

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).⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ The lesson inherent in such a juxtaposition is obvious, but at the same time that Vergil will ulti-

⁸⁴ 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 Ahearn, "Binding the Book: Hermeneutics and Manuscript Production in *Paradiso* 33," *PMLA*, 97 (1982), 800-809.

⁸⁵ *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 scende" ("the authority that descends from here" [*Par.* XXVI, 26]), i.e. Scripture. *Paradiso* XXVI's double reference to divine authorities (the "autoritadi" 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 Eloquentia*, see Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, "Appunti sul canto XXVI del *Paradiso*," in *Linguistica e retorica di Dante* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1978), pp. 223-246.

mately be reduced to a grammatical aside by the *verace autore*, we should remember that he is unique in being chosen for so extreme—and dangerous—a compliment. He is the only poet considered worthy of being compared and being found wanting, his are the only poetic shoulders strong enough to fail to carry such a burden. There is, in the *Comedy*, only one *autore* besides God, even if he is not a true one, and only one earthly author's *volume*. Statius and his text have no place in this world of extreme compliments, and extreme failures; Statius serves Dante's purpose precisely in that he is always secondary, never primary, and as a figure in the *Comedy* he is therefore always mediated, modified, and deflected: a *per te poeta*, 'l savio che ristette.

Dante: "ritornerò 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.⁸⁶ Although that hope was never fulfilled, the impact of the phrase "ritornerò 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 termi-

⁸⁶ *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.

nology has rendered its application highly significant.⁸⁷ Thus, we note that no lyric poet is called *poeta* in the *Comedy*, just as none is ever called *saggio* or *savio*, an omission that gains in interest if we consider that Guinizzelli is a *saggio* in the *Vita Nuova*. In the *Comedy*, such terminology is reserved for the figures to whom Dante also assigns the responsibilities of teaching and guiding the pilgrim, narrative responsibilities analogous to the poetic tasks undertaken by these poets, who dared to confront the historical and social problems of their times. In the poem, as in life, the social orientation of these poets is rewarded by badges of honor not conferred on those whose poetry is more self-concerned. Both the poets whom Dante distinguishes in this way are epic poets, and although Dante does not use this terminology, his treatment of Vergil and Statius demonstrates his careful differentiation of them from the vernacular lyric poets of his own day. By calling himself *poeta*, Dante links himself to them, establishing himself as their fulfillment, his poem as their poems' completion, and underscoring the message of *Inferno* I and IV, where he invokes Vergil as the *only* source of his beautiful style and is admitted by the fraternity of classical poets as one of their own. When I say, then, that Dante claims to be an "epic" poet in the *Paradiso*, I do not mean to compare the *Comedy* to national epics like the *Chanson de Roland*, or to claim technical epic status for it, but to draw the conclusion to which Dante is pointing when he says "ritornerò poeta": he is an "epic" poet in that he sees himself as fulfilling and completing a poetic itinerary that begins with

⁸⁷ The intentionality with which Dante restricts the term *poeta* in the *Comedy* is more striking if it is remembered that in the *Vita Nuova* he goes out of his way to appropriate for vernacular poets, *dicatori*, the term traditionally used only for Latin authors, *poeti*. Thus, Dante first clears the way for vernacular *dicatori* to be recognized as *poeti*, and then, in the *Comedy*, imposes new restrictions of his own fabrication. On Dante's use of these terms, see Angelo Jacomuzzi, *L'immagine al cerchio* (Milan: Silva, 1968), pp. 37-40, and Francesco Tateo, *Questioni di poetica dantesca* (Bari: Adriatica, 1972), pp. 65-68; on the history of such terminology, see Alfredo Schiaffini, "Poesis e 'poeta' in Dante," in *Studia philologica et litteraria in honorem L. Spitzer* (Bern: A. Francke, 1958), pp. 379-389.

the *Aeneid* and that finds in the *Comedy*—also a long narrative with social, historical, and prophetic pretensions—its last and highest form of expression.⁸⁸

We have already seen how, in the *Inferno*, Dante takes care to educate his readers with respect to the true value of the term *comedia* as he is using it; having time and again seen him demonstrate the superiority of the *bassa comedia* over the *alta tragedia*, we should not now be surprised to see the humble scribe appropriate the name *poeta* for himself, displacing the great poets of antiquity. Within the discourse of Dante's poem the conventions to which he subscribes in the Epistle to Cangrande, whereby the poem is called a comedy because it proceeds from a foul beginning to a happy ending and is written in the vernacular, do not hold; here Dante has evolved a transcendental poetics, which alters the significance of *comedia* by rendering it paradoxical.⁸⁹ Thus, although Dante twice calls his poem a

⁸⁸ I wish to emphasize that I am not bolstering the pretensions of patriotic scholars to an Italian national epic (see, for instance, Giulio Natali, "A qual 'genere letterario' appartiene la *Divina Commedia*?" *Il Giornale dantesco*, 26 [1923], 147-152, who writes "non potremo più negare, come tanti hanno fatto, all'Italia una epopea nazionale"); in fact, I share Curtius' opinion that the *Comedy* "can be assigned to no genre" (*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask [1948; repr. Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1973], p. 361). Dante deliberately set out, in my opinion, to write a poem that would be unclassifiable; to this end, he mimics not only epic conventions (the invocations, the catalogue of ships in Cacciaguida's listing of Florentine families), but also those of every other major genre in circulation.

⁸⁹ In the article "Comedia," Franco Ferrucci argues that the terms *comedia* and *tragedia* are used in the poem "in una accezione personalissima e inedita" (p. 40); he too claims that *comedia* ultimately surpasses *tragedia*. The fact that I do not think the terminology of the Epistle reflects the situation of the *Comedy* does not affect my belief in the Epistle's authenticity, since such disjunctions between the poet and the exegete are common in Dante. Moreover, the Epistle does allude to the *Comedy*'s new poetics, albeit in more veiled fashion than the poem: enormously significant is the presence of the same Psalm, "In exitu Israel de Aegypto," used by Dante in two other key passages (*Convivio* II, i, 6 and *Purg.* II, 46); also, as Curtius demonstrates, Dante's list of the *Comedy*'s *modi tractandi* is carefully chosen in order to claim for the poem "the cognitional function which Scholasticism denied to poetry in general" (*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, p. 225). From a purely rhetorical perspective,

comedia, he does so only in the *Inferno*, and he embeds this fallen terminology in contexts that are intended to explode its conventional significance; in the *Paradiso*, the conventions of earthly language and of the rhetorical treatises no longer apply, and Dante therefore makes it clear that the usual distinctions between *comedia* and *tragedia* are irrelevant:

Da questo passo vinto mi concedo
più che già mai da punto di suo tema
soprato fosse comico o tragedo

By this enterprise I concede myself beaten more than ever
comic or tragic poet was overpowered by a point in his
theme

(*Par.* XXX, 22-24)

In this passage Dante declares himself poetically bankrupt by Beatrice's beauty, which has reached a pitch he says he can no longer describe; he is more defeated than any "comico o tragedo," i.e. any poet at all, has ever been defeated by what he was writing. But if Dante here invokes such distinctions, he does so in order to underscore the fact that they belong to an unredeemed world, a linear world of hierarchized schematization, and that whereas such poets, existing within the limitations of conventional genres, in fact could not attempt such a description, he—the poet whose method cancels the old oppositional distinctions between tragedy/comedy and high/low in an

Alfredo Schiaffini points to the appositeness of Horace's dictum, in a passage of the *Ars Poetica* cited in the Epistle, stipulating that comedians may occasionally use tragic diction and vice versa; see "A proposito dello 'stile comico' di Dante," in *Momenti di storia della lingua italiana*, 2d ed. (Rome: Editrice Studium, 1953), pp. 43-56. Regarding the Epistle's authenticity, résumés of the controversy are provided by: Arsenio Frugoni, "Le Epistole," in *Cultura e scuola* 4, nos. 13-14 (1965), 739-748; Manlio Pastore Stocchi, in "Epistole," *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, vol. II, pp. 706-707; Giorgio Brugnoli in his introduction to *Epistola XIII* in the 1979 Ricciardi edition. In "La 'mirabile visione' di Dante e l'Epistola a Cangrande," orig. 1965, repr. *Il pio Enea, l'empio Ulisse*, pp. 30-63, Giorgio Padoan clarifies and dissipates the differences between the two chief modern debaters on this issue, Francesco Mazzoni (who accepts the Epistle in its entirety) and Bruno Nardi (who accepts only the opening paragraphs).

all-embracing circularity—can and does undertake it. The paradox of the method, whereby one does what one says one cannot do, precisely by saying that one cannot do it, corresponds to the paradox of the genre that surpasses and eliminates genre: the *comedia* that is higher than the highest *tragedia*.

In the *Paradiso*, where Dante invokes the old categories of the *comico* and *tragedo* only to show how they fail with respect to him, he also clarifies the new significance assigned to *comedia*, not through contextual implications, as in the *Inferno*, but by explicitly redefining it in his new language, according to the new system. Matching the double use of *comedia* in the *Inferno*, we find the double use of the new appellation: in *Paradiso* XXIII, after having proclaimed the absolute disjunction between himself and all previous poets, Dante calls his poem "lo sacro poema" (62), and in the great opening prayer of *Paradiso* XXV, he calls it "l' poema sacro" (1). Given that these two occurrences constitute the only appearances of *poema* in the *Comedy*, it would seem that—paradoxically—only a scribe can write a poem.⁹⁰ The passage of canto XXIII, in particular, dwells on the dissimilarity between Dante's poetic undertaking and all others; here it is stated that if all those tongues to whom Polyhymnia and her sisters gave their sweetest milk were to come to Dante's aid in describing Beatrice's smile, they would not succeed in expressing a thousandth part of the truth: "al millesmo del vero / non si verria" (58-59). Because of the failure of poetic language at such a juncture, he goes on to say, his poem too must yield to the exigencies of describing Paradise in figurative terms: "e così, figurando il paradiso, / convien saltar lo sacro poema" ("and so, in figuring Paradise, the sacred poem is obliged to leap" [61-62]). Again the technique is to surpass paradoxically.

⁹⁰ *Scriba* is used only with reference to Dante, in "quella materia ond' io son fatto scriba" (*Par.* X, 27), while the only "writers" in the *Comedy* are "li scrittor de lo Spirito Santo" (*Par.* XXIX, 41), i.e. the composers of the Bible. In a context in which terms such as "writer" and "author" have been assimilated to God, to be a scribe is no degradation; indeed, it is to be the greatest of poets. On *poeta* and *scriba* in Dante, see Jacomuzzi, "Ond'io son fatto scriba," in *L'imago al cerchio*, pp. 31-100.

cally, conveying the true stature of the *comedia* by pointing to the *vero* that it must needs fail to express, a truth that would elude the combined expressive powers of all mankind's greatest poets; only now, when the task of rendering his own limits has succeeded in nullifying his precursors, and when he has effectively surpassed his own limits by rendering them, does Dante reveal the true meaning of *comedia*, telling us that it is a *sacrato poema*. And, lest we fail to grasp the full significance of this expression, and the completeness with which it cuts this poem off from all others, from those that owe their existence solely to human hands, we learn in canto XXV that a sacred poem is one in whose creation all reality—heaven and earth—participates: "1 poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra" ("the sacred poem to which both heaven and earth have set hand" [1-2]).⁹¹

These verses deserve a special prominence in the history of Western literature, for they bring the concept of mimesis full circle: rather than claiming that he has described both heaven and earth, which he has, this poet claims that heaven and earth have helped to describe themselves. The origins of this paradoxical inversion of the mimetic principle, in the name of a higher mimesis, are to be found in *Purgatorio* X, where Dante stands the tradition on its head by positing a form of art that would put to shame not only the greatest of human artists, but even nature herself; the engravings he sees on the terrace of pride are such that "non pur Policeto, / ma la natura li avrebbe scorno" ("not only Polycletus, but nature would there be shamed" [32-33]). In that these engravings are in fact God's handiwork, the contrast between these lines and the traditional principle as set forth in *Inferno* XI is only an apparent one; nature is said in *Inferno* XI to take its course from the divine intellect and from its art ("dal divino 'ntelletto e da sua arte" [100]), in the same way that human art in turn follows nature, so that the scenario of *Purgatorio* X—whereby nature would imitate God

⁹¹ Dante's use of the expressions *sacrato poema* and *poema sacro* is particularly significant in light of the fact, noted by Alfredo Schiaffini, that Macrobius refers to the *Aeneid* as a *sacrum poema* ("A proposito dello 'stile comico' di Dante," p. 53).

if she could—is in fact perfectly orthodox. But Dante has gone out of his way to suggest something else; by having nature put to scorn by God's art, rather than by His reality, he has brought into play the notion of an art that is more real than the real, where mimesis is perfected to the point that it is inverted upon itself, as the imitator achieves a greater reality than that possessed by what he is imitating. Moreover, in *Purgatorio* X the imitator is ultimately Dante himself: having posited a kind of supreme realism that is God's art, Dante must then attempt to imitate God's realism with his own, which is essentially what he does when he tries to describe what he saw—God's art—with the only means available to him, the words of his poem. The verbal tableaux of *Purgatorio* X, Dante's emphasis on the confusion of his senses, and the fast-paced dialogue between Trajan and the poor widow—all are attempts to re-create the engravings' *visibile parlare* in words, to find a way to project his art, like God's, into the fourth dimension. The situation of *Purgatorio* X thus generates one of those contradictions with which the *Comedy* is rife: although Dante is here dedicated to showing that God's art is greater than that of any other artist, the result is an enhancement of his own art, which dares to imitate the divine mimesis.⁹² The exaltation of divine art at the expense of human art paradoxically leads to the exaltation of that human artist who most closely imitates divine art, who writes a poem to which heaven and earth contribute, and who by way of being only a scribe becomes the greatest of poets.

Dante's counterpart in *Purgatorio* X, the figure who embodies the contradiction in Dante's daringly humble imitation, is David, "l'umile salmista" (65), who by publicly dancing before the arc

⁹² In stressing the paradoxical implications inherent in Dante's depiction of God's depicting, I do not intend to disagree with those who concentrate on the presence of divine art in canto X as a means of humbling human pride; see, for instance: Maria Sampoli Simonelli, "Il canto X del *Purgatorio*," *Studi danteschi* 33, fasc. 2 (1955-56), 121-145; Francesco Tateo, "Teologia e 'arte' nel canto X del *Purgatorio*," in *Questioni di poetica dantesca*, pp. 139-171; Philip R. Berk, "Some Sibylline Verses in *Purgatorio* X and XII," *Dante Studies*, 90 (1972), 59-76; James Thomas Chiampì, *Shadowy Prefaces: Conversion and Writing in the Divine Comedy*, chap. 3, esp. pp. 69-85.

of the covenant shows himself to be both "more and less than king": "e più e men che re era in quel caso" (66). In the same way, Dante's *poema sacro*, his *comedia*, is both more and less than the king of poems, the *tragedia*; as David's humility makes him more glorious, so the *comedia*'s lowly standing makes it more sublime.⁹³ The connection between Dante and David becomes more explicit in the *Paradiso*, where the humble Psalmist, composer of sacred poetry, is present in the canto where Dante most strikingly proclaims his own *poema sacro*: in *Paradiso* XXV David is again the poet of the Psalms, "sommo cantor del sommo duce" ("supreme singer of the supreme leader" [72]). The term *cantore* is always used in the *Comedy* for a divinely inspired artist; thus, Vergil is the "cantor de' bucolici carmi" ("singer of the bucolic songs" [Purg. XXII, 57]), in a reference to the prophetic fourth Eclogue, and David is a *cantor* throughout *Paradiso*: as the pupil in the center of the eagle's eye in the heaven of justice, he is called (in a passage whose combined reference to the Psalms and the arc of the covenant echoes *Purgatorio* X) "il cantor de lo Spirito Santo, / che l'arca traslatò di villa in villa" ("the singer of the Holy Spirit, who transferred the arc from town to town" [Par. XX, 38-39]); and in canto XXXII Ruth is named by periphrasis as the great-grandmother of David, the "cantor che per doglia / del fallo disse 'Miserere mei'" ("singer who for sorrow of his sin said 'Miserere mei'" [11-12]).⁹⁴ The central passage of this Davidic triptych is that

⁹³ David articulates the paradox of his glorious humility in the Biblical account, when he says to Michal that as a result of making himself more vile, he will appear more glorious; see the passage from Kings quoted in Singleton, *Commentary to the Purgatorio*, pp. 206-207, who also provides the apposite commentary from Gregory's *Moralium libri*. In "Some Sibylline Verses in *Purgatorio* X and XII," Philip Berk discusses Augustine on "the paradox of Christian humility" whereby "less is really more," a doctrine that illuminates not only the behavior of David but also the relation between Vergil and Statius.

⁹⁴ The other uses of *cantore* in the *Comedy* are minimal and do not contradict its usage as we have defined it: it refers to Cacciaguida, who takes his place among the lights of the cross and shows the pilgrim what kind of artist he is among the "cantor del cielo" (Par. XVIII, 51); it occurs in a simile that compares the movements of Trajan and Ripheus, synchronized with the voice of the eagle, to the relation between a "buon cantor" and a "buon citarista" (Par. XX, 142).

of canto XXV, the canto in which Dante implicitly aligns his poetry with David's by calling his poem a *poema sacro*; here, as part of his examination on hope, Dante translates word for word from David's ninth (now tenth) Psalm: "'Sperino in te,' ne la sua tēodia / dice, 'color che sanno il nome tuo'" ("Let them hope in Thee," he says in his *tēodia*, 'who know Thy name' " [73-74]). The term *tēodia*, "divine song," coined to describe the Psalms, is easily transferred to Dante's own *poema sacro*: needing a new descriptive term for his new genre, Dante invents it with the rest of the *Comedy*'s basic poetic baggage, its structure, form, and meter. True to his fundamental procedural principles of appropriation and revision, he first appropriates a standard rhetorical term, *comedia*, and then—having redefined it from within as a *poema sacro*—replaces the original term with a new one: *tēodia*.⁹⁵

If all of the *Paradiso*'s three references to David, "cantor de lo Spirito Santo," seem designed to contribute to the identification of the inspired Biblical poet with the inspired Italian poet, the last reference, by echoing the pilgrim's first words to Vergil, gives us a sense of the distance Dante has traveled to become the author of the new *tēodia*. David is last named, in *Paradiso*

⁹⁵ *Tēodia* is coined on the basis of terms like *comedia* and *tragedia*; interestingly, the only other such term in the *Comedy*, *salmodia*, also refers to David in the context of a direct citation from a Psalm (*Purg.* XXXIII, 2). Gian Roberto Sarolli, "Dante Scriba Dei," in *Prolegomena alla Divina Commedia*, treats these issues from a similar perspective; rather than establishing a direct parallel between Dante and David, however, Sarolli identifies Dante with Nathan, the prophet who reproved David for his adulterous love for Bathsheba, and identifies David, whom he views solely as king, with the Emperor Henry VII (see pp. 189-246). A direct analogy between Dante and David is suggested by Robert Hollander, who thinks that Dante "may have thought of his own poem as being like one of David's" ("Dante *Theologus-Poeta*," p. 66). Vincent Truijen, in the entry "profeta" of the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, points out that Dante frequently uses the term to refer to David, calling him simply "il Profeta" (vol. IV, p. 694); thus David is "the prophet" in the same way that Aristotle is "the philosopher." Indeed, the *Convivio* refers to the Psalm "In exitu Israel de Aegypto" as "quello canto del Profeta che dice che, ne l'uscita del popolo d'Israel d'Egitto, Giudea è fatta santa e libera" ("that song of the Prophet which says that, in the departure of the people of Israel from Egypt, Judea is made holy and free" [II, i, 6]).

XXXII, as the singer who said "Have mercy on me"; Dante, in *Inferno* I, uses a hybrid form of the Psalm's "Miserere mei" when he cries to Vergil, in a mixture of Latin and Italian, "Miserere di me" (65).⁹⁶ The reference to David at the end of the *Paradiso* is intended to function as a recall of the meeting with Vergil, because the divine singer is seen as providing the model that enables Dante to decisively surpass his Roman precursor. The events of *Purgatorio* X provide an emblem for just such a transcendence: after the pilgrim has studied the first bas-relief, detailing the Annunciation, he looks forward at his guide's prompting and discovers "un'altra storia ne la roccia imposta" ("another story set in the rock" [52]); this discovery leads him to go beyond his guide—"per ch'io varcai Virgilio" ("so that I went past Vergil" [53])—in order to view the second engraving. The phrase "per ch'io varcai Virgilio" is emblematic of the effect that David's art will have on Dante, for the result of "going beyond Vergil" in *Purgatorio* X is to see, in the second engraving, the *umile salmista*, composer of the *tëodia*, i.e. of an art form that certainly, from Dante's point of view, transcends Vergil's. Indeed, to go beyond a great model—to get past Vergil—Dante requires a humble model, on whose example he can forge his own humbly superior poetics. Once more we see the value of Benvenuto's celebrated circular assertion, whereby "divine language is smooth and plain, not high and proud like the language of Vergil and the poets."⁹⁷ Benvenuto's distinction between a style that is *divinus* because it is *planus*, as compared

⁹⁶ Hollander notes the parallel between these two passages in "Dante's Use of the Fiftieth Psalm"; he sees David's penitence as a prefiguration of Dante's penitence in the *selva oscura* (p. 111).

⁹⁷ Benvenuto's magisterial comment (Lacaita, vol. I, p. 90) was noted by Auerbach, who rightly made much of it in his discussion of Dante's *sermo humilis*. Auerbach's thesis regarding a Christian discourse, the *sermo humilis*, that encompasses the sublime (elaborated in *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim [1958; repr. Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1965], chap. I) finds its perfect exponent in the *Comedy* because Dante deliberately set out to situate his text within a paradoxical framework, whose emblem—the description of David as "più e men che re"—is entirely appropriate as an emblem for the *Comedy* itself.

to a style that is *altus* and *superbus*, precisely adumbrates the distinction between the *comedia-tëodia* on the one hand, and the *tragedia* on the other.

And yet Vergil is, as Dante tells us, the original source of his poetic style, of "lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore," a fact that allows us to assume that the paradoxical nature of the Vergilian problematic is related to the *Comedy's* most basic textual strategies, as it is also related to its key thematic concerns. If, on a thematic level, we may say that Vergil embodies the paradoxical relation of human knowledge to divine grace, on a textual level we may say that the true/false dialectic that is at the heart of Dante's Vergil is also at the heart of Dante's poem—as it would have to be at the heart of any fiction that proclaims itself to be true.⁹⁸ A fiction that claims to be nonfiction must deal squarely with problems of credibility, and one of Dante's tactics in this regard involves his treatment of his peers: in the same way that Dante tells us that his was the only love poetry directly inspired by Love, so he informs us that his is the only narrative poem to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, even if that truth sometimes has the face of a lie. This claim is the burden of the many episodes that deal, like *Inferno* XX, with Dante's narrative precursors. In other words, the credibility of the *Comedy* is achieved, in part, by establishing the incredibility of its forebears. As Dante's treatment of Vergil's text repeatedly demonstrates, the classical *tragedia* participates in fiction, also known as falsehood—*menzogna*—while the *comedia*, based on the conviction that the real is more valuable

⁹⁸ Particularly emblematic of this true/false dialectic, as well as an apt gloss on the "ver c'ha faccia di menzogna," are certain lines spoken by Statius to Vergil regarding his alleged avarice: "Veramente più volte appaion cose / che danno a dubitar falsa materia / per le vere ragion che son nascose" ("Truly many times things do appear which, because their true reasons are hidden, present false matter for doubting" [*Purg.* XXII, 28-30]). Regarding the role of the *Aeneid* in this problematic, Hollander notes that Dante learns from it "to compose a fiction that is intended to be taken as historically true" ("Dante Theologus-Poeta," p. 71); see also the brief note by Enzo Noè Girardi, "Virgilio nella poetica di Dante," in *Dante e Roma: Atti del Convegno di Studi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1965), pp. 237-241.

than the beautiful, deals exclusively in truth. The *comedia* is faithful to Augustine's dictum "in verbis verum amare, non verba" ("in words to love the truth, not the words");⁹⁹ as a genre that is devoted to the truth, rather than to the *parola ornata*, it may exploit any register—high or low—but depends entirely on none, since it must always be free to adopt the stylistic register that most accurately reflects the truth of the situation at hand.¹⁰⁰ We may say, then, that Dante would approve of St. Thomas' distinction between poetry, which employs

⁹⁹ The quotation is from *De Doctrina Christiana Liber Quartus*, comm. and trans. Sister Thérèse Sullivan (Washington: Catholic U. of America, 1930), 4, 11, 26. Augustine stresses the issue of a text's truth or falsity from the beginning of Book IV, noting that "per artem rhetoricam et vera suadeantur et falsa" ("through the art of rhetoric both truths and falsehoods are pleaded" [4, 2, 3]), and commenting later that the teacher's aim should be "veritas pateat, veritas placeat, veritas moveat" ("that the truth be clear, that the truth be pleasing, that the truth be persuasive" [4, 28, 61]). Dante's inheritance of Augustine's verbal epistemology is discussed by Marcia L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (New Haven and London: Yale U. Press, 1968), pp. 224-341.

¹⁰⁰ The potential equivalence between *parola ornata* and *menzogna* is established in *Inferno* XVIII, where Beatrice's instructions to Vergil from *Inferno* II—"Or movi, e con la tua parola ornata . . . l'aiuta" ("Now move, and with your ornate speech . . . help him" [67-69])—are ominously echoed in the story of how Jason (a classical hero by whom Vergil is particularly entranced) deceived Hypsipyle: "Ivi con segni e con parole ornate / Isifile ingannò" ("There, with signs and with ornate words, he deceived Hypsipyle" [91-92]). These are the only other *parole ornate* in the poem (as though to underscore the point, Dante here indulges in a bit of ornate wordplay himself, echoing "ingannò" [92] with "ingannate" [93] and "inganna" [97]). If the point is the alignment of beautiful language with deception, in retrospect we can see that this issue was already broached in *Inferno* II, as part of that canto's overall concern with the value of discourse; there, Vergil's "parola ornata" finds its corrective in the "vere parole" of line 135, words belonging—of course—to Beatrice. (A nagging question nonetheless remains regarding Beatrice's own language in canto II: can her words promising to praise Vergil to her lord be classified as *parole vere*, and if not, are they *parole ornate*?) We should also note that the only other words in the poem specifically labeled true are the pilgrim's, whose words to Nicholas III are called "parole vere" (*Inf.* XIX, 123). Thus, two sets are constituted: in one (*parole ornate*) we find Vergil and Jason; in the other (*parole vere*) we find Beatrice and Dante.

metaphor "propter repraesentationem," and "sacra doctrina," which employs metaphor "propter necessitatem et utilitatem," with the caveat that his poem, not for nothing called a *poema sacro*, functions more like *sacra doctrina* in this respect than like "poetry."¹⁰¹ In elaborating the category of *comedia*, as this term is used in the *Comedy*, Dante has not simply availed himself of current rhetorical theory, but has invented a new category, in order to accommodate a new kind of textuality, whose employment of figurative language "propter necessitatem et utilitatem" distinguishes it from all *belle menzogne*, whether they be his own, in the *Convivio*, or those of his classical antecedents. The hallmark of this textuality is the ability to say, with Cacciaguida, "Io dirò cosa incredibile e vera" (*Par.* XVI, 124), or, like Dante in an eclogue to Giovanni del Virgilio: "mira loquar, sed vera tamen" ("I tell of marvels, but they are nonetheless true"). The unbelievable but true—*mira vera*—is precisely the province of what, in another eclogue, Dante calls his *comica verba*.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. q. 1, a. 9.

¹⁰² The *Paradiso*'s "cosa incredibile e vera," with reference to one of the gates of ancient Florence, glosses the *Inferno*'s "cosa incredibile," namely a speaking thornbush derived from the *Aeneid* (*Inf.* XIII, 50); the parallel between the mythological content of the infernal episode and Cacciaguida's sober fact further clarifies the difference between *comedia* and *tragedia*. The phrase "mira loquar, sed vera tamen" is from Dante's second Eclogue, line 40; particularly suggestive is the fact that the narrator is here preparing to describe the "true marvel" of the singing flute, a verbal marvel reminiscent of others in Dante's canon: from the miraculous speech that leads to the creation of "Donne ch'avete," to the *visibile parlare* of *Purgatorio* X. In the first Eclogue, Tityrus (Dante) had explained to his friend that Mopsus (Giovanni del Virgilio) disapproves of his use of "Comica . . . verba," i.e. the vernacular, because it sounds on the lips of women and is spurned by the Muses (52-54); the similarity between this passage and the Epistle to Cangrande, where Dante claims that his poem is written in the "locutio vulgaris in qua et muliercule comunicant" ("vernacular discourse that even women use" [*Epistole* XIII, 31]), has been noted. The *Eclogues* also provide valuable insights regarding Dante's relation to Vergil, whose *buccolici carmi* Dante is here openly—and prophetically—imitating, and whose pastoral name he adopts (Vergil uses the name Tityrus for himself in *Eclogues* I and VI; on the decidedly non-Vergilian pastoral tradition before Dante, see Carlo Battisti, "Le Egloghe Dantesche," *Studi danteschi* 33, fasc. 2 [1955-56], 61-

Dante gives us two basic signs that his text is to be considered "true." One is his appropriation of real people, historical lives, a historicity that functions dialectically: the text "takes life" from some and "gives life" to others. The appropriation of a major figure, like Vergil, gives life to the text, allowing the text in turn to give life to all the minor figures, like Francesca, who crowd its pages. The distinction between text and life—text and truth—is thus deliberately blurred, and never more so than when Cacciaguida invests Dante with his poetic mission, telling him that, in order to assure his poem its exemplary powers of persuasion, he has been introduced only to famous souls, "anime che son di fama note" ("souls who are known to fame" [Par. XVII, 138]), even though this is patently untrue: most of the souls Dante meets we would never have heard of were it not for his poem. They are famous now because the text has given them life, making them into the kinds of exemplary figures whom Cacciaguida describes; Cacciaguida's assertion, untrue when it was written, is true now, because the text has made it true. Besides articulating the principle of the exemplum, with its necessary contamination between life and text, Cacciaguida further tells his descendent to make manifest all that he has seen ("tutta tua vision fa manifesta" [128]), having first set aside all falsehood ("rimossa ogne menzogna" [127]), for although Dante's voice will be unpleasant at first taste, it will

111, who demonstrates precise textual echoes of Vergil in Dante). Regarding our earlier discussion of the relation between *virga* and *Virgilio*, it is perhaps not insignificant that, in these poems written under the sign of Vergil, Dante should coin the term "virgiferi" ("staff-bearers" [IV, 92]) to refer to his poet-shepherds (on this use of *virgiferi* for "poets," see Battisti, "Le Egloghe Dantesche," p. 109). Finally, we note that Dante seems to accept Giovanni's terminology, according to which he—like Vergil—is a *vates*; he uses the term for himself and others in II, 36 (this constitutes the only occasion in which Dante applies the term, even indirectly, to himself). If, in the *Eclogues*, Dante accepts the standard terminology dictated by Latin usage, his avoidance of *vates* in the *Comedy* would appear to be related to that text's disjunction of itself from its forebears in the name of a new poetics, in which a *poeta* is a *vates* by implication. On the identity established by Dante between the terms *poeta* and *profeta*, see Mineo, *Profetismo e apocalittica in Dante*, pp. 303-307.

leave vital nourishment when digested (130-132);¹⁰³ he then transforms "la voce tua" of line 130 into the more potent *grido* of line 133, the cry that will smite the great of the earth: "Questo tuo grido farà come vento, / che le più alte cime più percuote" ("This cry of yours will do as the wind, which strikes most on the highest peaks" [133-134]). If Cacciaguida's injunction to leave aside all falsehood—"ogne menzogna"—seems to steer Dante's text away from its classical antecedents, his other remarks work to align it with more worthwhile precursors; the text's "vital nodrimento" reminds us that it is written "per utilitatem," and the emphasis on making truth manifest anticipates the description of the Gospel of John as "l'alto pre-conio che grida l'arcano / di qui là giù sovra ogne altro bando" ("the high announcement that more than any other heralding cries out the mystery of here down there" [Par. XXVI, 44-45]). The duty of a text is to be a proclamation, revealing secrets that should be made manifest, to be, like the Gospel, a "preconio che grida l'arcano"; the use of *gridare* here, with reference to the Gospel, is linked to Cacciaguida's definition of Dante's own text as *questo tuo grido*.¹⁰⁴ The importance of *gridare* for the

¹⁰³ The stress on the text as nourishment seems connected to the placement of one of the *Purgatorio*'s most notable poetic discourses on the terrace of gluttony. Whereas Bonagiunta and the other souls on the terrace of gluttony pray to the Lord to open their mouths in a song of praise, in the *Paradiso* we witness a poet whose mouth *has been* opened: the *Purgatorio*'s "Labia mea, Domine" (XXIII, 11) is answered by St. Peter's "apri la bocca, / e non asconder quel ch'io non ascondo" ("Open your mouth, and do not hide what I do not hide" [Par. XXVII, 65-66]).

¹⁰⁴ On the prophetic implications of the term *grido*, see Gian Roberto Sarolli, "Dante's Katabasis and Mission," in *Prolegomena alla Divina Commedia*, pp. 381-419. It may be recalled that Guittone too is associated with the term *grido*, albeit negatively; he is one whose praises were passed on from cry to cry, until finally the ill-founded *grido* was overcome by the truth: "di grido in grido pur lui dando pregio, / fin che l'ha vinto il ver con più persone" (*Purg.* XXVI, 125-126). There is a passage in *Paradiso* XIII, in which St. Thomas cautions the pilgrim not to make hasty judgments, that contains the verbal imprints of the Guittone passage of *Purgatorio* XXVI: here the *stolti* (used twice, in 115 and 127) are those who, because they do not discriminate, are bent in the wrong direction by "current opinion," and then fixed there by their vanity (*Par.* XIII,

poet's mission is expressed as early as the *Convivio*, where, regarding the composition of his first didactic poem, "Le dolci rime," Dante says: "proposi di gridare a la gente che per mal cammino andavano, acciò che per diritto calle si dirizzassero" ("I decided to cry out to the people who were going on the wrong path, so that they would straighten themselves onto the right way" [*Convivio* IV, i, 9]).

If Dante's poem is a *vision*, it is the same kind of vision afforded Saint John in the Apocalypse, the vision of one who

118-120). The echoing, in "l'opinione corrente" (119), of the "opinione" of *Purgatorio* XXVI, which tied people to the rumor of Guittone's greatness ("A voce più ch'al ver drizzan li volti, / e così ferman sua opinione / prima ch'arte o ragion per lor s'ascolti" [121-123]), finally issues forth in a condemnation that contains two more key terms from *Purgatorio* XXVI, *vero* and *arte*. Using the implied metaphor of sailing, which is linked to poetry throughout the *Comedy*, St. Thomas explains that he who leaves the shore ill-equipped does so at his peril: "Vie più che 'ndarno da riva si parte, / perché non torna tal qual e' si move, / chi pesca per lo vero e non ha l'arte" ("Far worse than in vain does he leave the shore, because he returns not the same as he sets out, he who fishes for the truth and has not the art" [121-123]). Given the insistent use of terms from the Guittone passage of *Purgatorio* XXVI—*stolti*, *opinione*, *vero*, *arte*—it seems not farfetched to suggest that the phrase "chi pesca per lo vero e non ha l'arte" is intended (although by no means exclusively) to describe Guittone, who certainly was "fishing for the truth," and who—according to Dante—had not the art to do so. If this is so, the passage confirms Dante's sense of Guittone as a poet whose aspirations were much like his own. Finally, let me conclude this excursus on the lyric subtext of *Paradiso* XIII by pointing out that if Guittone provides the negative term for Thomas' remarks, showing us what not to be, Guinizzelli provides the substance of his discourse: in his sonnet to Bonagiunta, "Omo ch'è saggio non corre leggero" ("A wise man does not run lightly"), Guinizzelli advocates the same intellectual caution and discrimination enjoined upon us by the saint. Indeed, the likelihood that Dante had Guinizzelli's poem in mind while composing canto XIII seems confirmed by the fact that the sonnet contains another highly pertinent verse: line 5, "Foll'è chi crede sol veder lo vero" ("He is mad who thinks that he alone sees the truth"), could stand as a rubric for the entire heaven of the Sun in which *Paradiso* XIII is situated. If Dante here raises the shadows of his lyric precursors, it is because the passage at hand deals implicitly with the very core of his paradoxical poetics; he is the poet who judges all while admonishing us not to judge, the poet—as witness to a sole and unimpeachable truth—can dramatize its many facets.

is in a waking sleep, like the old man who personifies the Apocalypse in the allegorical procession and who comes forward "dormendo, con la faccia arguta" ("sleeping, with a keen face" [*Purg.* XXIX, 144]).¹⁰⁵ It is in a waking sleep, with perfect consciousness, that Dante decides on his radical handling of textuality's fundamental issue, the question of its truth or falsity, and that he decides to make a text which attempts to obliterate the boundaries between art and life. With equal deliberateness, Dante chooses his title, making it a sign of the text's marginal status, its self-imposed difference, its newness. The title, which has generated controversy from the beginning of the exegetical tradition to the present because of its seeming unsuitability, is the pivotal element of the poet's revisionist poetics:¹⁰⁶ the *alto precontio* announcing his decision to adopt a solution to the problem of fiction that would be simple, totally effective, and so radical that it would place his text in a condition of outsideness, eternal liminality with respect to both past and future, the traditions that exist in a normal genealogical flow

¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Dante openly aligns himself with John earlier in this canto, where he cuts short the description of the four animals surrounding the chariot with the injunction to read Ezekiel; however, on the question of the number of their wings, "Giovanni è meco e da lui si diparte" ("John is with me, and departs from him," i.e. Ezekiel [*Purg.* XXIX, 105]). Thus the poet is one of the prophets, who—although they may differ on details—share knowledge of the truth. The strategy here is typically Dantesque: because it is embedded within the pedantry of the discussion (six wings or four?), the enormous claim seems unremarkable. We don't even notice the hubris of "Giovanni è meco": Dante is not saying that he agrees with John, but that John agrees with him!

¹⁰⁶ Benvenuto devotes the last pages of his Introduction to the question of the *Comedy*'s title, claiming that the text contains all three basic styles, and that it could as correctly be entitled "satyra, quam tragoedia, vel comoedia" (vol. I, p. 19). He goes on to suggest that the poem's happy ending may have induced Dante to choose its perplexing title. On this issue, see: Pio Rajna, "Il titolo del poema dantesco," *Studi danteschi*, 4 (1921), 5-37; Manfredi Porena, "Il titolo della *Divina Commedia*," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, 9 (1933), 114-141; Amilcare A. Iannucci, "Dante's Theory of Genres and the *Divina Commedia*," *Dante Studies*, 91 (1973), 1-25; and, from an entirely different perspective, Giorgio Agamben, "Comedia: la svolta comica di Dante e la concezione della colpa," *Paragone* 29, fasc. 346 (1978), 3-27.

on either side of it. All texts end with the *Comedy*, but none come out of it, for the price of inimitability is not to be imitated, as Dante knew full well when he inscribed one of the *Comedy's* great *forse* verses at the outset of the *Paradiso*: "forse di retro a me con miglior voci / si pregherà perché Cirra risponda" ("perhaps after me better voices will pray that Cyrrha may respond" [*Par. I*, 35-36]). No "better voices" will follow in this tradition, for the very desperation that gives the *Comedy* its certainty is also the index of its emargination. Dante knows that there will be no *di retro a me* and signifies as much in his title, whose paradoxical mixture of pride and humility will not be available to the poets of a later time, for whom the appropriation of reality is no longer a viable textual option. Dante's title is not intended to work in a conventional context, but to point the way out of it; precisely because it eludes conventional understanding, it was altered in the Venice edition of 1555 by Lodovico Dolce, who added the adjective *divina* and thereby unwittingly rendered it redundant.¹⁰⁷ But Dolce's apparent oxymoron has at least the merit of preserving the paradoxical nature of the original, which serves as the key to a paradoxical hermeneutics: as a title that embodies the principle of conversion, *Comedia* contains in itself the dialectic of the poem's totalitarian instability, its volatile peace.

¹⁰⁷ Rajna demonstrates that Dolce's most likely source for the adjective *divina* was Claudio Tolomei's *Cesano*, published by Gabriele Giolito at the same time as Dolce's edition of the *Comedy*; see "L'epiteto 'divina' dato alla *Commedia* di Dante," *Bullettino della Società Dantesca*, 22 (1915), 107-115 and 255-258. Besides its descriptive function, the adjective also possesses an apt if unintentional intertextual resonance in its echo of the *Thebaid's* reference to Vergil's poem as "divinam Aeneida."

APPENDIX

DANTE'S POETS

This Appendix provides, for each of the *Comedy's* chief poets, the locations in which Dante names or refers to him throughout his oeuvre. These summaries can be used synchronically, as indices of the poets who most interested Dante at a particular stage in his development, or diachronically, as charts of his developing attitudes toward a specific poet. Thus, one can verify the impression that Arnaut Daniel and Juvenal would, before intersecting in the *Comedy*, trace very different itineraries through Dante's texts: Arnaut is represented in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, while Juvenal figures in the *Convivio* and *Monarchia*. The decision to list only those instances in which a poet is named or mentioned (so that both "Stazio poeta" and "lo dolce poeta" are included), omitting those in which he is quoted or echoed without being explicitly referred to, results in certain lacunae of which the reader should be aware. For instance, Giacomo da Lentini is not named until the *Comedy*, but he was most likely in Dante's mind in *Vita Nuova* XXV, where he writes of "li primi che dissero in lingua di sì" ("the first who composed in Italian" [5]), and a canzone of Giacomo's is cited in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. By the same token, since the citations from the *Aeneid* and the *Pharsalia* in *Epistola VII* are not registered, only Vergil, who is explicitly named, appears as a classical authority of that Epistle. The entries are divided into three groups—Provençal, Italian, and classical—and each group is arranged alphabetically.