XXV. Poetare occurs only once (Par. XXX, 32) and refers to Dante.