Dante adds a last overt quote from the *ballata*. The first verse of canto XXIX, "Cantando come donna innamorata," is a replay of Guido's "cantava come fosse 'amarata," and thus serves to cast the lyric episode of canto XXVIII into initial relief before passing into the new mode signaled by the allegorical procession.

It would seem, therefore, that a measure of textual redemption is indeed accorded Cavalcanti in the Comedy, and that this occurs in Purgatorio XXVIII (having been forecasted in Inferno II) vis-à-vis the *ballata*, a form that Cavalcanti makes particularly his and that Dante, conversely, uses infrequently. Even so, it should be noted that the most Guido can recuperate in Purgatorio XXVIII is what he had in *Vita Nuova* XXIV, i.e. the position of a great but transcended precursor. In the episode of the Earthly Paradise we find the ratios of the *Vita Nuova* writ large: as the *boschetto* to the *divina foresta*; as the *ballata* to the canzone; as Matelda/Primavera to Beatrice, who will arrive in Purgatorio XXX; as the early Cavalcantian *stil nuovo* to the "true" *stil nuovo* of the *Vita Nuova*—a text insistently invoked in these cantos and obliquely named in XXX, 115—so is Guido to Dante. Cavalcanti is the only love poet, or indeed lyric poet, to have his poetic history traced so extensively in the Comedy; his path takes in Inferno II, X, XIV, Purgatorio VII, XI, XXIV, XXVI, and XXVIII-XXIX. On the other hand, he is the only love poet to be discussed in Hell, and to be exposed to insinuations regarding heresy and atheism that have become a permanent part of the legend surrounding his name. In the light of all the above, we might go so far as to suggest that the Comedy offers Cavalcanti a choice, and that this is the reason that the allusions to him are so carefully balanced between the Inferno and the Purgatorio, and that Dante takes such precautions not to judge him absolutely, to leave the door of the future

It seems not insignificant that Dante should single out a *ballata* for such an important role in the Purgatorio, since it is not only a form that he himself rejected, but it is Guido's great contribution to the new style, his *stil novo* par excellence. Thus, even at a formal level the lines between the two poets are sharply drawn; what pertains to the one does not pertain to the other, and vice versa.

---

**Lyric Quests**

---

**Bertran and Sordello**

(as Farinata calls it) open; in this sense, Cavalcanti's option is *Inferno* X or *Purgatorio* XXVIII. In the first case he is "dead," but he retains a peculiar stature by virtue of the fact that he has detoured himself from the direct line of Dante's precursors, represented by Guinizzelli; he is damned, but not quite surpassed. In the second case he is redeemed, but must pay the price by becoming the precursor par excellence, most valued but also most surpassed: like John the Baptist, an eternal forerunner of the greatness to come.

Finally, Guido's naturalistic paradise is associated with that of the classical poets, who are the other chief textual contributors to canto XXVIII. Their Golden Age informs Dante's Earthly Paradise, along with the Cavalcantian love lyric; their stories of profane love—embodied in the similes of Proserpina and Pluto, Venus and Adonis, Hero and Leander—stand behind the eroticism of the pilgrim's encounter with Matelda, along with the Provençal *pastorela*. Like their paradise, then, Guido's is shadowed by an attendant *forse*. Indeed, the charged ambivalence surrounding Guido throughout the Comedy finds its best emblem in three verses, all containing *forse*, all belonging to the sphere of poetic influence: the first two—"forse cui Guido nostro ebbe un disdegno" and "forse è nato / chi l'uno e l'altro caccarà del nido"—are answered by an even more tellingly elliptical verse at the end of canto XXVIII: "forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro" ("maybe, in dreaming of Parnassus, they dreamed of this place" [141]). Are we to imagine Guido smiling, like Vergil and Statius when they learn that their pagan dreams adumbrated a Christian truth? Their dreams had validity, but they are nonetheless just dreams; as Dante leaves Guido's lady to meet his own, the dreams of classical and vernacular precursors alike recede into the distance.

---

The Poetry of Politics: Bertran and Sordello

The analogy, which I intend to propose, between the Comedy's two remaining lyric poets—Bertran de Born and Sor-
Lyric Quests

dello—is by no means self-evident. Thomas Bergin, for instance, sets up a structural pattern whereby there is a trio of Provençal poets in the *Comedy,* composed of Bertran in the *Inferno,* Arnaut Daniel in the *Purgatorio,* and Folquet in the *Paradiso.* Faced with a fourth poet who wrote in the langue d’oc, Bergin concludes that Dante does not mean Sordello to ”‘count’ as a Provençal figure,” that ”Dante sees in Sordello not the Provençal poet but the Italian-born patriot and judge of princes.” However, this interpretation violates one sense of the episode, for Sordello’s tribute to Vergil at the beginning of *Purgatorio* VII is undoubtedly the tribute of one poet to another. It would seem that we are dealing with Dante’s tendency to favor contradictory or counterbalancing structures over neat straightforward ones. In the same way that the odd asymmetrical canticle of thirty-four cantos creates a new order by bringing the total number of cantos to one hundred, so the presence of a fourth troubadour who mars the neat symmetrical triad of Provençal poets may point to two overlapping structures: the trio posited by Bergin and the duo suggested here, which, significantly, includes as its pivotal figure precisely the poet excluded by the first arrangement. The claim that Sordello should be juxtaposed with Bertran de Born, as Cacciaquida with Brunetto or Piccarda with Francesca, is based on a simple but, I believe, telling observation: of all the lyric poets in the *Comedy* only Bertran and Sordello are not primarily love poets. In other words, if we look not at the restricted group of Provençal poets, but at the larger group of all the lyric poets who appear in the *Comedy*—Bertran de Born, Sordello, Bonaguida da Lucca, Guido Guinizelli, Arnaut Daniel, and Folquet de Marselha—the first two stand out as poets whose primary poetic missions are different from those of the others. Indeed, Bertran and Sordello are revealed as the *Comedy’s* two “political” poets.

Bertran and Sordello

The reading proposed here has the further merit of throwing light on a longstanding crux of Dante criticism. The stature Dante grants Sordello in the *Comedy* has long perplexed scholars, since it seems far out of proportion to his actual achievements. Not only does the meeting with Sordello, in the sixth canto of the *Purgatorio,* serve as the catalyst for the stirring invective against Italy that concludes the canto, but Sordello is assigned the important task of guiding Vergil and Dante to the valley of the princes and identifying its various royal inhabitants. This seems a large role for a minor poet who was, and is, chiefly known as the author of a satirical lament with political overtones, the lament for Blacatz. Thus, although there is a definite consonance between the tone of the lament and the hortatory attitude of the character in the *Comedy,* Sordello’s poetical oeuvre does not by itself convincingly account for his function in the poem; nonetheless, in the absence of other explanations, critics have traditionally agreed that we must turn to Sordello’s *planh* for an understanding of his position in the *Comedy.* In this so-called lament Sordello violently satirizes the princes of Europe, whom he criticizes for their cowardice; comments that Sordello is present to Dante “soprattutto per la sua ispirazione etico-politica” (Introduction, Vulgares eloquentes, p. VIII).

71 The *planh* is proposed as the source of Dante’s inspiration by D’Ovidio in ”Sordello,” Studi sulla Divina Commedia, pp. 1-13 (although this book was published in 1901, the study on Sordello was originally printed in the Corriere di Napoli in 1892, as the author explains on p. 10). De Lollis develops this insight in Vita e poesie di Sordello di Giotto (Viale: Max Niemeyer, 1896), esp. “Il Sordello dantesco,” pp. 90-116. In Sul “Sordello” di Cesare De Lollis (Venice: Olschki, 1896), Torracca disagrees with De Lollis’ position (pp. 41-43), but fails to suggest a concrete alternative to the *planh,* thus becoming the initiator of the tradition which maintains that Dante must have known more about Sordello than we do. See also E. G. Parodi, “Rassegna di studi sordelliani,” Bulletin della Società Dantesca Italiana, 4 (1897), 185-197, and, more recently, Guido Favai, ”Sordello,” Cultura e scienza 4, nos. 13-14 (1963), 551-565. In ”Dante e Sordello,” Comparative literature, 5 (1953), 1-15, C. M. Bowra makes a case for the importance of Sordello’s narrative poem, ”Ese-enhamens d’omar,” as does Ruggero M. Ruggieri, ”Tradizione e originalità nel lessico cavalleresco di Dante: Dante e i trovatori,” in L’uomuccino cavalleresco italiano: Da Dante a Pulci (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1962), esp. pp. 67-71.

72 An earlier form of this section appeared in PMLA, 94 (1979), 395-405. 
73 “Dante’s Provençal Gallery,” Speculum, 40 (1965), 25. The idea of three troubadours in the *Comedy,* one for each canticle, was anticipated by E. Hoeppner in ”Dante e les Troubadours,” pp. 196-197.
74 Bosco, *Purgatorio,* p. 94, refers to Sordello as ”un poeta politico”; Folena
Lyric Quests

in fact, the work is more a sirventes than a planh, more a diatribe against the living than a lament for the dead. The poem begins conventionally enough, bewailing the death of Blacatz and claiming, in the usual manner, that all virtue and bravery have died with him; it soon becomes apparent, however, that his death is more a pretext than a theme. Consequently, Blacatz is not mentioned again after the first verse:

Planher vuelh en Blacatz en aquest leugier so, ab cor trist e mariet; et ai en be razo,
que'n luy ai mescabat senhor et amic bo,
e qua't teug l'ayp valent en sa mort perdut so;
tant es mortals lo dans quieu non ai sospeisso
que jamais si revenha, sen aitl guiza no;
qu'am li traga lo cor e quen maniol baro
que vivon descorat, pueys aurant de cor pro.

Premiers manje del cor, per so que gras ops l'es
l'eperaire de Roma, s'elh vol los Milanes
per fors conquistar . . .

I want to lament Sir Blacatz in this light melody, with a sad and afflicted heart; and I have good reason, for in him I have lost a lord and a good friend, and because all that is virtuous is lost in his death. This damage is so fatal that I have no hope that it can ever be remedied, if not in this way: let his heart be taken out and the barons eat of it who live without heart—then they will have heart enough. / Let the first to eat of the heart, because he has great need of it, be the Emperor of Rome, if he wants to conquer the Milanese by force . . .

(1-11)

Using throughout the poem the alimentary motif of Blacatz' heart as a source of courage for the cowardly kings, Sordello pillories a different prince in each stanza, all for being too weak and spineless to fight for their rightful territories.


Bertran and Sordello

The Sordello of Purgatorio VII is also given to judging the behavior of rulers; here, too, he rebukes the princes for negligence and for failing to govern properly. His indictment includes many of the same families, and although in most cases Dante's Sordello is dealing with the next generation, there is one overlapping king.76 The lofty Dantesque concept of the sovereign's moral obligation to his subjects has taken the place of the simple feudal attitude of the planh, in which loss of land is considered a stain on the personal honor of the prince, but once this inevitable shift has been taken into account the correspondences between the historical Sordello and the Sordello of the Comedy are clear enough. And yet they are inadequate, for neither Sordello's poetry nor his Lombard origins, which permit him to greet Vergil with the famous verse "O Mantoano, io son Sordello / de la tua terra!" ("O Mantuan, I am Sordello of your land!") [Purg. VI, 74-75]), justify his prominence in the Comedy in a more than mechanical way. It is this gap between the real and the fictional that has made Sordello the subject of so much critical debate, to the point of being labeled "l'enigma dantesco" by one scholar who believed that only the discovery of new biographical material would resolve Dante's problematic esteem for this minor poet.77 It is my purpose to show that there are internal reasons for Sordello's role and stature, beyond those already adduced, and that Dante's underlying logic and intentions in the Sordello episode may best be clarified by means of a comparison with the Comedy's other political poet, Bertran de Born.

Bertran too was celebrated for laments; those traditionally attributed to him are both for Prince Henry of England, also


Lyric Quests

called the Young King, with whom the poet was presumably on intimate terms. They are the famous “Si tuit li sol e’l
plor e’l marrimen” and the less well-known “Mon chan fenisc ab
dol et ab maltraire.” Unlike Sordello’s planh for Blacatz,
these are true laments, following the customary format of both
praising the dead man and mourning his loss:

Si tuit li sol e’l plor e’l marrimen
E las dolors e’l dan e’l chaitvier
Qu’om anc auzis en est segle dolen
Fossen ensems, semblran tot leugier
Contra la mort del jote rei engles,
Don rema pretz e jovens doloros
El mons oscurs e teintz e tenebros,
Sems de tot joi, ples de tristor e d’ira.

(1-8; italics mine)

78 For the legend of Bertran de Born and the Young King, see Olin H. Moore,
The Young King; Henry Plantagenet 1155-1183, in History, Literature and
Tradition (Columbus: Ohio State U., 1925), and William D. Paden, Jr., “Bertran
de Born in Italy,” in Italian Literature: Roots and Branches (Essays in Honor
of Thomas Coddard Bergin), ed. Giuse Rimanelli and Kenneth John Atchity
Bertran may not have been as intimate with Prince Henry as the poet claims
(pp. 38-47), Dante and his contemporaries certainly believed in this intimacy.

79 Modern scholarship has raised the question of the authenticity of “Si tuit
li sol.” Carl Appel, in his edition of Bertran, Die Lieder Bertrams von Born
(Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1932), places “Si tuit li sol” among the poems of
doubtful attribution, as does L. E. Kastner, in “Notes on the Poems of Bertran
de Born,” Modern Language Review, 32 (1937), 219. For a résumé of the
critical opinion on this matter, see D’Arno Silvio Avalle, in his edition of the
poet to whom some scholars assign the planh, Peire Vidal: Poesie (Milan-
Naples: Ricciardi, 1960), vol. I, p. cxxvi, n. 1. The traditional attribution of
“Si tuit li sol” to Bertran is so firmly ingrained that the poem has been included
in anthologies under his name even by scholars who acknowledge that the
authorship is questionable; see, e.g. Anthology of the Provençal Troubadours,
compiler to omit “Si tuit li sol” from a selection of Bertran’s poems is Frederick
Goldin, Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères (New York: Anchor-Dou-

158

Bertran and Sordello

If all the sorrow, tears, anguish, pain, loss, and misery
which man has heard of in this sorrowful life were heaped
together, they would all seem light compared to the death
of the young English king; for him worth and youth
grieve, and the world is dark, covered over, and in shade,
lacking all joy, full of sadness and spite.

Bertran is capable not only of the obsessive grief of “Si tuit li
dol” ("marrimen," "jove rei engles," and "ira" are all repeated
in the same position in each stanza), but also of the vivid delight
in battle found in his sirventes. In these poems, Bertran
constantly urges the barons on to battle, as does Sordello in his
lament for Blacatz. Sordello, however, recommends war as an
antidote for reprehensible cowardliness and as a means of se-
curing lost territory, whereas Bertran’s reasons for warmon-
gering are unabashedly mercenary and self-serving, and his
chief concern is loot. Thus, even when Bertran and Sordello
share similar social themes and a similar polemical bent, Ber-
tran’s verse lacks the didactic element that distinguishes the
poetry of Sordello. In the lament for Blacatz and in the longer
narrative poem, “Ensenhamens d’onor,” Sordello dispenses in-
struction on the chivalric code, as the title of the latter work
(“The Teachings of Honor”) makes explicit. It is this aspect of
Sordello’s poetry and personality that must have initially ap-
pealed to Dante and provided him with the starting point for
the figure of the Comedy.

The canto in which the travelers first meet Sordello, Pur-
gatorio VI, belongs, as is well known, to the Comedy’s triad
of political cantos, along with the sixth cantos of the Inferno
and the Paradiso. Although the political thematics of Purgatorio VI
become most overt in the inventive beginning “Ah serva Italia,
di dolore ostello” (“Ah enslaved Italy, hostel of grief” [76]), it
is signaled from the line in which Dante apostrophizes a soul,
as yet unidentified, by referring to the part of Italy from
which it came: “o anima lombarda” (61). This soul turns out to be
Sordello, whose Lombard origins drew him to Vergil. The in-
vective is therefore fueled by the ironic contrast between Sor-
dello’s loving response to Vergil as a fellow Mantuan (“e l'un l'altro abbracciava” “and one embraced the other” [75]) and the discord characteristic of Italy, where fellow citizens “gnaw” rather than embrace each other (“e l’un l’altro si rode / di quei ch’un muro e una fossa serra” “and one gnaws at the other, of those whom one wall and one moat enclose” [83-84]). The appellation “anima lombarda” also serves to bring to mind another episode—again political—where an Italian place-name is used as a form of address, namely the one in which Farinata calls out: “O Tosco che per la città del foco / vivo ten vai” (“O Tuscan, who through the city of fire go alive” [Inf. X, 22]). There are numerous correspondences, heightened by verbal echoes, in the presentations of Farinata and Sordello, who both appear in episodes dealing with love of one’s native land: both souls are isolated and disdainful; both are first noticed by Vergil, using the same expression. The necessary password on each occasion is a sound evoking the patria: Farinata hears Dante’s Tuscan accent, and Sordello reacts to Vergil’s first word, “Mantùa.”

Perhaps most striking is the structural correspondence between the two episodes; in both a conversation is suddenly interrupted, suspended without a word of explanation, and just as suddenly resumed. Farinata and Dante are interrupted by Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti; they stop conversing until he disappears and then begin again as though he had not existed. Similarly, the conversation between Sordello and Vergil is interrupted by the narrator’s apostrophe to Italy, which cuts in and continues to the end of the sixth canto. So abrupt is the break that when the conversation resumes at the beginning of the seventh canto, Sordello does not yet know who Vergil is. These devices serve rhetorically to underscore Sordello as a

purgatorial corrective to Farinata. In Hell, love of one’s native land is put into a context of “heresy” or divisiveness, so that Farinata is able to turn common Tuscan origins into barriers of family allegiance and party affiliation. In Purgatory, common Lombard origins become the reason for an embrace; Sordello’s immediate reaction to the word “Mantùa” is part of a context that stresses unity, here the unity resulting from a shared birthplace. Sordello, then, is related in three ways to the theme of politics in the Comedy. First, he is intrinsically connected by virtue of his historical identity as a poet concerned about the behavior of rulers in his day. Second, he is connected by his situation in the sixth, political, canto of the Purgatorio, where his embrace of Vergil, exemplifying political unity, gives rise to the invective in which Dante deplores the lack of unity in Italy. Third, Sordello is the poetic refocusing of Farinata, the lens through which the theme of love of one’s native land reappears on the slopes of Mount Purgatory.

The common denominator in these various aspects of the Dantesque Sordello is the concept of political unity, played against its contrary, discord and fragmentation. Within this context, but in a linguistic sphere, there is a particular feature of Sordello’s career that may well have determined Dante’s development of his role. Sordello was that anomaly among poets— one who wrote in a language not his own. Although an Italian from Goito near Mantua, he wrote in Provençal. That Dante was intrigued by this is clear from what he has to say about Sordello in the De Vulgari Eloquentia: “[Sordello], being a man of great eloquence, abandoned his native vernacular not only in writing poetry, but in all forms of expression” (I, xv, 2). Thus, Dante finds it a particular sign of Sordello’s eloquence that he should have abandoned his native tongue not just “in poetando,” but “quomodocunque loquendo,” in any form of discourse whatsoever. Significantly, Dante does not cite any of Sordello’s poetry in the De Vulgari Eloquentia; all that seems

\footnote{Benedetto Croce calls Sordello the “Farinata del Purgatorio” (La poesia di Dante [Bari: Laterza, 1921], p. 112). In “Il canto VI del Purgatorio” (1940; reprint in Lettere scritte sulla Divine Commedia, ed. Giovanni Gentile [Florence: Sansoni, 1970], pp. 577-593), Giovanni Gentile points to Vergil’s use of the expression “Vedi là” in both episodes; most of the similarities between these two episodes have been previously noted in one commentary or another.}

\footnote{Significantly, Dante does not cite any of Sordello’s poetry in the De Vulgari Eloquentia; all that seems
of the Holy Roman Empire to be described.

Therefore, one would ask: does the linguistic unity of Italy, as well as the linguistic unity of Germany, exist? Since the Holy Roman Empire was divided into many states, each with its own language and dialect, it is clear that any attempt to create a national language for Italy would face many challenges.

In the context of the Holy Roman Empire, the concept of a national language was further complicated by the fact that many different languages were spoken within the empire, including Latin, German, Italian, and many others. The idea of a single national language did not exist in the same way as it does today, and it was not until the 19th century that Italy began to rally around the idea of a single national language.

In conclusion, the linguistic situation in Italy during the Holy Roman Empire was complex and varied, with many different languages coexisting within the empire. The concept of a national language was not present at the time, and it was not until later centuries that Italy began to develop a sense of national identity and a national language.

Lyric Quests

Bertran de Born is also present in the De Vulgari Eloquentia where, as we have seen, he is the prototype of the poet of arms in a Romance language, a martial poet for whom Dante can find no equivalent in Italian letters. His poetic credentials in the treatise are excellent: he is in the company of Arnaut Daniel, the Provençal representative of love poetry, and Giraut de Bornelh, the Provençal poet of rectitude; in the same passage Dante quotes the incipit of one of his sirventes, in which he rejoices in a forthcoming battle (II, ii, 8). Moreover, unlike Sordello, Bertran is one of the select group of contemporary poets (comprising also Guinizzelli and Giraut) to appear in the Convivio, where he is the only poet in a group of nobles being praised for their generosity (IV, xi, 14). In accomplishing the startling revision of the Comedy, where Bertran is instead located in the ninth bolgia of the eighth circle of Hell among the “seminator di scandalo e di seisma” (“sowers of discord and schism” [Inf. XXVIII, 35]), Dante’s starting point must have been the sanguinary and bloodthirsty qualities of Bertran’s verse, reproduced in the carnavale of the ninth bolgia. But Dante’s elaboration of Bertran does not rest primarily on his poetry. The key to the Dantesque character lies in the reports about Bertran that circulated in the Provençal vidas and razos. These accounts exaggerate Bertran’s already inflated notion of himself as Prince Henry’s counselor; we learn from them that Bertran was Henry’s chief advisor, personally responsible for fanning the hostilities between the prince and his father, Henry II. Moreover, and most important, one vida specifies that Bertran did this “ab sos sirventes,” with his poetry.84

84 This passage is from the first of the two biographies of Bertran de Born (Biographies des Troubadours, p. 65). The case for Dante’s knowledge both of Bertran’s poetry and of the Provençal biographies is stated by Moore, pp. 74-78. Michele Scherillo, “Dante e Bertran dal Bornio,” Nuova antologia, 155 (1897), 82-97, considers that the excessive importance Dante assigns to Bertran’s role in the Young King’s rebellion is based on his belief in the “leggenda provenzale” (p. 90).

Bertran and Sordello

Seingner era totas ves quan se volia del rei Enric e del fill de lui, mas totz temps volia que ill aguessen guerra en-

sens, lo paire e l fils e l fraire, l‘uns ab l’autre. E toz temps
di volc que lo reis de Fransa e l reis d’Engleterra aguessen
guerra ensens. E s’il aguen patz ni treva, ades se penet ab sos sirventes de desfar la patz e de mostrar com cascuns era
desonratz en aquella patz.

He was lord whenever he wished of King Henry and of his son, but he always wanted them to wage war against each other, the father and the son and the brother, the one against the other. And he always wanted the King of France and the King of England to wage war. And if they made peace or a truce, he immediately strove with his sirventes to undo the peace and to show how each one was dishonored by that peace.

(italics mine)

The sinners of the ninth bolgia display wounds on their bodies that correspond to the wounds they inflicted on the social fabric during their lifetimes. Hence Bertran arrives carrying his head before him like a lantern; it is severed from his body to indicate that he severed the son from the father. His account of his sin conforms closely to the vida:85

‘E perché tu di me novella porti,

sappi ch’i’ son Bertran dal Bornio, quelli che diedi al re giovane i ma’ conforti.

Io feci il padre e ‘l figlio in sé ribelli;

Achinòle non fé più d’Absalone
e di David coi malvagi punzelli.

Perch’io partì così giunte persone,

partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!,”

85 There are also verbal similarities between the vida and the Comedy: “Lo paire e fils e l fraire, l‘uns ab l’autre” is echoed in Hell by “il padre e ‘l figlio in sé” (Inf. XXVIII, 136); “l’uns ab l’autre” may be further echoed in Purgatorio VI, where Dante contrasts “l’un l’altro abbracciava” with “l’un l’altro si rode.”
Lyric Quests

dal suo principio ch’è in questo troncone.
Così s’osserva in me lo contrapasso.”

“And so that you may carry news of me, know that I am
Bertran de Born, the one who gave the evil counsels to the
Young King. I made the father and the son into rebels
against each other; Achitophel did no more for Absalom
and David with his wicked barbs. Because I disjoined per-
sons thus united, I carry my brain, alas!, disjoined from its
root in this trunk. So in me the contrapasso is observed.”
(Inf. XXVIII, 133-142)

In a canto whose theme, the sowing of discord, is fundamentally
political, Bertran’s sin is distinctly so; although the social unit
he affected is technically the family, the family in question is
a royal one, so that his actions are necessarily viewed as having
social and political consequences. In fact, not only Bertran’s but
all the sins of Inferno XXVIII can be classified as social and
political: Mohammed and Ali (and Fra Dolcino, mentioned by
Mohammed) brought schism into the church; Pier da Medicina
was a troublemaker in the courts of Romagna; Gaus Scribonius
Curio indirectly started the civil wars by inciting Caesar to cross
the Rubicon; Mosca de’ Lamberti authorized the killing of Buon-
delmonte, thus giving rise to the Florentine factions and inter-
nece fighting of Dante’s own day. In that these souls are
political exempla, they are not developed as characters in any
way, but are permitted only depersonalized existences under the
label “seminator di scandalo e di scisma.” This is especially
glaring in Bertran’s case since such treatment is unexpected;
both the De Vulgari Eloquentia and the Convivio attest to Dante’s
interest in him as poet and personality. Yet here Bertran too is
kept at a distance, expounding the nature of his sin and its exact
repercussions with mathematical clarity and enunciating the law
of the contrapasso. The clinical tone of his speech is heightened
by the pathetic interpolations “Oh me!” and “lasso!” so at
variance with his discourse as a whole. In a canto where all the
sinners are exemplary, Bertran is served up as the last and

Bertran and Sordello

supreme exemplum: his sin is the worst, his punishment the
most gruesome.86

All of Dante’s efforts in Inferno XXVIII are directed toward
making a political statement. The tone of the canto is set by
the opening rhetorical question, which simultaneously names
the material at hand and distances it:

Chi poria mai pur con parole sciolte
dicer del sangue e de le piaghe a pieno
ch’i’ ora vidi, per narrar più volte?

Who could ever fully tell of the blood and wounds that I
now saw, even if in loosened words and after numerous at-
ttempts?

(1-3)

Subsequently Dante mentions Livy, who as historian of Rome
attempted many such descriptions ‘pur con parole sciolte,’ i.e.
in prose. This unique reference to the august political chronicler
belongs to the fifteen-line comparison of lines 7 through 21,
which describes five battles encompassing the political history
of southern Italy from Roman times to the takeover of Charles
of Anjou, and whose bewildering array of proper names has the

86 On a textual level as well, the entire canto is a preparation for its pièce de
résistance, Bertran de Born. There are echoes of Bertran’s poetry throughout
Inferno XXVIII, beginning with the structural imitation of the opening of “Si
tuì lì dól” in lines 7-21, see Singleton, Commentary to the Inferno, pp. 496,
502, 506, and Michelangelo Picone, “I trovatori di Dante: Bertran de Born,”
Studi e problemi di critica testuale, 19 (1979), 71-94. The classic studies of this
episode are Michele Scherrillo, “Bertran dal Bornio e il Re giovane,” Nuova
antologia, 154 (1897), 452-478, and “Dante e Bertran dal Bornio”; De Lollis’
review of Scherrillo in Bullettino della Società Danteasca Italiana, 1, nuova serie
5 (1897-1898), 69-73; and Vincenzo Crescini, “Il canto XXVIII dell’Inferno,”
Lectura Danteis (Florence: Sansoni, 1907), repr. in Lectura scele sul la Divina
Commedia, ed. Giovanni Getto, pp. 383-398. Mario Fubini discusses the de-
liberate depersonalizing of the sinners of this canto through the use of a dis-
tancing rhetoric in “Il canto XXVIII dell’Inferno,” Lectura Danteis Scaligera
(Florence: Le Monnier, 1967), pp. 999-1021. Other recent studies include Mar-
ianne Shapiro, “The Fictionalization of Bertran de Born,” Dante Studies, 92
(1974), 107-116, and Franco Suiter, “Due trovatori nella Commedia (Bertran
de Born e Folcheto di Marsigl.),”
effect of battering the reader with historical and political data. Furthermore, *Inferno* XXVIII contains reminiscences of other cantos in the *Inferno* where Dante airs his political beliefs, namely *Inferno* VI, where he discusses Florence with Ciaccio, and *Inferno* X, where he meets Farinata. In canto VI Dante questions Ciaccio as to the whereabouts of five well-known Florentines; one of these men, Mosca de’ Lamberti, turns up in canto XXVIII among the sowers of discord. The dialogue between Dante and Mosca recalls an earlier dialogue between the pilgrim and Farinata; in both cases Dante retorts acrimoniously, saying something that—theological imprecision notwithstanding—causes the sinner even greater suffering. A last link between these cantos is the prophesying that occurs in all of them (politics being in some respects the art of successfully foretelling the future): in *Inferno* VI Ciaccio hints at Dante’s exile by predicting the overthrow of his party; Farinata, in *Inferno* X, also alludes to Dante’s exile, before going on to discuss the nature of foresight in Hell. It hardly seems coincidental that in *Inferno* XXVIII “l’antivedere” (‘foresight’) [78] should once more be practiced, this time by Mohammed and Pier da Medicina; rather, these correspondences are signposts marking the similar thematic concerns that underlie all three cantos.

As a canto that deals with a political theme—specifically, *desfar la patz*, the “unmaking of peace,” to borrow a phrase from the Provençal *vida*—*Inferno* XXVIII stands in opposition to that canto of unity and peacemaking, *Purgatorio* VI. Stylistic points of comparison support this conclusion. In his reading of *Purgatorio* VI, Aurelio Roncaglia draws attention to the recurrence of formulas denoting separation (“nave sanza nocchiere” “ship without a helmsman,” “sella voto” “empty saddle,” “vedova Roma” “widowed Rome”) in the invective against Italy.\(^\text{87}\) *Inferno* XXVIII also ties a motif of separation to a discourse on politics; however, the metaphorical rendering of the *pur-

gatorio* is literalized in the *Inferno*, where political bereavement is expressed through physical wounds. Hence we find, to mention only two of the *bolgia*’s inhabitants, Ali “fesso nel volto dal mento al ciuffetto” (“with his face cleft from his chin to his forelock” [33]) and Pier da Medicina “che forata avea la gola / e tronco ’l naso infin sotto le ciglia, / e non avea mai ch’un orecchia sola” (“who had his throat pierced and his nose cut off up to his eyebrows, and who never had more than one ear at a time” [64-66]). Another similarity between the cantos is the massive use in each of proper names, which serve to stress the historical, specific, and ephemeral nature of politics. In *Inferno* XXVIII, for instance, we find between lines 14 and 18 the names Ruberto Guiscardo, Ceperan, Pugliese, Tagliacozzo, and Alardo; in *Purgatorio* VI, in only two lines, we find Montecchi, Cappelletti, Monaldi, and Filippeschi (106-107).

*Inferno* XXVIII, then, stands in opposition to *Purgatorio* VI, in much the same way as does *Inferno* X. In the episodes of Farinata and Sordello the theme “division versus unity” is treated under the rubric, so to speak, of “love of one’s native land.” In the episodes of Bertran and Sordello, the same theme is treated under the rubric “poets who in their poetry fostered either divisiveness or unity.” The Provençal *vida* specifically declares that Bertran strove to stir up trouble between father and son “with his *sirventes*”; there is perhaps an allusion to this in Dante’s verse “quelli / che diedi al re giovane i ma’ conforti” (“the one who gave the evil counsels to the young king” [134-135]), where the nature of the “conforti” is not specified but certainly implied. Bertran is Sordello’s poetic counterpart, a fact that is confirmed and thrown into relief by their being the only lyric poets in the *Comedy* to concentrate on political concerns. Bertran’s political poetry fostered disunity and schism by encouraging the Young King to disobey his father, while Sordello’s, by criticizing the princes in a way that prefigures Dante’s own critical stance of *Purgatorio* VI and VII, served the final goal of political unity. Bertran and Sordello are exmapla of the uses to which a poet can put his poetry in the service of the state. As political poets, who address a wider audience than

\(^{87}\) See “Il canto VI del *Purgatorio*,” *Rassegna della letteratura italiana*, 60 (1956), 409-426, where Roncaglia comments that “La frequenza di questa sigla avusiva rappresenta la tormentosa fissità d’uno stato sentimentale de lacerrazione” (p. 419).
Lyric Quests

Purgatorio VI to VIII (he is last mentioned in Purgatorio IX, 58: “Sordel rimase e l’altr genti forme” “Sordello remained and the other noble souls”), he holds the stage longer than any of his peers, who suffer narrative as well as geographical confinements and are thus limited to one canto appearances. Sordello greets Vergil in a manner that foreshadows Statius’ greeting of Vergil later on, and—most important—he serves as guide to the travelers, even saying “a guida mi t’accostò” (“I will take your side as guide” [Purg. VII, 42]), thus implicitly aligning himself with the other two poet-guides, Vergil and Statius. All in all, Sordello’s preeminence among the lyric poets in the Comedy is such as to suggest that he enjoys quasi-epic status, a status underscored by the similarity between the valley of the princes and Limbo, the home of the classical poets. Moreover, the word onesto, etymologically related to onore, which with its various derivatives occurs eight times in Inferno IV and is Limbo’s verbal talisman, is twice used in connection with Sordello, both times strategically: first in the initial presentation of canto VI (“e nel mover de li occhi onesta e tarda” “and in the slow dignified movement of your eyes” [63]), and then in the re-presentation at the beginning of canto VII (“Poscia che l’accoglienze oneste e liete” “After the dignified and joyful greetings” [1]). These efforts to link Sordello to the Comedy’s epic and classical poets also serve to separate and distinguish him from the Comedy’s lyric love poets.

By the time Dante came to write the sacred poem, he was incapable of—or uninterested in—unalloyed aesthetic judgments; hence Sordello, owing to his role as a moral and political poet in the service of political unity, is given marks of distinction not accorded to other lyric poets, even though this group includes some whom we would consider poetically greater than he. For that matter, Bertran is a greater poet than Sordello, objectively speaking, and we have seen how little this fact counts in the final judgment. Sordello’s position depends entirely on the importance Dante attaches to political unity and peace as the basis, the sine qua non, of mankind’s temporal well-being. Sordello’s poetry does not aspire to the educational value of

170

Bertran and Sordello

do love poets, they have a proportionately greater responsibility: Bertran misused his position and mishandled his responsibility; Sordello, the counterexemplum, behaved responsibly by putting his poetry to good use. Their poetry thus becomes emblematic of everything that each comes to stand for in the Comedy: one for separating, disjoining, undoing, taking apart what ought to be united; the other for crossing over, bringing together, reuniting what has been torn asunder. The relationship between the two political poets is one more strand in the web of overlapping political themes that converge in the sixth and seventh cantos of the Purgatorio and that could be diagramed as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Inferno VI} \\
\text{prophecy regarding} \\
\text{Florence} \\
\end{array}
\quad \text{Purgatorio VI and VII} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{apostrophe to Italy} \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Inferno X} \\
\text{Farinata—love of} \\
\text{patria} \\
\end{array}
\quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Sordello—love of} \\
\text{patria} \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Inferno XXVIII} \\
\text{Bertran—political} \\
\text{poet} \\
\end{array}
\quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Sordello—political} \\
\text{poet} \\
\end{array}
\]

We can now see why Sordello is treated far more sympathetically in the Comedy than his poetic stature or position in life would lead us to expect. The historical Sordello has been absorbed by a Sordello whose function confers on him some signal honors and privileges not granted to any other lyric poet. For instance, although as a rule only epic poets move in the Comedy, Sordello moves. Since he cannot leave Ante-Purgatory, he does not move significantly upwards in the way that Vergil and Statius do; he is nonetheless the only lyric poet to move at all. (I am not referring to static motion that is part of punishment or purgation, like Guinizelli’s movement through the flames.) In that Sordello’s presence spans three cantos, from
Lyric Quests

epic poetry, nor does it speak to all humanity; Dante's point, however, is that it comes closer to embodying these ideals than does any other form of lyric poetry. Consequently, Dante deliberately links Sordello to the epic poets. He also takes care to show that, in this respect as well, Bertran is the exact opposite of Sordello. The description of Bertran in *Inferno* XXVIII as a trunk who carries its head like a lantern ("e l' capo tronco tenea per le chiome, / pesol con mano a guisa di lanterna" "and it held the truncated head by the hair, dangling in its hand like a lantern" [121-122]), and lights the way for itself by itself ("Di sé facea a sé stesso lucerna" "Of itself it made for itself a lamp" [124]), cannot but call to mind Statius' tribute to Vergil in *Purgatorio* XXII:

Facesti come quei che va di notte,
che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova,
ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte

You did as one who goes by night, who carries the light behind him and helps not himself; but makes those who come after him wise

(67-69)

Bertran is a grotesque inversion of Vergil: in one there is total severance, a self-sufficiency that is not strength but meaninglessness, whereas in the other there is a sharing, a passing on, and an illumination of others at the expense of oneself.

In his presentation of Bertran and Sordello as polar opposites, Dante definitively alters the historical record, and in such a way as to affect the poetic record as well: Bertran's poetic reputation was not enhanced by the *Comedy*, and Sordello's certainly was. Sordello, who wrote a biting and savage poem (which, had it been acted on, would have resulted in fighting in every corner of Europe), is reincarnated as an emblem of unity; whereas Bertran, whose poems in fact had little political impact, becomes an emblem of schism. The point is that neither of these recreations, although justifiable, is without its arbitrary features. Dante was not interested in finding for each character in his poem a niche to correspond exactly to the merits of that person as a historical figure; rather, he begins with ideal categories that will illuminate the structure of reality as he sees it, and into these he fits his characters. So it is for souls in general, and so it is for poets. If Dante has two political poets, they must perforce have more than gossip value; they must illustrate more than the fate that each found on dying. The ideal categories would naturally have to do with the use or misuse of their poetry, and Dante would look for figures whose biographies and poetic output worked well within these categories, even if not slavishly corresponding in all details. Accordingly, Dante's treatment of Bertran de Born and Sordello presents us with a deliberate revision of history for didactic purposes; in this instance the objective is to impart a moral lesson concerning the ways the poet uses his gifts vis-à-vis society, and specifically to illustrate—within the relation of the poet to the body politic—his indivisible responsibility to the state.

The Lyric Picture: Patterns of Revision

In concluding this chapter on Dante's treatment of his lyric peers, I would like to turn briefly to the historiographical perspective of his contemporaries, as embodied in the anonymous sonnet "Infra gli altri difetti del libello," as the first line

48 The attribution of this sonnet to Cino is based on the identification of the lady in the sextet as Selvaggia, Cino's lady; I think it more probable that the poem was written by someone else annoyed at Cino's exclusion from the *Comedy*. Although Gerolamo Biscaro, "Cino da Pistoia e Dante," *Studi medievali*, nuova serie, 1 (1928), 492-499, supports Cino's paternity of this sonnet and two others that attack Dante, Cino's authorship is denied by Zingarelli in his review of Biscaro. *Studi danteschi*, 14 (1930), 184-185, as well as by Sapegno, *Il Trecento* (Milan: Vallardi, 1934), p. 45. Marii places this sonnet among Cino's "Rime dubbie" in his edition *Poeti del Dolce stil nuovo* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1969); this is the edition I have used. The sonnet also rebukes Dante for failing to give Onesto degli Onesti his due; for a general discussion of Onesto's position vis-à-vis the stilnovisti, see Marii, "Onesto da Bologna, lo Stil nuovo e Dante," in *Con Dante fra i poeti del suo tempo*, pp. 45-68.