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of Glasgow**

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Master of Philosophy by Research in Classics

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**POETICAL VOCABULARY IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*
IMITATION, EMULATION, SUPERSEDING AND REDEMPTION
OF THE CLASSICS**

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Introduction

Dante's relationship with his classical models has interested many scholars over the decades, especially because of the numerous references to classical literature in the *Commedia*, which suggest a profound knowledge of the *auctores* despite the little evidence for Dante's actual education. Previous studies have focused on the modality and quality of classical reception in Dante as the work of a man living in a world that interpreted most pagan literature in Christian terms;¹ on how and where Dante alludes and refers to classical literary material in the *Commedia*;² on how Dante developed the *genre* of comedy from Antiquity;³ and finally on how Dante perceived classical literature as inadequate and insufficient compared to the thought and writings of Christianity.⁴

My research consists primarily in the analysis of the *Commedia*'s technical poetical vocabulary (i.e. *genre*, specific verbs and objects) and poetical topoi and images related to writing poetry that have their roots in classical literature (invocations, sailing similes, coronation with laurel, immortalization of the poet as *vates*, the effects of poetical song on the audience, ineffability).

In addition to finding new literary correspondences between Dante and his *auctores*, I have attentively evaluated Dante's dialogue with the Classics, pointing out that Dante's 'lungo studio' and 'grande amore' are the literary foundation of the *Commedia*; and that although the relationship

¹ Comparetti 1896, Battaglia 1965, Weiss 1969, Benko 1980, Pertile 1981, Kleinhenz 1988, Ziolkowski-Putnam 2008.

² Moore 1896, Whitfield 1949, Hollander 1968, Paratore 1968, Kirkpatrick 1978, Parenti 1982, Jacoff 1987, Corti 1989, Ziolkowski 1990.

³ Barański 1995 and 1997.

⁴ Ossola 2001, Botterill 1996, Nardi 1966, Brugnoli 1967, Barberi Squarotti 1977, Hollander 1983, Barolini 1984, Gorni 1990, Boyde 2000.

between Dante and his classical models is not definitely established from the encounter with Virgil, it develops in love, conflict, imitation, in-/dependence, superseding and redemption throughout his journey, as Dante's personality evolves between his descent to Hell and his rise to Paradise. At the end of his poem there is no total refutation of his *auctores*; yet by incorporating them into his poetry to express even the essence of God, Dante gives them the chance to redeem themselves from paganism, to write Christian poetry through his own verses and to participate in the kingdom of God as poets.

On this basis I have formulated a new interpretation of the allegorical 'dark wood' in *If. 1*: the dark wood becomes the literary place for Dante's poetical orientation and definition of his own identity, and the meeting with Virgil represents the starting point of the *Commedia* as a work of poetry.

Dante's reception of the Classics is an issue of pressing interest not only for *dantisti*, yet for any scholar in the field of humanities, as it embodies the lively interaction between the Christian-based culture of Western society and its classical roots, which becomes more forcefully relevant today as cultural identities face both internal and external fragmentation.

Part One

Encountering Virgil and Statius: Dante's Revisited Relationship with the Classics

Dante meets Virgil and Statius in *If.* 1 and *Pg.* 22 respectively. Both poets are mentioned by Dante in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* among the canon of *poetae regulati* (i.e. the poets who compose verses in Latin language and metre).¹ In these encounters Dante expresses his devotion to and love for the Latin *auctores*, acknowledging the influence they have on his poetry.

Virgil is recognized as Dante's principal model, on whom he bases his poetical style, according to the belief current in the Middle Ages that Virgil was the most excellent poet among the Romans in mixing truth with delight, as the commentator Da Buti puts it.² On the other hand, Statius is appreciated for the sweetness of his poetry, even though the *Silvae*, in which Statius wrote nearly all his most enchanting lines, were not known in the 1300s. Nevertheless, appreciation of Statius' charming style was well established and consolidated in the Middle Ages by tradition since Antiquity, and was well known to Dante, thanks to the testimony of Juvenal, who states that the

¹ Dante uses the word 'poeta' to indicate exclusively the classical poets, as they composed poetry according to the rules of grammar, rhetoric, and musical rhythm; those who wrote a poetical work without the technical support of *grammatica* and *musica* are called simply versifiers; cf. *DVE* 2.4.2, [poesia] nichil aliud est quam fictio rhetorica musicaque poita. [Qui vulgariter versificantur] differunt tamen a magnis poetis, hoc est regularibus, quia magni sermone et arte regulari poetati sunt, hii vero casu [...]; and *DVE* 2.6.7, utilissimum foret [...] regulatos vidisse poetas, Virgilium videlicet, Ovidium Metamorfoseos, Statium atque Lucanum.

² The 'bello stilo' mentioned in *If.* 1.87 is the poetical style Dante has modelled on that of Virgil. Buti (ed. 1982, vol. 1, 43-4) explains that poetry is nobler than historiography, since the latter reports real events in order either to educate or to give pleasure, whereas the former adds delight to the truth. Above every other poet is Virgil: 'lo storiografo dice la verità nuda, onde solamente diletta o solamente ammaestra; ma il poetico sotto figure e finzioni comprende la verità sì, che insieme diletta et ammaestra; e questo così fatto stilo è bello [...] Virgilio in questo stilo poetico avanzò tutti li altri poeti latini e Dante in esso à seguitato lui'. Cf. Hor. *Ars Poet.* 99-100, non satis est pulchra esse poemata; dulcia sunto / et, quocumque volent, animum auditoris agunto; 333-4, aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae / aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae; 343-4, omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, / lectorem delectando pariterque monendo. Chiavacci Leonardi (1997, vol. 1, 27) adds that *stilo* is the 'linguaggio poetico capace di esprimere le più grandi realtà umane, che è il vero debito di Dante verso Virgilio, o meglio ciò in cui Dante non riconosce altri predecessori o maestri'.

audience was literally captured by Statius' *dulcedo*.³ Only the imitation of the art of these poets – including grammar, syntax, and rhetoric – will lead the new poet to fame and glory. Dante is aware of the fact that this final goal is extremely arduous to reach and that not everyone who tries to attempt this task will succeed.⁴

Indeed, the strong poetical self-awareness of Dante plays a contrasting role in the scenes of *If.* 1 and *Pg.* 22, and makes both Latin poets slide back to an inferior level. While he recognizes their greatness as men of letters and of virtue, Dante perceives the deficiency in their poetry, which could never have been supplied by human means unless they were driven by the Revelation of God: pagan literature endeavoured against its limits to answer the need for eternity and infinity innate in the human being, though the result was inadequate.⁵ In opposition to pagan literature, the power of the divinely-inspired word is the factor on which Dante insists most when what he is about to say in poetry is beyond human possibilities. Poetry should disclose the truth of God through the mediation of the poet: poetry at its highest level reveals its ‘power to express, on a par with theology and

³ Juv. 7.82-6, *curritur ad vocem iucundam et carmen amicae / Thebaidos, laetam cum fecit Statius urbem / promisitque diem: tanta dulcedine captos / adficit ille animos tantaque libidine volgi / auditur; cf. Pg. 21.88, ‘tanto fu dolce mio vocale spirto’ (Statius speaking); Tanodi 1969, Ronconi 1965, and *infra* 41-5. The poetical characteristic of sweetness is attributed also to other poets or singers in general: cf. Hor. *Ars Poet.* 395, *saxa movere sono testudinis et precea blanda;* Ov. *Tr.* 2.465, *eadem blandi praecepta Properti;* 5.1.17, *blandique Propertius oris;* Met. 11.170, *dulcedine captus;* Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 9.643, *Cerberos Orpheus lenivit sibila cantu;* Stat. *Theb.* 10. 876-7, *molli / structa lyra.**

⁴ The imitation of the Classics is the first step to achieving the “fine style”. Yet there is also a divinely ordained factor in a poet’s progress to perfect style: in *DVE* 2.4.10 Dante clarifies that not everyone is elected to become a real poet on the model of the Classics, but *hi sunt quos poeta Eneidorum sexto dei dilectos et ab ardente virtute sublimatos ad ethera deorumque filios vocat, quanquam figurate loquatur.* Dante reads *Aen.* 6.128-31 metaphorically (*superasque evadere ad auras, / hoc opus, hic labor est. Pauci quos aequus amavit / Iuppiter aut ardens evexit ad aethera virtus, / dis geniti potuere*). Cf. *DVE* 2.4.3, *accidit ut, quantum illos proximus imitemur, tantum rectius poetemur. Unde nos, doctrine operi impendentes, doctrinatas eorum poetrias emulari oportet.* Grayson synthesizes Dante’s thought, stating that poetry must be written within the rules of *ars* following the example of the classical authors, by learning their poetic theory (Horace’s *Ars Poetica*) and imitating their style: ‘the closer we imitate the classical writers, the more correctly will we write vernacular poetry, not only by studying their theoretical works [...] but by learning from their example the most noble constructions and expressions’ (1980, 155).

⁵ Cf. Picone 1997, 61: ‘the essential function of the canon of *auctores* in the *Commedia* seems therefore to be that of demonstrating the incompleteness of the classical world – the absence of meaning, which can only be granted by the Christian world’.

philosophy, the eternal truths the intellect perceives'.⁶ Therefore, the task of the poet is to undertake a prophetic mission: Dante is aware of his onerous task, ‘having been chosen like Aeneas and St. Paul to reveal to men a special vision of God’s justice’.⁷ Moreover, he well knows that true poetical glory, like spiritual glory, is acquired solely by Christian-orientated activity;⁸ however, it is a *conditio sine qua non* for the poet to be full of divine grace and to ‘reach out early for the angels’ bread’, so that the true purpose of poetry can be fulfilled.⁹ As a result, in spite of the prophecy of the birth of Christ in *Ecl.* 4 and the predestination of Rome as the place of residence for the Church presented in the *Aeneid*,¹⁰ Virgil cannot be totally redeemed, because of his paganism.¹¹ On the other hand, Statius’ poetical production cannot be accepted within Christian literature either, since his conversion to Christianity was held secret and did not affect his actions (or his poems) in life. In other words, only the man who entwines his personal Christian life with his poetical experience can reach both earthly distinction and, what is much more important, God’s approval.

Nevertheless, the texts from *If.* 1 and *Pg.* 22 show Dante’s deep reverence and gratitude towards Virgil and Statius, and by extension to all classical authors, for their immeasurable contribution in enlarging and deepening human horizons; at the same time they reveal Dante’s

⁶ Grayson 1980, 162. Indeed, in the *Commedia* the importance of good eloquence is often recalled and stressed, while badly spoken words are consequently cited as a source of perdition: on this specific topic cf. Botterill 1996. Botterill states that Virgil’s ‘parola ornata’ is capable of succouring Dante in the woods (cf. *If.* 2.67-9), yet is not sufficient to dominate the devils at the gate of Dis (cf. *If.* 9.13-15). Virgil lacks the ‘parole sante’ which come directly from God and assure their deliverance beyond the devils (cf. *If.* 9.104-5).

⁷ Grayson 1980, 161. Cf. Dante’s attitude of false modesty expressed in *If.* 2.32, ‘io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono’, and Nardi 1942, 265-328.

⁸ This is not the place to discuss Statius’ conversion to Christianity; cf. Barolini 1984, 257-8 for bibliography. Yet it is still worth noticing that one of the reasons for Dante’s superiority over Statius relies on the Latin poet’s sloth in the practice of the Christian faith (*Pg.* 22.90-1, ‘per paura chiuso cristian fu’ mi, / lungamente mostrando paganesmo’), or concerns the pagan themes of his poems (*Pg.* 21.92, ‘cantai di Tebe, e poi del grande Achille’). Cf. *infra* 16-19.

⁹ The “bread of the angels” refers to the study of theology: *Pd.* 2.10-11, ‘voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo / per tempo al pan de li angeli’. Cf. *infra* 82.

¹⁰ Virg. *Ecl.* 4.5-7, magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo. / Iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna; / iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto. According to medieval reception the tale of the predestination of the Roman Empire told in the *Aeneid* is supported by God’s will, since it is connected to the death of Christ and the later foundation of the Roman Church. Cf. Weiss 1975, 21-2.

¹¹ *Pg.* 22.66-9, ‘appresso Dio m’alluminasti. / Facesti come quei che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e sè non giova, / ma dopo sè fa le persone dotte’. Virgil is not conscious of the potential meaning of his own verses. It is Statius who gives them a Christian significance: cf. Kleinhenz 1988, 29: ‘the tragedy of Virgil is again evoked by his description as one who carries a lantern, the light of which benefits those who follow but not himself’.

polemic attitude and question whether, and in what respects, the Classics may be assumed as models and *auctores*, or become vehicles for authentic Truth and Knowledge as the Christian Dante intended them.

Let us read the two passages in which Virgil and Statius respectively present themselves:

“Nacqui *sub Iulio*, ancor che fosse tardi,
e vissi a Roma sotto ‘l buono Augusto
nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi.

Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
figliuol d’Anchise che venne di Troia,
poi che ‘l superbo Ilión fu combusto.

Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
perché non sali il diletoso monte
ch’è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?”

“Or se’ tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?”,
rispuos’ io lui con vergognosa fronte.

“O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
vagliami ‘l lungo studio e ‘l grande amore
che m’ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

Tu se’ lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore,
tu se’ solo colui da cu’ io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m’ha fatto onore”

If. 1.70-87

“Nel tempo che ‘l buon Tito, con l’aiuto
del sommo rege, vendicò le fóra
ond’ uscì ‘l sangue per Giuda venduto,
col nome che più dura e più onora
era io di là”, rispuose quello spirto,
“famoso assai, ma non con fede ancora.

Tanto fu dolce mio vocale spirto,
che, tolosano, a sé mi trasse Roma,
dove mertai le tempie ornar di mirto.

Stazio la gente ancor di là mi noma:
cantai di Tebe, e poi del grande Achille;
ma caddi in via con la seconda soma.

Al mio ardor fuor seme le faville,
che mi scaldar, de la divina fiamma
onde sono allumati più di mille;

de l’Eneïda dico, la qual mamma
fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando:
sanz’ essa non fermai peso di dramma”

Pg. 21.82-99

From these two texts we can see that both self-introductory speeches start with a chronological reference, connoting the time in which each poet lived. Time and space are paradoxically well-delineated in a dimension of both eternal Limbo (Virgil) and eternal salvation (Statius). Because neither poet lives on earth (*If.* 1.67, ‘non omo, omo già fui’), and they no longer continue to use their own names for identification (*Pg.* 21.91, ‘Stazio la gente ancor là mi nomo’), in introducing themselves they must outline the co-ordinates of their past existence, namely the political power in charge when they were still in the world, and their major occupation in earthly life.¹²

Concentrating on *If.* 1, Virgil’s Latin expression *sub Iulio* confers a tone of gravity on his words and draws attention to the figure of Julius Caesar within Dante’s perception of God-driven history, according to which Caesar plays a primary role as the founder of the Empire where the Church had set its secular power.¹³ The historical importance of Caesar as the first Roman *princeps* is mentioned here with solemnity for the very first time in the *Commedia*. Moore elucidates Dante’s conception of history by affirming that the poet ‘regarded the Empire to be as much a divine institution as the Church, and the history of the Roman people to have been no less divinely ordered in preparation for the one, than the history of the Jewish people was for that of the other’.¹⁴

Virgil provides another chronological indication (*If.* 1.72, ‘nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi’): this time Virgil is referring to the birth of Christ, in order to illustrate to the pilgrim that he lived before the Incarnation of the Word and was thus not a Christian. At first sight the reader could question what benefit this shadow could give to a disorientated soul such as Dante’s in the dark wood. The pagan gods certainly are not able to succour him, nor lead him to spiritual

¹² Cf. Getto 1967, 14: ‘i personaggi sono sempre riconosciuti nella loro origine municipale e radicati nella loro terra, come nativi di una determinata regione e appartenenti ad una ben individuata città’. A comparison of the structure of both texts is offered in Barolini 1984, 262-3.

¹³ For Dante’s perception of Caesar and the foundation of the Roman Empire, cf. Davis 1975, Schanzer 1955, and s.v. ‘Giulio Cesare’, *ED*, vol. 3, 22-4.

¹⁴ Moore 1896, 167.

redemption; thus it is natural to wonder how a heathen poet, who had no experience of God's truth, can show him 'the straight way which was lost'.¹⁵

Virgil continues: 'poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto / figliuol d'Anchise'. This is the declaration of his main occupation on earth: he was a poet. The first appearance of the verb 'cantare' in the *Commedia* is in line with its classical poetic usage, and it is even related to the greatest Latin epic poem, the *Aeneid*; in Latin epic, *cano* is used mostly to define the object of the song and its author, as it characterizes the genre of poetry and its contents and the writer's poetic intentions (*cano* is the technical verb for epic, and not elegy or satire).¹⁶ Virgil is announcing here the theme of his masterpiece, evoking his own verses and calling himself 'poeta'.¹⁷ All the Latin references and Latinisms ('miserere di me', 'parenti', 'patria', 'nacqui sub Iulio', 'Roma', 'buon Augusto', 'poeta', 'cantai') contained so far in Virgil's words progressively increase the tension of the passage by their gravity: the poetic tone becomes higher in importance and solemnity, in addition to the fact that Virgil's name is pronounced here by Dante for the first time, hence conferring on the scene an atmosphere of reverence and marvel.¹⁸ Dante utters Virgil's name with astonishment in *If.* 1.80 almost like an epiphany, as if Virgil were exhumed from the world of shadows and oblivion in that precise moment and brought to new life by the voice of his reader: Virgil is no longer a weak shadow now that Dante-the-pilgrim has recognized and interacted with

¹⁵ *If.* 1.3, trans. Sinclair.

¹⁶ 'Chi scrive *carmina* specifica il tipo di composizione, selezionando il genere e, soprattutto, all'interno del testo esprime la voce dell'autore' (s.v. 'Cano/canto/cantus', *EV*, vol. 1, 648). In Virgil, the verb *cano* is used frequently with a poetical significance: *Ecl.* 4.1, *paulo maiora canamus*; 4.3, *si canimus silvas*; 6.3, *cum canerem reges et proelia*; 6.9, *non iniussa cano*; 10.70, *haec sat erit, divae, vestrum cecinisse poetam*; *Geo.* 2.176, *Ascraeumque cano Romana per oppida carmen*; 4.566, *Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi*; *Aen.* 1.1, *arma virumque cano*; 9.525, *vos, o Calliope, precor, adspirate canenti*.

¹⁷ *If.* 1.71-2, 'che venne di Troia / poi che 'l superbo Iliòn fu combusto' recalls *Aen.* 3.2-3, *cecuditque superbum / Ilium et omnis humo fumat Neptunia Troia*.

¹⁸ Cf. Getto 1967, 14-15: 'nacqui sub Julio, ancor che fosse tardi, / e vissi a Roma sotto 'l buon Augusto, è tutta penetrata di una sacra solennità che si esprime nella formula latina e nella pronunzia di grandi nomi di Roma, di Cesare e di Augusto. Ma è soprattutto in quella rivelazione folgorante *poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto...* che trema e culmina in un'emozione profonda [...] E che cosa è questo incontro, nel suo momento poetico più autentico, se non il canto di una dichiarazione d'amore, che conserva intatta l'ingenuità, la freschezza e il pudore che l'hanno velata fin lì dal silenzio?' Virgil's name appears once in *Inferno*. The reader must wait until Pg. 7.7 to read it again: 'io son Virgilio'.

him, and Dante-the-poet has quoted his verses; on the same level, Virgil's poetical fortune is restored in the exclamation 'se' tu quel Virgilio...', since the glory of a dead poet (like Virgil) endures as long as living posterity (like Dante) remains in dialogue with that poet's works.¹⁹ Dante's apostrophe to Virgil in *If.* 1.79 ('quel Virgilio') and the references to the *Aeneid* at the beginning of the *Commedia* should be considered as indexes of the relationship between the author and his reader. It is indeed the reader, as he is the actual originator of the reception of the Classics, who primarily keeps ancient authors alive by reading and studying their works. Before the interaction with Dante-the-reader, Virgil-the-author is but a still silent shadow in the dark waiting for someone to call him forth, as a closed book longing to open up and speak out once again.²⁰ Despite the fact that the glory Virgil had earned in his past life does not affect nor alleviate by any means his unfortunate destiny in the underworld, Dante seems to find a secure and trustworthy guide in him, as he shows enthusiasm and excitement in meeting Virgil at such a drastic moment. Thus, the drastic character of the dark wood cannot be intended exclusively as an indicator of sin or immorality (with which the wood is often associated):²¹ the succour that Dante is looking for is not a spiritual one, since Virgil is not exactly a theological guide, as St. Bernard would be, but a poetical one. Virgil is an *auctor* in poetry and can only offer Dante help within his specialized field,

¹⁹ On the relationship between reading an author and prolonging his fame, cf. Ramajo Caño 2001, 295: 'en *Tristia*, Ovidio se sirve con más frecuencia de tal formulación sintáctica. En ocasiones, para resaltar la inmortalidad de su propia obra' (Ov. *Tr.* 3.7.50-2, *me tamen extincto fama superstes erit, / dumque suis victrix septem de montibus orbem / prospiciet domitum Martia Roma, legar;* 5.14.5, *dum legar, mecum pariter tua fama legetur*).

²⁰ *If.* 1.63, 'chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco'. The poets' fame endures while their names are still pronounced on earth. The etymology of *fama* lies in the root *φα* which relates to something *spoken* by a multitude (cf. *If.* 2.58-60, 'o anima cortese mantoana, / di cui la fama ancor nel mondo dura, / e durerà quanto 'l mondo lontana'); cf. Ov. *Tr.* 4.10.117-28.

²¹ Conv. 4.24.12, 'selva erronea di questa vita'. Pietro Alighieri comments (ed. 1846, *ad loc.*): *ivisse errando per prata et sylvestria loca diu, idest per operationes vitiosas, ut caecatus in nocte;* cf. Della Lana (ed. 1864-5, *ad loc.*), 'selva, si intende la vita viziosa e salvatica rispetto alla virtuosa, ed è scura in quanto conduce lo uomo alla securitate dello inferno'; Da Imola (ed. 1887, *ad loc.*): *sicut enim sylva est locus incultus, plenus insidiarum, receptaculum ferarum in hominem diversimode saevientium, ita in ista vita inculta sunt diversa genera viciorum saevientium in perniciem animarum et corporum;* cf. Boccaccio, *Esposiz.* 1.2.70: '[la selva è lo stesso inferno] il quale è casa e prigione del diavolo, nella quale ciascun peccatore cade ed entra si tosto come cade in peccato mortale'; Mazzoni 1967, 27: '[la selva è] luogo di determinazione esistenziale della creatura umana, luogo in cui essa *in statu viae* fu posta da Dio *ut operaretur* (*Gen.* 3.23) dopo che, pel peccato di origine, fu cacciata dal paradiso terrestre'; Gorni 2002, 51; and s.v. 'Selva', *ED*, vol. 5, 137-42.

not restore him on a spiritual level. If Virgil is the perfect guide for Dante at this stage (and he is), then before he met his master, Dante must have had poetical problems that Virgil could mend.

Previous to the meeting with Virgil is Dante's uncertainty in the dark wood (*If.* 1.2-3, 'mi ritrovai per una selva oscura / ché la diritta via era smarrita'): Dante is not achieving any progress in his journey or in his poetry (as the dark wood, the beasts, the desert and silence dominate the initial scene) before actually encountering, interacting with, and following Virgil. Dante seems to retreat and give up in desperation because he does not know which direction to take, and understands he is not capable of proceeding by his own strength.²² The pilgrim is lost in a forest which is not only the traditional allegory of human sin or existential condition, but it also represents the darkness of Dante's poetical inadequacy, as Dante actually meets his *auctor* or master of poetical style to guide him:²³ indeed the whole first canto can be read as a metaphor of poetical impossibility and difficulty connected to the last chapter of the *Vita Nuova*. At the end of his early prosimetrum, Dante perceives the insufficiency of his words to express his love for Beatrice, and promises himself to write 'no more of this blessed one until [he] could more worthily treat of her'²⁴ after a long period of study: this time of meditation and poetical pondering will end with the composition of the *Commedia* and the elaboration of his most beautiful poetry.²⁵ In accordance with the end of the *Vita Nuova*, *If.* 1 sees Dante drowning in an obscure lack of inspiration and still realizing he is unable to

²² Dante's fear, disorientation and despair are well depicted in *If.* 1.15, 'm'avea di paura il cuor compunto'; 1.35-6, 'impediva tanto il mio cammino, / ch'i' fui per ritornar più volte volto'; 1.54, 'ch'io perdei la speranza dell'altezza'; 1.57, ''n tutti i suoi pensier piange e s'attrista'; 1.61, 'io rovinava in basso loco'.

²³ This assumption is suggested by Nardi 1966, 220-1: 'il primo incontro di Dante con Virgilio [...] è quello sul terreno della retorica, e più precisamente del *bello stilo*'; and Gorni 2002, 49 and 56: 'salire il monte è forse metafora del far poesia'; 'Dante viene da un lungo silenzio. Silenzio della poesia' ('silenzio della poesia' echoes the silence of Virgil).

²⁴ Cervigni-Vasta 1995. Cf. Fichera 2005 and *VN* 42, 'non dire più di questa benedetta infino a tanto che io potessi più degnamente trattare di lei. E di venire a ciò io studio quanto posso [...] Io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna. E poi piaccia a colui che è sire della cortesia, che la mia anima se ne possa gire e vedere la gloria della sua donna, cioè di quella benedetta Beatrice, la quale gloriosamente mira ne la faccia di colui *qui est per omnia saecula benedictus*'.

²⁵ Gorni 1996, 278: 'quest'ultimo capitulo inscena un vero e proprio non-finale, che, invece che chiudere il libro, si apre all'estremo su un voto solenne, che fa della *Vita Nuova* la profezia di una profezia più grande, quale appunto sarà la *Commedia*'.

treat more worthily of the good he came across in his journey, despite his desire to do so.²⁶ The only anchor of literary salvation he can hang on to is the very first source of his poetical experience, Virgil: Virgilian are the dark wood, the beasts and the blessed presence of a special helper.²⁷

One of the first intentions of Dante-the-pilgrim in the dark wood is to reach the top of a hill which is illuminated by the sun at the end of an obscure valley (*If.* 1.13-14, ‘fui al piè d’un colle giunto, / là dove terminava quella valle’, and 1.31 ‘al cominciar de l’erta’): on the same level, Dante-the-poet is struggling to leave the quietness and barrenness of his earlier production, and begin a new poetical phase, trying to climb the mountain which represents the challenge and difficulty of poetry.²⁸ The deficiency of poetical motivation is symbolized by the imagery of the wood and by the three wild beasts who hold back the poet from progress and inspiration (*If.* 1.59-60, ‘venendomi ‘ncontro poco a poco / mi ripigneva là dove ‘l sol tace’; 1.35-6, ‘’mpediva tanto il mio cammino / ch’i’ fui per ritornar più volte volto’; 1.61, ‘mentre ch’i’ rovinava in basso loco’; 1.95 ‘non lascia altrui passar per la sua via’; 1.29, ‘piaggia diserta’; 1.64, ‘nel gran deserto’): the synesthesia ‘sol tace’ indicates poetical unproductiveness, since the sun corresponds to Apollo as the god of poetry and the desert conveys the idea of aridity of eloquence. It is under this light that the beasts impede the composition of poetry and restrain Dante from writing his poem.

²⁶ *If.* 1.8-9, ‘ma per trattar del ben ch’i’ vi trovai / dirò de l’altre cose ch’i’ v’ho scorte’; VN 18.8, ‘pareami avere impresa troppo alta matera quanto a me, sì che non ardia di cominciare; e così dimorai alquanti dì con desiderio di dire e paura di cominciare’.

²⁷ Gorni 2002, 53-4; *Aen.* 6.3, *lucos*; 6.118, *lucis* [...] *avernis*; 6.154, *lucos Stygis*; 6.238, *nemorumque tenebris*; 6.179, *itur in antiquam silvam, stabula alta ferarum*; 6.186, *aspectans silvam immensam*; 6.188, *nemore tanto*; 6.270-1, *per incertam lunam sub luce maligna / est iter in silvis*. Cf. Serv., *Comm. ad Aen.* 1.310, *lucus enim est arborum multitudine cum religione, nemus vero composita multitudo arborum, silva diffusa et inculta*. Aeneas asks two doves sent by Venus to help him in finding the golden branch in *Aen.* 6.194-7, recalling Dante beseeching Virgil sent by Beatrice in *If.* 1 (*este duces o, si qua via est, cursumque per auras / derigate in lucos, ubi pingueum dives opacat / ramus humum; tuque o dubiis ne defice rebus / diva parens*). As Hinds (1998, 11-13) points out that *Aen.* 6.179-82 evokes Ann. Ann. 175-9 by ‘metaphorizing a literary encounter between the poet of the Aeneid and his archaic predecessor in the Roman epic tradition’, we could assume the same thing happening in the dark wood between Dante (*If.* 1) and Virgil (*Aen.* 6), conferring to their encounter a literary significance.

²⁸ Dante attests to the difficulty of producing a work of poetry in DVE 2.4.10, *sed cautionem atque discretionem hanc accipere, sicut decet, hic [sic] opus hic labor est, quoniam nunquam sine strenuitate ingenii et artis assiduitate scientiarumque habitu fieri potest*. It is worth noticing that Dante quotes Virgil (*Aen.* 6.129) to state the difficulty of that labour: in *If.* 1 Virgil himself will offer Dante help to overcome his trouble with poetry. The sun which illuminates the hill is a metonymy for Apollo, the god of poetry and of the sun.

The anti-poetical aspect of the beasts is clear if compared and connected with the character of Pluto, since it presents the same features: Pluto is an infernal beast who hinders the progress of the pilgrims by speaking words of terrible effect and harsh sound (*If.* 7.1-2, “‘pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe!’ / cominciò Pluto con la voce chioccia’). Pluto is described as a swollen mouth, a damned wolf and a cruel beast consumed by rage, openly contrasting with the poet Virgil ‘savio gentil’ and his sweet words. Against the beauty of poetry, Pluto symbolizes the unpleasantness of bad rhetoric and embodies the same poetical aridity that dominates the initial stage of the *Commedia*, when Dante is trapped by the anti-poetical beasts. Despite the fact that the three beasts do not utter a word, they nevertheless correspond to Pluto; like Pluto, the ‘lonza’ is called ‘fera’, the ‘leone’ is frantic with ‘rabbiosa fame’, and the ‘lupa’ is described as ‘maledetto lupo’ as the following table shows.

Pluto	Lonza	Leone	Lupa
maledetto lupo, <i>If.</i> 7.8			lupa, <i>If.</i> 1.49
rabbia, <i>If.</i> 7.9		rabbiosa fame, <i>If.</i> 1.47	
fiera crudele, <i>If.</i> 7.15	quella fera, <i>If.</i> 1.42		

The triple number of the beasts and their anti-poetical character are replicated in the figure of Pluto, who speaks using ‘voce chioccia’ (*If.* 7.2), which is the equivalent to ‘rime aspre e chioce’ (*If.* 32.1) and denotes the asperity and harshness of speech and poetry.²⁹ The three beasts and Pluto both stand for poetical insufficiency, the former because they impede the poet and live in a ‘selva [poetically] aspra’,³⁰ the latter because of his strident words. The poetical asperity of the dark wood

²⁹ Barański 1998.

³⁰ *If.* 1.5, ‘selva selvaggia e aspra e forte’.

anticipates the unmusicality of Pluto's words and his incapability of expressing himself harmoniously, since the roughness of the wood is relevant not only to its irregular disposition of vegetation and its spiritual effect on the pilgrim, but also to the poetical deficiency that has taken over Dante, given that the specific term *asperitas* is often used by Dante referring to poetry.³¹

The environment of a poetical wood at the beginning of a literary work has classical resonances: for example, in Ov. *Am.* 3.1 the poet is wandering in a grove hiding a sacred source, looking for inspiration and finally meeting Elegy and Tragedy, who each propose to him a theme.³² On the other hand Dante is lost in the woods of poetical block and eventually stumbles upon Virgil (Dante's poetical source) who allegorically invites him to ascend the mountain of poetical challenge and consciously assume a higher subject of poetry.³³ The difference between the Ovidian and the Dantean wood is significant, however; while in the *Amores* the environment of the wood is pleasant and tranquil (there are sweet birds singing and not beasts raging) and the choice between Elegy and Tragedy is a programmatical declaration of poetics (Ovid will eventually opt for Elegy – at least in the immediate term),³⁴ the ‘selva oscura’ embodies the uncertainty of Dante's poetry and the crucial point for his spiritual salvation, revealing the deep entwinement between Dante's poetical and spiritual lives.

Yet the mountain cannot be climbed immediately: since the journey to reach spiritual salvation and poetical success is arduous and demanding, Dante must retrace his steps and start over

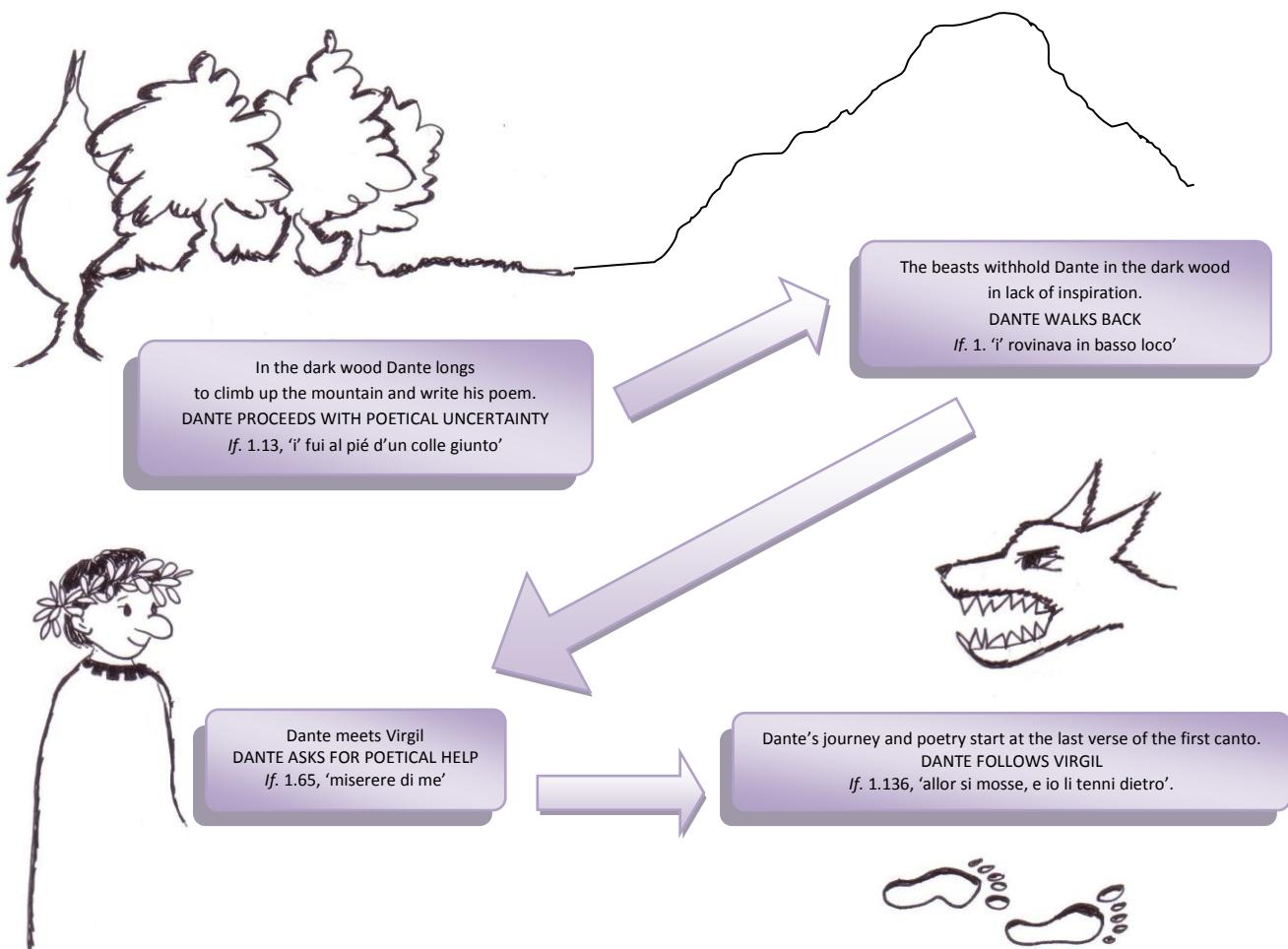
³¹ Cf. *Conv.* 4.2.12-13; *Rime* 103.1; s.v. ‘Aspro’, *ED*, vol 1, 416; *silva* indicates ‘the raw material of a literary work’ not yet perfected (s.v. ‘Silvae’, *OCCL*, 524); cf. Quint. *Inst.* 10.3.17, *silva aspera*; Virg. *Ecl.* 4.3, *si canimus silvas*; Hinds 1998, 12; and Fenton 2008, 563.

³² Ov. *Am.* 3.1.1, *incaeduia silva*; 1.3-6, *fons sacer [...] / hic ego dum spatior tectus nemoralibus umbris, / quod mea, quaerebam, Musa moveret opus*; 1.7, *venit [...] Elegia*; 1.11, *venit [...] Tragedia*; cf. Weiden Boyd 1997, 196: ‘this is a poetic grove and Ovid's poet has come to it precisely in the hopes of receiving inspiration [...] pondering his next poetical step’. Cf. Prop. 3.1.1-6; Luck 1957; Wimmel 1960, 296; and Fenton 2008, 563: ‘the use of the vegetable world as a metaphor for poetry is an old practice’.

³³ If 1.76-8, “ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia? / Perché non sali il diletoso monte / ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?” / “Or se' tu [...] quella fonte” and 1.91, ‘a te convien tenere altro viaggio’, which both contain a similar incitement to Ov. *Am* 3.1.24-5, *incipe maius opus / materia premis ingenium* (Tragedy speaking to the poet).

³⁴ Weiden Boyd 1997, 196: ‘inspirited wood, a fountain, a cave, birds – this grove is a likely place, perhaps, for an encounter between the lover and his *puerella*’.

again from almost the beginning of his poetical practice. Dante realizes that he is unable to make such an effort through his own strength, and needs a recognized author in order to proceed with caution and regain orientation; the silence from the abrupt ending of the *Vita Nuova* is finally broken by the voice of Virgil, who gives Dante after a few lines of poetical disorientation (*If.* 1.1-66) the starting point for the *Commedia* by quoting the *Aeneid*, which is the threshold of a new type of poetry yet to be explored by Dante: the real beginning of the *Commedia* is at the end of *If.* 1, when Dante physically and poetically follows Virgil.³⁵



³⁵ *If.* 1.136, 'allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro'. Cf. Chiavacci Leonardi 1997, vol. 1, 3; Antonietti 1972; Bosco-Reggio 1979, vol. 1, 1-5; Mastrobuono 1979, 46; and Giannantonio 1983, 80.

Meeting Virgil, who is actually the greatest representative of the Classical authors, Dante frequently refers to the *Aeneid* and makes use of Latinisms in order to build the basis for his new poetical journey: Dante's first words are the Latin appeal '*miserere di me*', which highlights Dante's belief that good-quality poetry should begin with the study of the Classics, and also displays his tribute to the greatness of Antiquity as though he were addressing the classical authors as a whole (and not only Virgil as their delegate) with a beseeching prayer: 'please succour me with your poetry!'

Virgil is the source from which every beauty of speech derives; he is the one by whom Dante is inspired to begin writing his lines, without whom there is no poetry: 'or se' tu [...] quella fonte / che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?' (*If.* 1.79-80). Virgil is also his guide, the light that illuminates the path clearly, and they should proceed side by side.³⁶

Dante's reverence for Virgil is conveyed once more if we continue reading: Virgil is proclaimed as 'de li altri poeti onore e lume', 'maestro', 'autore', and 'fiume'.³⁷ All of these words derive from a clear Latin matrix and, once again, the importance of the passage is conveyed by borrowing words and constructions from the Latin idiom.³⁸

³⁶ The expression 'quella fonte' reflects the Latin construction of *ille* meaning 'that famous' together with a person's name, which often appears in classical literature, including Virgil's own works. This expression in Virgil is connected with epic material and is accompanied by the name of heroes, mythological characters and gods, for example *Aen.* 1.617, 4.215, 4.331, 6.326, 6.767, 12.513. Besides, the spurious opening of the *Aeneid*, *ille ego qui quondam*, known to Servius, is a possible source of Dante's use of 'quel Virgilio'. *Geo.* 4.563 (*illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat*) could represent a further model: *illo* and *Vergilium* are written next to each other, but without being linked by grammatical agreement – *illo* is ablative with *tempore*. The same syntagma is presented in *Pg.* 21.124-5 in a similar context of praise and acknowledgement: 'questi che guida in alto li occhi miei, / è quel Virgilio'.

³⁷ *If.* 1.82, 85 and 80. The image of *fiume* as the source of copious poetical activity is also fully attested in the tradition: cf. Hor. *Car.* 4.2; Ov. *Am.* 3.1.3, *Pont.* 4.247, *Met.* 5.574 and *passim*. Virgil was already acknowledged to be a wide stream in Phocas *Vita Verg.* 26.

³⁸ *Lumen* (*Aen.* 1.590 and 2.683) and *auctor* (5.17, 8.134, 8.336, 12.405) are attested in Virgil's poetry with a sense of respect and reverence in their meaning, often accompanied by the name of a god or hero. Moore (1896, 167) states the increasing elevation of speech at this point in *Inferno*: 'Virgil is quoted by Dante as though his language was invested with almost the authority of Scripture'. The etymology of *magister* derives from the word *magis*, 'more', and the suffix 'ter', which is the ancient index for the comparative grade of the adjective: *magister* denotes a person of distinguished knowledge, who "knows better" than another, and in that respect he becomes an authority. According to Dante (referring to Hugutio of Pisa, s.v. 'Augeo', 5) 'autore' derives from the Greek *autentin*, 'degno di fede e obbedienza', so that 'autore, quinci derivato si prende per ogni persona degna d'essere creduta e obbedita' (*Conv.* 4.6.3-5). Battaglia (1965, 36) adds two other etymological hypotheses, one from *augeo*, 'to increase in quantity or size', 'to enrich', 'to develop', and the other form *auieo*, 'entwine words together'. The latter specifically denotes the poets who 'con l'arte musica le parole hanno legate', recalling the etymology of *ῥαψάδος* (from *ῥάπτω*, 'to sew'). Carruthers

In showing his admiration for Virgil, Dante portrays the quality of his relationship with his teacher: he gained from him that beautiful poetical style through which he received honour. The word ‘volume’ (*If.* 1.84) pictures the *Aeneid* as the most important poem in history, since it is used elsewhere in the *Commedia*, always referring to Scripture, conferring greater magnificence in this case. Hollander (1968, 145) considers the authority of the *Aeneid* in the Middle Ages to be stressed especially by the use of this specific word ‘volume’ and infers that the *Aeneid* is ‘the best book we have from Latin antiquity, the pagan counterpart of the Old Testament, the authoritative history of the seed of Troy on its way to becoming Christian, as the Old Testament is the history of the Hebrews on a parallel path’. This spiritual importance given to the *Aeneid* is the result of the misinterpretation of the Classics from the first centuries following the spread of Christianity in Europe: ‘a Christian reading the fourth *Eclogue* had little difficulty finding points of connection between the words and the ideas of Virgil and those of the Old and New Testament’.³⁹ Christian authors initially did not have the need to refer to classical literature in order to give authority to their own works, which already had authority from the Word of God itself; later they started reconsidering the Classics as literary models under another light, to gain legitimacy also from the world they lived in, and ‘the immense popularity of Virgil among the Romans was boldly used [...] to support the Christian truth and to give Christianity an air of respectability and objectivity’.⁴⁰ The reason for this lies in the full acknowledgement of the pedagogical primacy of pagan antiquity by late-antique and medieval literates on the one hand, and the parallel need to fit it into the new dominant Christian culture on the other, consciously or unconsciously deforming the original material.⁴¹ In other words, that the mere

(1990, 189-90) points out that ‘*auctor* was thought to be derived [also] from [...] *agere*’, implying an active relationship with the predecessors, since the ‘*auctores* were, first of all texts, not people’, and ‘the memory bits culled from works read and digested were rummaged into a composition – that is basically what an *author* does with *authorities*’. For further clarification on the subject, cf. Baroncini 2002; Picone 2005; and s.v. ‘Autore’, *ED*, vol. 1, 454-6.

³⁹ Benko 1980, 662.

⁴⁰ Benko 1980, 682.

⁴¹ As Comparetti states (1896, 97), Christians were naturally led ‘to assimilate the word of the poet they admired to the ideas imposed upon them by the new faith, and to purify him from what was in their eyes his only fault, the pagan

exaltation of pagan Rome and its traditions was the most relevant aim of the *Aeneid* was no longer acceptable for such an acclaimed poetical masterpiece, which continued to be read and studied even after the end of the Roman Empire. Its original aim had been converted into a more Christian view: the initial celebration of Rome added greatness to the city chosen by God to found the Catholic Church. Only on these terms could a poem like that of Virgil have had the fortune to claim such wide approbation as it had in the Middle Ages. The *Aeneid*, together with Virgil's other works, was one of the Latin texts to be most studied in schools even before the author's death in 19 B.C. as the most complete example of the use of the Latin language and its poetical means of expression.⁴² For this reason the diffusion of the *Aeneid* in the literary environment was more or less universal, since every student who commenced learning the *artes* of the *Trivium* and *Quadrivium* read Virgil and Cicero as their primary models of Latin classicism and grammar.⁴³

Medieval commentaries on the Classics were accompanied by information regarding the life and works of the specific poet in question, gathered in a section of the *codex* called *accessus ad auctorem*. These *accessus* also gave guidelines for the *correct* understanding of the text, providing amendment to their message with a Christian explanation. This is the case with Virgil's famous *Ecl.* 4.5-7, which was interpreted as a prediction of the birth of Christ *ante*, or better, *extra litteram*.⁴⁴ A

spirit', and 'the ecclesiastical writers did not look upon the ancient pagan authors merely as great masters of tropes and figures; whenever they found in their works any passage calculated to confirm the principles of the Faith, they promptly availed themselves of it, even to the extent of straining the sense, or even resorting to forgery'. Cf. Proba, *Praef. ad Centonem, dignare Maronem mutatum in melius divino agnoscere versu*; and Pg. 7.7-8, 'io sono Virgilio; e per null'altro rio / lo ciel perdei che per non aver fe'.

⁴² Cf. the information on the grammarian Q. Caecilius Epirota given in Suet. *De Gramm.* 16.

⁴³ Virgil's popularity in the field of education is judged by Comparetti to have extremely influenced the tradition of his texts throughout the centuries: 'the greatest triumph gained by Virgil and the other Augustan poets was in the domain of education. And, in fact, they had with their works so entirely satisfied what had been a long-standing want, that it would have been mere folly on the part of the schools to keep up the old tradition, and not to profit by this new and quickening nourishment which was offered them (28) [...] Many works which have been lost would not have been so had they had the fortune to be used as textbooks (29) [...] The use which the grammarians made of Virgil is so extensive that, if all the mss. of him had been lost, it would be possible from the notices given us by the ancients of the Virgilian poems, and the passages quoted from them by the grammarians alone, to reconstruct practically the whole of the *Bucolics*, the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*' (32).

⁴⁴ Numerous prophecies of the birth of Christ were identified by Christians in the Old Testament, which is previous to the *Eclogues* and the *Aeneid*: cf. Is. 7.14 and 9.5-6. Cf. Benko 1980, and Comparetti 1896, 97: 'Christian

Christian outcome, namely the final foundation of the Church in Rome, was imposed even on the *Aeneid*. Despite all the success brought to Virgil in the Middle Ages, Virgil undoubtedly was not a Christian and could not in any way have been aware of the prophecies which he himself uttered in his poetry, or be a source of theological illumination for Dante.⁴⁵ Dante does not take Virgil as a prophet inspired by God but primarily as a model for his poetry, as he clearly states in *If.* 1.85, ‘tu se’ lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore’. Dante is requesting the poetical support of none other than he who was considered the best Latin author ever: the wood becomes the dialectic stage for literary consciousness and development between the master and his pupil.

Dante’s dialogue with the classical authors is better appreciated if we reread the encounter of Dante and Virgil with Statius in *Purgatorio* among the greedy and prodigal:

“Nel tempo che ‘l buon Tito, con l’aiuto
del sommo rege, vendicò le fòra
ond’ uscì ‘l sangue per Giuda venduto,
col nome che più dura e più onora
era io di là”, rispuose quello spirto,
“famoso assai, ma non con fede ancora.

Tanto fu dolce mio vocale spirto,
che, tolosano, a sé mi trasse Roma,
dove mertai le tempie ornar di mirto.

Stazio la gente ancor di là mi noma:
cantai di Tebe, e poi del grande Achille;
ma caddi in via con la seconda soma.

Al mio ardor fuor seme le faville,
che mi scaldar, de la divina fiamma
onde sono allumati più di mille;
de l’Eneïda dico, la qual mamma
fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando:
sanz’ essa non fermai peso di dramma”

Pg. 21.82-99

authors did not disdain to quote his words in support of the great principles of Christianity, or with a view of showing that of all the pagans he was the one who had approached nearest to that faith’.

⁴⁵ Cf. Barolini 1984, 201-56; and Pg. 22.67-8, ‘facesti come quesì che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova, / ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte’.

The self-introduction of Statius can be compared with that of Virgil in *If.* 1 owing to the presence in both of certain key-elements. Again the Latin author starts by presenting himself through an indication of time and space (*Pg.* 21.82, ‘nel tempo che ‘l buon Tito’, and 21.89, ‘tolosano, a sé mi trasse Roma’),⁴⁶ religious circumstances (*Pg.* 21.83-4, ‘vendicò le fòra / ond’uscì ‘l sangue per Giuda venduto’),⁴⁷ profession (*Pg.* 21.85, ‘col nome che più dura e più onora’),⁴⁸ and principal subject of poetry (*Pg.* 21.92, ‘cantai di Tebe, e poi del grande Achille’).⁴⁹ Dante models the picture of Statius’ character on the example of Virgil’s first speech in *If.* 1, maintaining the same Latin-tinted tone and the same hint of Dante’s respect for the second poet: the only difference indicated to the reader is Statius’ Christian faith.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, a closer analysis of and comparison between the passages reveals a change of perspective: if in *If.* 1 we have the encomium of Virgil’s poetry on Dante’s part, a similar context (namely Dante’s praise of Statius) is likely to be expected in *Pg.* 21, when another of Dante’s poetical models is brought onto the scene, especially after the two parallel introductions just considered (*If.* 1.70-5 and *Pg.* 21.82-93). What captures our attention here is that *Pg.* 21.94 ff. (on a par with *If.* 1.79-87) still contains veneration for Virgil’s poetry, enacted this time by Statius himself, as another debtor to Virgil in terms of poetry and faith (*Pg.* 22.73, ‘per te poeta fui, per te cristiano’): Statius was moved from ‘ardor’ (*Pg.* 21.57) and ‘amor’ (*Pg.* 21.134) to compose his poetry,⁵¹ originating by the *Aeneid*, called here ‘divine flame’ and ‘seed’.⁵² The image of the seed as a generative source is connected to that of the mother – ‘mummy’ more precisely – and to that of

⁴⁶ Cf. *If.* 1.70-1.

⁴⁷ Cf. *If.* 1.72.

⁴⁸ Cf. *If.* 1.73.

⁴⁹ Cf. *If.* 1.73-5.

⁵⁰ On Statius’ conversion to Christianity cf. Landi 1913 and 1921, and s.v. ‘Stazio Publio Papinio’, *ED*, vol. 5, 419-25; and *supra* 3, footnote 8.

⁵¹ Cf. *If.* 1. 83 and Stat. Theb. 1.3, Pierius menti calor incidit.

⁵² *Pg.* 21.94-6, ‘fuor seme le faville / che mi scaldar, della divina fiamma / onde sono allumati più di mille; / dell’Eneida dico’; cf. *If.* 1.79-84, ‘quella fonte / [...] / o de li altri poeti [...] lume, / [...] tuo volume’.

the nurse, who both help to sustain the baby in all its needs.⁵³ As we proceed in our reading, the correspondences with *If.* 1 become more intense: the act of adulation described in *Pg.* 21.130 ('s'inchinava ad abbracciare li piedi') is similar to *If.* 1.81 ('con vergognosa fronte'), even though the latter expresses more a sense of shameful respect than of loving reverence;⁵⁴ the image of Virgil as a person carrying a lantern is supported by *Pg.* 21.96 ('onde sono allumati più di mille') and *Pg.* 22.66-9 ('appresso Dio m'alluminasti. / Facesti come quei che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova, / ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte') and finds its model in *If.* 1.82 ('de li altri poeti [...] lume');⁵⁵ the quality of Virgil's legacy to Statius' poetry is given in 'è quel Virgilio dal qual tu togliesti / forte a cantare de li uomini e di dèi' (*Pg.* 21.125-6), using the same vocabulary as 'quel Virgilio' (*If.* 1.79), and 'tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi / lo bello stilo' (*If.* 1.86-7);⁵⁶ again, the title of poet, 'nome che più dura e più onora' (*Pg.* 21.85), is on a par with 'de li altri poeti onore' (*If.* 1.82); and 'per te poeta fui, per te cristiano' (*Pg.* 22.73) is the perfect parallel of 'poeta fui' (*If.* 1.73), i.e. Statius becomes a poet like Virgil by literally echoing him.

This list of comparisons confirms that the introduction of the two Latin poets is similar in both passages; however, the two praises for Virgil originate from opposite points of view. Dante's tribute to Virgil is on a different level than Statius'; both Dante and Statius recognize their poetical model in Virgil, yet in two dissimilar attitudes. Statius' adulatory and emotional words reveal the character of a poet who dares not confront or emulate but just imitate his author, setting him in a sphere of divinity; Statius seems to follow blindly his model-'mamma' without beneficial dialogue,

⁵³ *Pg.* 21.97-9, 'la qual mamma / fummi e fummi nutrice [...] / senz'essa'. Note the alliteration of the sound 'm' which confers an infantile tone on these lines. The negative picture of Statius as an "infant" poet is stressed even more if we read the inadequacy for poetry of the 'lingua che chiami mamma o babbo' (*If.* 32.9). The concept of breastfeeding the poet is classical and usually referred to the Muses. It is recalled in *Pg.* 22.102 and 105, 'le muse lattar più ch'altri mai', and 'monte / che sempre ha le nutrici nostre seco'. In this context in *Pg.* 22, Virgil addresses Statius with the same colour of his speech as in *Pg.* 21.

⁵⁴ *If.* 1.81 is built on *Aen.* 6.156 to trace a closer correspondence between Dante-the-pilgrim and Aeneas.

⁵⁵ Even though Virgil is carrying a lantern, he is still a shadow of Limbo lingering in the darkness (*Pg.* 22.67, 'quei che va di notte'). This could be a further clue for a negative interpretation of pagan literature as hollow and insufficient, compared with Dante's.

⁵⁶ Note the same line-position of the words 'togliesti'- 'tolsi'.

keeping at a safe distance from it in adoration, ironically recalling the end of the *Thebaid*.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Dante's regard and admiration for Virgil does not prevent him from engaging in a mature interchange with him (be it polemic or simply constructive). Dante is conscious of his place in the history of literature, and wants to create new poetry, assuming the attitude of *ζηλός* ('eager', 'rival', 'emulator' in a positive sense) towards those who came before him. That is the reason why the basis of his poetry ('bello stilo') is not only love – although his love is great ('grande amore'), like that of Statius ('ardor', 'favilla', 'fiamma', 'scaldar', 'amor') – but also includes the time and effort spent reading the Classics, reflecting and meditating on them with positive criticism ('lungo studio', 'volume')⁵⁸ towards those whom he calls his masters and authors ('maestro' and 'autore', not 'mamma', nor 'nutrice').

Dante is far above Statius' infantile approach to Virgil: the vocabulary used in the two passages determines the difference between a mature and critical pupil (Dante), and a shallow imitator (Statius). According to Dante, Statius' weakness lies in the idleness and inactivity (*Pg.* 22.92, 'tepidezza') of his poetry as well as of his faith: as he did in his poetical works, he is too fearful to assume an outstanding position in matters of faith (*Pg.* 22.90, 'per paura chiuso cristian fu' mi'). It is only through an interactive approach that the author of the *Commedia* is fully able to emulate the *auctores* on the poetical and literary level as a poet, and to supersede them on the moral level as a Christian.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Cf. Stat. *Theb.* 12.816-7, *nec divinam Aeneida tempta, / sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora*. Statius' quote of Virg. *Ecl.* 4 in *Pg.* 22.70-2 ('secol si rinnova: / torna Giustizia e primo tempo umano, / e progenie scende di ciel nova') is not intended as Statius' literary interaction with Virgil's works, since it did not affect Statius' poetry, but his spiritual life. Statius became a poet by following the poetical example of the *Aeneid*, and became a Christian by following the prophecy in *Ecl.* 4. Cf. *Pg.* 22.73, 'per te poeta fui, per te cristiano'.

⁵⁸ Cf. Ov. *Pont.* 2.5.63-4, *tu quoque Pieridum studio, studiose, teneris, / ingenioque faves, ingeniose, meo.*

⁵⁹ Cf. *infra* 32-6.

Part Two

The Usage of ‘Cantare’: Imitation of the Classics

Dante’s usage of classical poetic vocabulary can be analyzed starting from the word which represents it all: ‘cantare’ is by antonomasia the technical verb which characterizes most of our poetical tradition. The Italian verb ‘cantare’, in this particular connotation, means ‘to narrate’, ‘to say something with solemnity’, ‘to say something in poetical verses’, and also ‘to compose lines of poetry’:¹ this definition corresponds to the Latin *cano*, ‘to sing’, but also ‘to celebrate (in verse) [...] to celebrate in lyrical language [...] to compose’,² and verbs within the same semantic range find their first significant manifestations in western literature at the beginning of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.³ In Latin poetry, *cano* holds most of the connotations of the Greek verbs *ἀείδω* and *ἐνέπω*, especially in epic contexts of invocations to gods.⁴

Dante inherits this particular meaning of ‘cantare’ from his classical models primarily when classical echoes are evoked in the *Commedia*. The construction of this verb is usually ‘cantare’ + ‘di’, and rarely ‘cantare’ + accusative (as the Latin form of *cano* would require). For example, the first appearance of ‘cantare’ is in *If.* 1, when Virgil summarises the contents of the *Aeneid*, drawing on his own words:

¹ S.v. ‘Cantare’, *GDLI*, vol. 2, 650-3.

² S.v. ‘Cano’, *OLD* 266.

³ Cf. *Il.* 1.1, *μῆνιν ἀειδε, θεά,* and *Od.* 1.1, *ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα. Ἀδω* – like *cano* – covers a wider semantic area than *ἐνέπω*, which means ‘to relate’ and is a technical verb for the opening of hymns. Cf. s.v. ‘Evéπω’, *GEL* 494; and Curtius 1953, 145-7.

⁴ Cf. Wheeler 2002, 35 ff.

Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
figliuol d’Anchise che venne di Troia,
poi che ‘l superbo Ilion fu combusto.

If. 1.73-5

It has been observed several times that in these three lines Dante condenses three passages of Virgil’s poem.⁵ Dante’s ‘cantai’ (*If. 1.73*) can be seen as another borrowing from Virgil’s *arma virumque cano* (*Aen. 1.1*) to complete Dante’s reference to the first line of his beloved *volume*: in *If. 1.73* ‘cantai’ is the third word (excluding the coordinative conjunction ‘e’) spoken by Virgil regarding his *Aeneid*, as *cano* is the third word (excluding the enclitic *que*) of the *Aeneid* itself. In both cases, the context is epic and traditional: the object of the song – ‘giusto figliuol’ – is in line with *virum*, since he is the protagonist of the poem.⁶ Even the subject of the verb is the same for each author, regardless of its tense which is present in Virgil and past in Dante.⁷ In his first canto Dante repeats Virgil’s lines (or, rather, Virgil-the-*Commedia*-character quotes himself) in terms of the verb and its object; however, he seems to forget to include the *arma*, which indeed is the opening word of the whole *Aeneid*. Should we run through the *Commedia* to the next important poetical encounter, in Pg. 22 we will discover that Virgil addresses Statius as follows: ‘or quando tu cantasti le crude armi’ (Pg. 22.55), referring to the *Thebaid*. Even though there is no doubt that these arms belong to the Thebans rather than to Aeneas, they are nonetheless presented as the object depending on the verb ‘cantasti’, according to the Latin construction *cano* + accusative, just as in *Aen. 1.1*, *arma [...] cano*, evidently evoking Virgil. At that time no attentive reader could have missed this subtle cross-reference between Pg. 22 and *If. 1*, or fail to appreciate the engagement of both passages with Virgil’s famous proemium.

⁵ Virg. *Aen.* 1.544-5, *quo iustior alter / nec pietate fuit nec bello maior et armis*; 1.1-2, *Troiae qui primus ab oris / Italiam [...] venit*; and 3.2-3, *ceciditque superbum / Ilium*. Cf. Moore 1896, 321-94; and Hollander 1968, 142-3. Most of the relevant bibliography is provided by Hollander in his footnotes.

⁶ ‘Giusto figliuol’ recalls more closely *Aen. 1.544-5*, cf. footnote 5 above.

⁷ Cf. *supra* 6.

Furthermore, another source for *If.* 1 can be traced: the epithet used by Dante to designate Aeneas (*If.* 1.74, ‘figliuol d’Anchise’) is modelled on the traditional repertoire of epic expressions, in parallel with the renowned patronymic of Achilles in *Il.* 1.1 (Pelides). Nevertheless, the name *Anchisiades* – which perfectly corresponds to the Italian ‘figliuol d’Anchise’ – is absent in the proem of the *Aeneid* since we already have *virum* to introduce the hero Aeneas. Moreover, the patronymic *Anchisiades* is used rather scarcely in Virgil;⁸ yet the following episode may plausibly relate to *If.* 1.74:

Talibus orabat dictis arasque tenebat
cum sic orsa loqui vates: ‘sate sanguine divum,
Tros Anchisiade, facilis descensus Averno:
noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;
sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,
hoc opus, hic labor est. Pauci, quos aequus amavit
Iuppiter aut ardens evexit ad aethera virtus,
dis geniti potuere. Tenent media omnia silvae,
Cocytusque sinu labens circumvenit atro.

Aen. 6.124-32⁹

At this point in *Aen.* 6, Aeneas has formulated his prayer to the Sibyl, who greets him as the son of Venus (*Aen.* 6.125, *sate sanguine divum*) and of Anchises (*Aen.* 6.126, *Tros Anchisiade*). Standing at the gate of Hades, the Sibyl warns him of the difficulty of the journey to the world of the dead, speaking words which evoke epic tradition. The Virgilian environment of the wood, the appeal for help by the pilgrim, and the start of a perilous expedition to the underworld are the

⁸ Virg. *Aen.* 5.407, *magnanimusque Anchisiades*; 6.126, *Tros Anchisiade*; 6.348, *dux Anchisiade*; 8.521, *Aeneas Anchisiades*; 10.250, *Tros Anchisiades*; 10.822, *Anchisiades*.

⁹ Another vocative with Aeneas’ patronymic is found in *Aen.* 6.322, *Anchisa generate, deum certissima prole*, when the Sibyl describes the banks of the Acheron.

source of the scene in the *Commedia*'s first canto.¹⁰ In addition to all these elements, the use of the patronymic is a further connection to Virgil although the two contexts are different: in the *Aeneid* the Sibyl gives a prophecy by providing Aeneas with indications for his journey, whereas in the *Commedia* Virgil speaks to Dante delineating the contents of his masterpiece, i.e. the latter is a poetical context. The use of Virgilian vocabulary at this stage of the *Commedia* demonstrates that Dante is comparing his own experience with that of Aeneas – despite his assurance that he is comparable neither to Aeneas nor to Paul (*If.* 2.32, ‘io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono’) – the comparison between his own poetry and that of Virgil becomes inevitable. However, Dante's choice of this particular title for Aeneas (‘figlioul d'Anchise’) seems to accord greater importance to Virgil's first words in the *Commedia* (already rich in classical reminiscences) and highlights Dante's deeper knowledge of the *Aeneid*, who knows it all as he affirms later.¹¹

The expression ‘cantare di’ also occurs to introduce the works of Statius. Dante's presentation of Statius in *Pg.* 21 reprises the epic example of *If.* 1.73-5:

Stazio la gente ancor di là mi noma:
cantai di Tebe, e poi del grande Achille

Pg. 21.91-2

¹⁰ The wood (*If.* 1.2, ‘selva oscura’; 1.5, ‘selva selvaggia e aspra e forte’) is mentioned in *Aen.* 6.130, *tenent omnia media silvae*; 6.138-9, *hunc tegit omnis / locus et obscuris claudunt convallis umbrae*; 6.178, *itur in antiquam silvam, stabula alta ferarum* (*If.* 1.42, ‘fera’; 1.58, 89 and 94, ‘bestia’); 6.186, *silvam immensam*; 6.188, *nemore in tanto*; 6.238, *nemorumque tenebris*; and in 6.271, *est iter in silvis*. The perilous journey and the harshness of the underworld (*If.* 1.114-7, ‘trarotti di qui per luogo eterno, / ove udirai le disperate strida, / vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti, / che la seconda morte ciascun grida’) is described in *Aen.* 6.128-9, *sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras / hoc opus hic labor est*; and in 6.168-294. The appeal for help (*If.* 1.89, ‘aiutami’; 1.130-3, ‘poeta, io ti riccheggio / per quello Dio che tu non conoscesti, / acciò ch'io fugga questo male e peggio, / che tu mi meni là dove or dicesti’) appears in *Aen.* 6.106-9, *unum oro [...] / [...] / ire ad conspectum cari genitoris et ora / contingat; doceas iter et sacra ostia pandas*; 6.115, *te supplex peterem*; 6.124, *talibus orabat dictis arasque tenebat*; and in 6.186, *sic forte precatur*.

¹¹ *If.* 20.114, ‘ben tu lo sai che la sai tutta quanta’. As Barolini has stated (1984, 202), the presence of Virgil and his poetry is very strong at the beginning of the *Commedia*, when Virgil is needed most by Dante-pilgrim, but it decreases constantly as the *Commedia* progresses. Cf. Hawkins 1999, 99-124.

Thebes ('Tebe') is the subject of Statius' main poem (the *Thebaid*), where it appears alongside a list of epic elements (kindred armies, kingdoms and battles), or simply alone:

Fraternas acies alternaque regna profanis
decertata odiis santesque evolvere Thebas
Pierius menti calor incidit. unde iubetis
ire, deae? gentisne canam primordia dirae

Theb. 1.1-4

canunt [...] Thebas

Theb. 8.228

Besides, the second object of the song in Pg. 21.92, 'il grande Achille', is also closely related to epic poetry, considering the opening of the *Iliad* or more precisely Statius' *Achilleid*: Dante could not have had direct knowledge of Homer, however he could certainly have read the *Achilleid*, that reports the deeds of the great Achilles: *magnus [...] Achilles*.¹² Through the correspondence between 'il grande Achille' and *magnus [...] Achilles*, Dante's quotation of Statius' last, unfinished work is clear here. An additional source for il 'grande Achille' is Ovid, who repeats the epithet *magnus Achilles* twice in two consecutive lines, creating a polyptoton by presenting the same noun and adjective in two different grammatical cases, thus highlighting once more the greatness of Achilles:¹³

... quis magno melius succedit Achilli
quam per quem magnus Danais successit Achilles?

Met. 13.133-4

¹² Stat. *Ach.* 1.19 and *passim*.

¹³ Latin authors seem to reprise the standard characterisation of Achilles from Greek literature as he was first depicted in the *Iliad* (1.1-4, μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Αχιλῆος / οὐλομένην, ἡ μνή Αχαιοῖς ἀλγε' ἔθηκε, / πολλὰς δ' ἵρθιμοντος ψυχὰς Λίδη προΐαψεν / ἤρώων), being either valorous and strong in fighting (Virg. *Geo.* 3.91, *magni currus Achillei*; Stat. *Sil.* 4.4.94, *magnusque [...] Achilles*) or burning with anger (Hor. *Carm.* 1.6.5-6, *nec gravem / Pelidae stomachum cedere nescii*; 1.15.33-4, *iracunda [...] classis Achillei*; Ov. *Am.* 2.18.1, *ad iratum [...] Achillen*).

Dante’s debt to the epic repertoire in treating the works of Statius is evident in the following:

Questi che guida in alto li occhi miei,
è quel Virgilio dal qual tu togliesti
forte a cantare de li uomini e d’i dèi

Pg. 21.124-6

and further along in the next canto:

“Or quando tu cantasti le crude armi
de la doppia trestizia di Giocasta”
disse ‘l cantor de’ buccolici carmi

Pg. 22.55-7

These verses refer to recurring elements in the majority of epic *incipita* and statements of the subject of heroic song. Each passage above (Pg. 21.126 and 22.55) is a paraphrase of the other, and a variation on ‘cantai di Tebe’ (Pg. 21.92) – since they represent the same poem, the song of Thebes – though utilizing different vocabulary: ‘uomini’ and ‘dèi’ in the first, ‘crude armi’ in the second, rather than ‘Tebe’. Once again, the words used by Dante are a re-elaboration of a Virgilian *locus*: a clear point of reference for the Dantean lines is the very first line of the *Aeneid*, which in keeping with the epic tradition introduces the objects of the poem, *arma* and *virum*. These words are collected and translated into ‘armi’ and ‘uomini’, and split between the two texts, so that the first passage bears *virum*-‘uomini’ and the second *arma*-‘armi’, both governed by *cano*-‘cantar’-‘cantasti’. In Pg. 22.55 the construction of ‘cantasti’ is modelled on the Latin *cano* in Aen. 1.1 (*arma virumque cano*, verb + accusative), despite Dante’s preference for using the lower-style

construction verb + 'di'. Moreover, the epic key-elements *pugnasque* (corresponding to 'armi', considering *arma* as synecdoche for *pugnas*) and *virosque* (corresponding to 'uomini') appear in *Theb.* 8.551-2, [Uranie] *cupit ille tamen pugnasque virosque, / forsitan ut caneret*. In *Theb.* 8.551-2 the epic atmosphere is enhanced even more by the presence of the Muse Urania at the beginning of the verse.¹⁴ In conclusion, the passages in *If.* 1.73-5 and *Pg.* 21.92, 21.124-6 and 22.55-7 are extremely rich in classical reminiscences and full of connections that descend ultimately from early Greek oral literature. The epic form is kept fairly unchanged by Dante both in terms of terminology and context. The epic subject of the hero of Troy or of the Theban saga is unaltered in respect of all the programmatic beginnings by Latin authors and the standards of the epic genre. 'Armi', 'cantare', 'uomini', and 'dèi' are analogous to *pugnas*, *arma*, *bella*, *cano*, *virum*, as specific traditional words by which the epic poems were immediately recognized.¹⁵ Considering the major Latin authors known to Dante, in Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Lucan and Statius the verb *cano* is indeed used in a poetical sense and presented along with its typical objects, e.g. arms, glorious men, gods, kings, heroes, peoples, deeds; however, this particular meaning of *cano* is relatively scarce in their texts.¹⁶ The reason for this derives from the fact that these authors' works are not exclusively

¹⁴ Another close model for both 'cantar de li uomini e d'i dèi' and 'cantasti le crude armi' is *Aen.* 9.777, *semper equos atque arma virum pugnasque canebat*. This Virgilian self-allusion is undoubtedly an added source for Dante's 'uomini', 'armi', and, of course, 'cantar'-‘cantasti’. Furthermore, in 'cantar de li uomini e d'i dèi', Dante seems to pick from *Aen.* 12.28 the words *divique hominesque canebat* and adapt them to a new purpose. In fact, in Virgil the context is not epic but prophetic and, additionally, *divique hominesque* are the subject of *cano* rather than the object and topic of the song as in Dante's 'cantar de li uomini e d'i dèi'. Finally, there is the opening of *Luc. Bell. Civ.* – *bella per Emathios plus quam civilia campos / iusque datum sceleri canimus [...]*, 1.1-2 – where the similarity between *bella* and 'armi', and *canimus* and 'cantar'-‘cantasti’ is patent. Poetic lines on this subject can also be found in *Virg. Ecl.* 6.3, *cum canerem reges et proelia*, where the connection is even stronger thanks to the presence of *canerem*; and in *Ov. Am.* 1.1.1-2, *arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabam / edere, materia conveniente modis*, where the equivalent of 'crude armi' lies in the Latin *arma [...] violentaque bella*, while that of 'cantasti' is in *parabam edere*.

¹⁵ The oral tradition of epic poetry in its initial centuries created the need for the bard to stress the poetic beginnings by the means of easily recognizable technical vocabulary, in order to make the performance simpler to follow for the audience. On orality in ancient literature cf. Gentili 1995, 15-47; bibliography on this question is given in Gentili's footnotes.

¹⁶ The most frequent acceptation for *cano* is 'to foretell' and 'to prophesy', especially in *Luc. Bell. Civ.* 1.581, *tristia Sullani cecinere oracula manes; 1.637-8, flexa sic omina Tuscus / involvens multaque tegens ambage canebat; 5.92-3, sive canit fatum seu, quod iubet ille canendo, / fit fatum*; the second most frequent meaning of *cano* is 'to sing with voice and instrument', many of which occur in *Virg. Ecl.*, 5.9, *quid, si idem certet Phoebum superare canendo;*

concerned with their poetics (Horace’s *Ars Poetica* is an exception) but concentrate every poetical passage in restricted and defined sections where a specific traditional vocabulary is utilized, i.e. the proems and appeals to the gods, recalling the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.¹⁷ On the other hand, Dante uses the verb ‘cantare’ mostly in contexts of poetry and poetics, to introduce poets and to relate to their works, adopting the same construction as the Latin language, yet not employing it in proemial sections as often and as standardly as the Latin authors did.¹⁸

One parallel with the object of epic poems which belongs to heroic vocabulary is ‘regno’, which in Dante indicates the three underworlds, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise:

dicean: ‘Chi è costui che sanza morte
va per lo regno della morta gente?’

*If. 8.85-6*¹⁹

e canterò di quel secondo regno
dove l’umano spirito si purga
e di salire al ciel diventa degno.

Pg. 1.4-6

5.72-3, *cantabunt mihi Damoetas et Lyctius Aegon; saltantis Satyros imitabitur Alphesiboeus;* 9.44-5, *quid, quae te pura solum sub nocte canentem / audieram?*; finally the less frequent meaning is the epic meaning considered here.

¹⁷ Here is an example of inner proem: Virg. *Aen.* 7.641-6, *pandite nunc Helicona, deae, cantusque movete, / qui bello exciti reges, quae quemque secutae / complerint campos acies, quibus Itala iam tum / floruerit terra alma viris, quibus arserit armis; / et meministis enim, divae, et memorare potestis; / ad nos vix tenuis famae perlabitur aura.* Cf. Conte 1992.

¹⁸ Cf. *infra* 54ff.

¹⁹ This passage will not be taken into close consideration since it does not include the word ‘canta’; besides it is taken from the *Inferno* where the usage of ‘cantare’, is a high poetical word and very scarce, due to the *Inferno*’s lower style: instead of ‘cantare’, the poet uses the verb ‘dire’ (*If.* 1.4, ‘ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura’; 32.12, ‘si che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso’); ‘trattare’ (*If.* 1.8, ‘ma per trattar del ben ch’i vi trovai’); ‘ritrar’ (*If.* 4.145-7, ‘io non posso ritrar di tutti a pieno, / però che si mi caccia il lungo tema / che molte volte al fatto il dir vien meno’); and ‘descrivere’ (*If.* 32.7-8, ‘non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo / disriver fondò a tutto l’universo’). ‘Cantare’ is used with a poetical meaning only in *If.* 21.2, ‘che la mia commedia cantar non cura’, referring to Dante’s own poem; the other occurrences refer to Latin poetry, as already explained, in *If.* 1.73, ‘poeta fui, e canati di quel giusto figliuol’, and in 20.112-3, ‘Euripilo ebbe nome, e così ‘l canta / l’alta mia tragedia’. Cf. *infra* 35-40.

Veramente quant’io del regno santo
ne la mia mente potei far tesoro
ora sarà la materia del mio canto.

Pd. 1.10-12

A direct source for both *Pg. 1* and *Pd. 1* is *Theb. 1.1-4*:

Fraternas acies alternaque regna profanis
decertata odiis santesque evolvere Thebas
Pierius menti calor incidit. Unde iubetis
ire, deae? gentisne canam primordia dirae...

As we can see from the passage above, the main subjects of the *Thebaid* are *acies* and *regna* in the first line, governed by *evolvere* [...] *calor incidit* (lines 2-3). In *Theb. 1.4* we find *canam*, which takes *gentis* [...] *primordia dirae* as its object and confirms the epic context of the passage. The presence of *canam* only a few lines after *regna* allows us to recognize Dante’s borrowing from *Theb. 1* to write ‘canterò di quel secondo regno’ and ‘quant’io del regno santo [...] sarà ora materia del mio canto’.²⁰ Other possible sources from Latin literature are *Aen. 7.641-2*, *pandite nunc Helicona, deae, cantusque movete / qui bello exciti reges*, thanks to the presence of *reges* and *cantus*, and in a way *Luc. Bell. Civ. 1.1-4*, because of the presence of two crucial words, *canimus* (1.2) and *regni* (1.4):

Bella per Emathios plus quam civilia campos
iusque datum sceleri canimus, populumque potentem
in sua victrici conversum viscera dextra
cognatasque acies, et rupto foedere regni...²¹

²⁰ In this last passage ‘canto’ does not appear in the form of a verb but that of a noun, being closer to the Latin word *cantus* or *carmen*. Cf. for example Virg. *Ecl. 1.77*, *carmina [...] canam*.

²¹ The opening of the *Bell. Civ.* is one of the rare poetic-epic *loci* in Lucan, or at least the most important and traditional. Other passages in the poem related to *cano* and its epic significance are 2.672-7, *talis fama canit* – referring to the deeds of Xerxes – and 9.643, *Cerberos Orpheo lenivit sibila cantu* – referring to the enchanting song of Orpheus.

In *Aen.* 7.641-2 the poet asks the Muses for help by writing a supplementary proem and listing the subjects of the poetry: *reges* firstly, then *acies*, *viris*, and finally *armis*. *Reges* could be regarded as equivalent to *regna* and ‘regno’, therefore reinforcing the correspondence between Dante and Virgil. In Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 1.1-4, however, the relationship to the *Commedia* is not as clear as it is in *Theb.* 1.1-4; in fact, *regni* at the end of line 4 is distant from *canimus* at line 2, and in this case it is not even the object of the song. *Regni* is a genitive within the ablative absolute *rupto foedere*: the proper accusatives of *canimus* are instead *bella*, *ius*, *populum*, and *acies*, and do not include any word or synonym that recalls Dante’s ‘regno’. We might assume that the relatively close collocation of the term *canimus* with *regni* in Lucan struck Dante when he first read the *Bellum Civile*, and impressed his intellectual visual memory so much so that he recollected the same word partnership between them, and reproduced them later in juxtaposition in the *Commedia*. Dante recognized *canimus* as one of the typical verbs used in poetical openings, and *regnum* itself is commonly part of the vocabulary of epic proems; in this particular passage, the outstanding position of *regni* at the end of line 4 has greatly influenced its memorization. Dante informs us in *If.* 20.114 that he knew all the *Aeneid* by heart: this is not the place to prove that Dante also knew the *Bellum Civile* by heart, putting the latter on the same level of importance as the *Aeneid*, yet it is plausible that Dante had memorized as many verses of poetry as he could when he read them, especially the *incipita*, because the manuscripts available were not easily retraceable in his times. Books and manuscripts were kept in private collections or inside abbeys and monasteries spread throughout Europe (where most *codices* were copied), which were rarely open to a public of scholars or amateurs. In the Middle Ages, public libraries on the model of those in the Roman Empire barely

An epic shadow can be found in 1.566, *cecinere deos*. Nevertheless, most of occurrences of *cano* in Lucan have a prophetic meaning and are used in contexts where magicians, foretellers and priests are speaking oracles. The main object of its song in Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 1.1, *bella*, is the very first word of the poem, as *arma* (both neutral plural with the same metric compute - -) is of the *Aeneid*.

existed, and even the distance between the monasteries conspired in making access to books rather difficult.²² All this alludes to an indirect consultation of Lucan’s poem when composing these lines of the *Commedia*, and a probable process of mnemonic recall which implied the commixture (unconscious or deliberate) of more than one Latin proemium previously memorized by the author, and consequently the use of those words which were more strongly impressed in his mind, such as *regni*. Additionally, works of classical poetry, the texts which we now read with line divisions, had been copied in manuscripts since Antiquity using the *scriptio continua*, in order to save as much space as possible on the sheet of papyrus, vellum, or paper.²³ In many cases the reader read the text continuously width-wise without any line interruption or start of a new line each time a new verse commenced. Poetical verses were conceived by their metrical structure, rhythm, and pulse, which are consistent and repetitive within their scheme. With a knowledge of prosody any expert could read classical poetry fluently even in manuscripts whose layout was rather unpractical. In this case, Dante knew that *regni* had a prominent place at the end of line 4 – no matter where it was written on the page – since he read it adopting a certain scheme of beats.

Thus, we may assume that Dante learnt by heart most of the major poetical works he was acquainted with (or at least their beginnings), and that he stored and remembered in particular those words that were located in crucial metrical places and then recovered them in time of re-elaboration and composition more easily than others, which were more difficult to recall because of the limited possibility of consulting texts. In addition to plainer references like Stat. *Theb.* 1.1-4, Dante might have elaborated his connections to classical literature through his stratified readings. This process may have occurred in the case of *Pg.* 1.4 and *Pd.* 1.10-12, where Dante wanted to emphasize the contrast between the Christian ‘canterò di quel secondo regno’ or ‘quant’io del regno santo / [...] /

²² Reynolds-Wilson 1968, 79-121.

²³ Gavrilov 1997, 59; and Thomas 1992, 92-3.

ora sarà materia del mio canto’, that he already had in mind, and the classical *canimus [...] regni* stored in his mind.

Up to this point, Dante’s use of specific epic vocabulary has allowed comparison with traditional epic poetry and its contents, raising the question whether Dante is engaged in completing an epic journey himself. We have already seen Dante’s refusal of comparisons with Aeneas and St. Paul.²⁴ the commentaries agree that in denying assimilation to the most valiant of epic heroes and the most ardent of apostles, Dante reserves for himself an even more unique role.²⁵ Despite his apparent modesty, he draws us to believe he is the first poet who ever sang the complete range of the underworlds, divine punishment, purgation, and – what is new in epic literature – such spiritually elevated encounters in the Highest in an extraordinary *unicum poeticum*. He is not the pagan Aeneas, nor the Christian Paul, but he is both Dante-the-Christian-pilgrim and Dante-the-epic-poet: the very first person to travel from the depths of sin to the heights of beatitude, and the very first and only poet who dared to relate his unique journey.²⁶ In *Pd.* 1.10 Dante points out programmatically the subject of the third cantica, i.e. ‘regno santo’, which goes much further than ‘secondo regno’ (i.e. Purgatory, *Pg.* 1.4) and ‘regno della morta gente’ (i.e. Hell, *If.* 8.86), since it needs a richer poetical skill that almost overcomes the limits of human experience. The *Paradiso* is indeed the section of the *Commedia* that demands the most of Dante’s poetical capacities in their wider array, and the author himself has a clear awareness of its challenge from its first lines. It is in this context that Dante affirms the hardship of his work and that the concept of superseding the models is outlined; if in the previous canticas Dante talked about realms that could have been compared to epic *regna*, and followed his epic predecessors in their poetical devices, in *Paradiso* he

²⁴ Cf. *supra* part one.

²⁵ Cf. Chiavacci Leonardi 1997, vol. 1, 52: ‘di fronte a loro appare l’umile cristiano qualunque, peccatore, che Dante rappresenta, e che pure – come qui ben s’intende – potrà esser fatto degno di altrettanto privilegio’; and s.v. ‘Paolo’, *ED*, vol. 4, 271-5: ‘Dante però non dubita che il suo viaggio sia voluto dall’alto e, implicitamente, riconosce di essere investito di una missione analoga a quella di Enea e di Paolo’.

²⁶ *Pd.* 2.7, ‘l’acqua ch’io prendo già mai non si corse’.

can proudly walk away from them and claim the primacy of such elevated poetry. Moreover, the expression ‘regno santo’ introduces the poetical *topos* of *primus* so often used in classical literature, if we consider the Greeks who were continually looking for their *πρώτος εὑρετής* in every field,²⁷ because it is the first time in the history of Western literature (claims Dante) that the Kingdom of God has been treated in poetry, making it an originally risky task.

Dante adopts another device to refer again to the substance of his poetry: from *Pd.* 1.10-12²⁸ the author clearly describes the general content of his poetry as ‘materia’, literally meaning ‘subject’, apparently recalling the famous Horatian advice *sumite materiam vestris [...] aequam / viribus:*

Sumite materiam vestris, qui scribitis, aequam
viribus et versate diu quid ferre recusent,
quid valeant umeri. Cui lecta potenter erit res,
nec facundia deseret hunc, nec lucidus ordo.

Ars Poet. 38-41

Despite the fact that Horace warns the poet not to treat things out of his reach and calibre (to avoid the unpleasant situation for the poet of making a fool of himself if he fails in his purpose along the way), keeping in the attitude typical of Latin poets called by scholars *recusatio*,²⁹ Dante

²⁷ Such as Orpheus for music, Homer for epic poetry, Theseus for the foundation of Athens, or Pelops for the progenitor of the peoples in Peloponnesus and so on. Besides Greek literature, Horace utilizes the same literary convention in *Epist.* 1.19.21-33, *libera per vacuum posui vestigia princeps / non aliena meo pressi pede [...] / [...]* *Parios ego primus iambos / ostendi Latino, numeros animosque secutus / Archilochi [...] / [...] / Hunc ego, non alium dictum prius ore, Latinus / vulgavi fidicen;* and in *Carm.* 3.1.2-4, *carmina non prius / audita Musarum sacerdos / virginibus puerisque canto.* This topic will be treated in the present study together with the analysis of the proems (cf. *infra* 82). Another mention of this *topos* can be found at the opening of Virg. *Ecl.* 6, *prima Syracosio dignata est ludere versu...*

²⁸ ‘Veramente quant’ io del regno santo / ne la mia mente potei far tesoro, / sarà ora materia del mio canto’.

²⁹ The choice of writing of lighter subjects was first introduced by Callimachus in the prologue to the *Aitia*. Reluctance in Latin poetry derives especially from Callimachus: Ov. *Tr.* 2.331-9, *numeris levioribus aptus / sim satis, in parvos sufficiamque modos / [...] / conantem debilitabit onus. / Divitis ingenii est immania Caesaris acta / condere, materia ne supereretur opus / [...] / [...] / ad leve rursus opus [...] veni; Pont.* 2.5.26-30, *materiae gracili sufficit ingenium / [...] / ausus sum tantae sumere molis opus / [...] / nec potui coepti pondera ferre mei; Prop., 3.3.22, non est ingenii*

makes use of the same word ‘materia’ and its variant ‘matera’ as a technical word for poetic subject-matter.³⁰ It is also utilized with the same meaning elsewhere in the *Commedia*:

vedra’mi al piè del tuo diletto legno
venire, e coronarmi de le foglie
che la matera e tu mi farai degno

Pd. 1.25-7

Di nova pena mi conven far versi
e dar matera al ventesimo canto
de la prima canzon ch’è d’i sommersi

If. 20.1-3

Closer parallels to Horace’s *sumite materiam* may be found in the *Vita Nuova* and in other parts of the *Commedia*:

Pareami avere impresa troppo alta matera quanto a me, sì che non ardia di cominciare; e così dimostrai alquanti dì con desiderio di dire e paura di cominciare.

VN 18.9

Ma chi pensasse il ponderoso tema
e l’omero mortal che se ne carca,
nol biasimerebbe se sott’esso trema

Pd. 23.64-6

... caddi in via con la seconda soma

Pg. 21.93

cumba gravanda tui; Hor. *Carm. 4.15.1-4*, *Phoebus volentem proelia me loqui / victas et urbes increpuit lyra, / ne parva Tyrrhenum per aequor vela darem*. On *recusatio* cf. Wimmel 1960, Clausen 1964, Smith 1968, and James 2001.

³⁰ The suppression of the semivowel ‘i’ after liquid and nasal consonants is common in old Italian. Cf. Rohlf 1966, vol. 1, 401: ‘nella lingua letteraria quando si è conservato *rj* si tratta di latinismi: per esempio *memoria, purgatorio, primario, vittoria, furia, mortorio*; nelle forme dell’antico italiano *memora, purgatoro, lussura, ingiura, desidero, vitupero, mortoro, vittora, matera* si ha forse un adattamento di parole dotte alla lingua popolare’.

The correspondences between the Dantean and the Horatian texts are evident in particular words that Dante translates from Horace and adapts to the new poetical circumstances: *materiam aequam* (or rather *iniquam* in Dante’s case) becomes the ‘troppo alta matera’ in *VN* 18.9, the ‘ponderoso tema’ in *Pd.* 23.64, and the ‘soma’ in *Pg.* 21.93 (identified here with the load of a beast of burden);³¹ *vestris viribus* finds its match in ‘quanto a me’ in *Vita Nuova*, meaning ‘in respect of my resources’; *quid valeant umeri* is on a par with ‘l’omero mortal che se ne carca’ in *Pd.* 23.65, and ‘soma’ in *Pg.* 21.93; *diu* corresponds to ‘alquanti di’ in *Vita Nuova* on the basis of these comparisons. However, there is a fundamental discrepancy between Statius’ ‘seconda soma’ in *Pg.* 21.93, on the one hand, and Dante’s ‘ponderoso tema’ in *Pd.* 23.64 (or ‘troppo alta matera’, in *VN* 18.9), on the other, as Dante with ‘ponderoso tema’ claims a superior quality of the poetic subject to Statius. In fact, the ‘troppo alta matera’ represents something too high to be said, namely the praise of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*, which Dante promised himself not to undertake unless he could do it more meritoriously once he had the adequate skills:³² the initial ineffability of the ‘loda di questa gentilissima’³³ in the *Vita Nuova* is strictly connected with the insufficiency of relating in poetry a subject of such elevation as God’s essence, and yields to and evolves into the praise of the Heavens typical of *Paradiso* (the actual ‘ponderoso tema’), which is the main challenge for Dante in the later *Commedia*. The ultimate unsayable essence of Heaven (i.e. God Himself), which Dante is going to deal with directly in the very last canto of the *Commedia*, is far beyond the topics of Statius’ *Thebaid* and *Achilleid* (namely the ‘seconda soma’), which are instead traditional topics, whose language, metre, and poetical expressions were all well established and developed by the time Statius wrote. Dante’s insecurity and trembling under such a burden are not due to his scarce

³¹ ‘Matera’, ‘tema’, and ‘soma’ are all Latinisms and Graecisms. The correspondence between ‘soma’ and *sumite materiam* is given by the etymological root of ‘soma’ deriving from the Greek *σώμα* (‘weight’, ‘burden’, ‘load’), and the meaning of *sumo*, ‘to load’, ‘to undertake’. For the etymology of the Italian ‘soma’ cf. s.v. ‘Soma’, *DEI*, vol. 5, 3539.

³² *VN* 52.

³³ *VN* 18.9.

qualities as a poet (as it might appear from VN 18.9);³⁴ rather, Dante excuses his difficulty in writing the *Commedia* by highlighting the contrast between the divine subject of his poetry and his human limits, using the device of *captatio benevolentiae* in *Pd.* 23.66 ('nol biasimerebbe se sott'esso trema'). From Dante's lines we assume that Statius and Dante are two poets on two distinct levels.³⁵ Statius and Dante are both carrying a burden which is the composition of their poems, but, whereas Statius carries a simple 'soma' (word re-elaborated from Horace's *sumite materiam*), Dante sustains a heavier burden 'ponderoso tema', that is, a subject-matter that transcends his capabilities. Therefore, the opposition between Dante (who attempts the highest poetical subject) and Statius (who fails in carrying a regular burden) lies in the opposite choices of weight to carry, and not merely in the fact that Statius did not complete his *Achilleid*, and failed to sustain that burden because he died too soon.³⁶ What matters in our discussion of Dante's reuse of Latin terminology is neither the completion of the poets' work nor the superiority of one poet over the other on the basis of finished or unfinished poems but the fact that Dante adopts very similar expressions in *Pg.* 21 and *Pd.* 23 (which both have their source in Horace) to highlight the difference between previous epic poems and his new *Commedia*. Hence, the comparison between the *Commedia* as the heavy burden, and the *Achilleid* (and by extension the *Thebaid*) is straightforward: Statius in the *Commedia* with his simple 'soma' represents traditional and obsolete pagan poetry, whilst Dante with his 'ponderoso tema' embraces the ambitious attitude of exceeding human limits, despite the risk of undertaking *materia* too much *iniqua*.

To return to 'cantare', the theme of the song is still traditionally epic in the following passage:

³⁴ In fact Dante uses the expressions 'pareami avesse intrapresa troppo alta materia, si che non ardia di cominciare' and 'paura di cominciare', which can be understood as an inadequacy of poetical skills.

³⁵ *Pg.* 21.93 and *Pd.* 23.64-6. Both passages are linked to each other by the presence of the vocabulary from the *Ars Poetica*.

³⁶ For further discussion cf. Bettini 1979-80.

Euripilo ebbe nome, e così ‘l canta
l’alta mia tragedia in alcun loco:
ben lo sai tu che la sai tutta quanta

If. 20.112-14

In these lines, Dante tells us that he knows all the *Aeneid* by heart and that he regards it as a ‘tragedy’. Moreover, he implies that a tragedy can be stylistically intended as an epic, since it is accompanied by the specific verb usually reserved for epic poems, i.e. ‘cantare’. Nevertheless, after a few lines, at the beginning of the next canto, Dante points out also that his ‘comedia’ sings like epic tragedies:

[...] altro parlando
che la mia comedia cantar non cura

If. 21.1-2

In ancient rhetoric, oratorical speech was divided into three different styles, formulated firstly by Theophrastus (IV-III cent. B.C.), and then recalled by Cicero.³⁷ according to the latter author, the three styles corresponded to the three parts of speech – the instruction, the delight, and the emotion of the audience. The first part ‘avoids the use of rhythmical patterns and employs metaphors for the sake of clarity rather than ornament’; the second is ‘a combination of both the plain and the grand’; the third (or grand) ‘tries to influence the emotions of the audience’ and ‘in this case the orator is allowed to use poetic words and archaisms, and the sentences ought not to be too smooth’.³⁸ The late-antique commentator on Virgil, Servius, recognized the three styles (or characters, as he calls them) in the three major works of Virgil (*Eclogues*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid*), for they deal with different use of language and topics, creating the basis for medieval poetics:

³⁷ Cf. Cic. *Or.* 100-12, *is est enim eloquens, qui et humilia subtiliter et alta graviter et mediocria temperate potest dicere;* and *De Or.* 3.152, *tria sunt igitur in verbo semplici, quae orator adferat ad inlustrandam atque exornandam orationem: aut inusitatum verbum aut novatum aut translatum.*

³⁸ Kirchner 2007, 193.

Tres enim sunt characteres, humilis, medius, grandiloquus: quos omnes in hoc invenimus poeta. Nam in *Aeneide* grandiloquum habet, in *Georgicis* medium, in *Bucolicis* humilem pro qualitate negotiorum et personarum.

Servius *Comm. in Verg. Buc. Proemium*

According to medieval theorists, the three styles were: the grandiloquent, the mediocre and the humble; Dante's mention of tragedy in *If.* 20.107 corresponds to the 'high style' of the *rota Vergili*,³⁹ and indicates a poetical work concerning deeds of heroes, kings, and gods, written with magniloquence; the mediocre style, in contrast, deals with mediocre situations, people and language (that of the fields), and the lower style with lower-social-rank characters and idioms (that of sheep-rearing).⁴⁰ These three styles classify and include in their range most poetical works, having their models respectively in the *Aeneid* (high), in the *Georgics* (medium), and in the *Eclogues* (low), as elucidated by Servius. Geoffrey of Vinsauf and John of Garland define the three styles as follows:

Sunt igitur tres styli, humilis, mediocris, grandiloquus. Et tales recipiunt appellationes styli ratione personarum vel rerum de quibus fit tractatus. Quando enim de generalibus personis vel rebus tractatur, nunc est stylus grandiloquus; quando de humilibus, humilis; quando de mediocribus, mediocris. Quolibet stylo utitur Vergilius: in *Bucolicis* humili, in *Georgicis* mediocri, in *Eneyde* grandiloquo.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf *Poet. 2.3.145*

Item sunt tres styli secundum tres status hominum: pastorali vitae convenit stylus humilis, agricolis mediocris, gravis gravibus personis quae praesunt pastoribus et agricolis.

John of Garland *Par. Poetr. 5, 86*

Dante gives a more definite description of the styles and their linguistic standards:

³⁹ On this topic cf. Curtius 1953, 231-2; Laugesen 1962; and Ziolkowski-Putnam 2008, 744-50.

⁴⁰ Cf. Barański 1997, 6: 'different kinds of literary texts existed in order to deal with different topics [...] The formal manner in which each topic was presented was controlled by the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the mode of writing to which it was assigned'.

Deinde in hiis quae dicenda occurunt debemus discretionem potiri, utrum tragice, sive comice, sive elegiace sint canenda. Per tragediam superiorem stilum inducimus, per comoediam inferiorem, per elegiam stilum intellegimus miserorum. Si tragice canenda videntur, tunc assumendum est vulgare illustre, et per consequens canticum ligare. Si vero comice, tunc quandoque mediocre quandoque humile vulgare sumatur [...]. Si autem elegiace, solum humile oportet nos sumere [...] Stilo equidem tragicum tunc ut videmur quando cum gravitate sententie tam superba carminum quam constructionis elatio et excellentia vocabulorum concordat.

Dante, DVE 2.4.5-7

According to Dante, a tragedy is a work of poetry perfectly balanced in style, vocabulary and syntax (*cum gravitate sententie tam superba carminum quam constructionis elatio et excellentia vocabulorum concordat*); in other words the ‘bello stilo’ (*If. 1.87*) that Dante took from Virgil in composing his own poetry. Comedy, on the other hand, corresponds to the use of both mediocre and humble styles, whereas elegy corresponds solely to the humble. The adoption of one of the three styles must be carefully pondered according to the contents of poetry, and then be adapted to the relative style of language chosen (*illustre, mediocre* or *humile vulgare*); Dante points out that a comedy is more versatile and can alternate between mediocre and humble language. A comedy is also considered to be a work of poetry which promotes a positive evolution of its events, from a sad beginning to a happy ending.⁴¹ However, Dante’s *Commedia* does not simply develop from sad to more fortunate happenings or switch from mediocre to humble Italian vernacular, but it increases in language and style on a par with its progression of events, stretching from the infamous jargon of the devils to the highest praise in Heaven, even including the magniloquent style typical of tragedy. The initial humble style evolves into a medium and then to a higher one, as a consequence of the uplifting development of the theme from the damned of Hell to the saints and Trinity of Paradise. By treating at first of the horror of human sin and then of the highest theological concerns as the *Commedia* progresses in its *iter* to the skies, Dante mixes comedy with tragedy, or, to use Dante’s

⁴¹ Cf. Dante, *Epist. 13.28.31*: *comoedia vero inchoat asperitatem alicuius rei, sed eius materia prospere terminatur, ut patet per Terentium in suis comediis [...] Similiter differunt in modo loquendi: elate at sublime tragedia; commedia vero remisso et humiliter.*

words, combines *vulgare humile* with *vulgare mediocre* and *illustre*: this means that the *Commedia* is not only mere ‘comedia’, according to medieval poetics, in terms of language and subject; but it actually slides from the features of a ‘comedia’ over to those of a ‘tragedia’ as the poem evolves,⁴² being ‘the most elastic and wide ranging of all medieval *modi* [...] accommodating characters and feelings of every kind (Quint. *Inst. Orat.* 1.8.7); having links with prose (John of Garland 1.51-2); and employing a wealth of formal registers (Hor. *Ars Poet.* 95; Quint. *Inst. Orat.* 10.1.65; Matthew of Vendôme 2.7)’.⁴³

Thanks to the mixture of styles (legitimised even by the authority of classical writers), it does not surprise us to find Dante’s ‘comedia’ accompanied by ‘cantare’, a verb which is typically engaged with epic and therefore with tragedy (*If.* 21.2, ‘la mia comedia cantar non cura’). Dante’s *Commedia* is the outcome of a combination of all *modi dicendi*, thus it can be rhetorically classified as both comedy and tragedy, encompassing styles and themes from low to high poetry. Therefore, just as an ancient tragedy like the *Aeneid*, the *Commedia* ‘sings’ of Dante’s deeds: the *Commedia* is above all genres, equalling tragedy in the adoption of the same epic vocabulary, yet at the same time superseding it in its extreme stylistic flexibility and sacred content. Dante’s poem is thematically and poetically superior to any existing traditional classification of tragedy or comedy, since it would delimit and diminish its literary power even when expressing the inexpressible:

⁴² The ultimate object of the *Commedia* is the reason for human existence and man’s deep relationship with God: this theme would require a tragic style according to the rhetorical regulations; cf. DVE 2.4.8, *quare, si bene recolimus summa summis esse digna iam fuisse probatum, et iste quem tragicum appellamus summus videtur esse stilorum, illa quae summe canenda distinximus isto solo sunt stilo canenda: videlicet salus, amor et virtus et quae ea concipimus dum nullo accidente vilescent*. This takes us to what Grayson has asserted about Dante’s poetry at its highest levels (1980, 162); that it expresses ‘on a par with theology and philosophy, the eternal truths the intellect perceives’.

⁴³ Barański 1997, 13. Cf. Dante, *Epist.* 13.30-31, *sicut vult Oratus in sua Poetria ubi licentiat aliquando comicos ut tragedos loqui, et sic converso: interdum tamen et vocem comedie tollit / iratusque Chremes tumido delitigat ore, / et tragicus plerunque dolet sermone pedestri / Telephus et Peleus [...]. Et per hoc patet quod Comedia dicitur presens opus*; Hor. *Serm.* 1.4.45-8; and Barański 1995.

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

Pd. 30. 22-4

As a result, by mentioning Virgil’s ‘tragedia’ (*If.* 20.113) a few lines before his ‘comedia’ (*If.* 21.2 – both accompanied by ‘cantare’), Dante implicitly expresses his superiority over the Classics in his masterly dealing with all ranges of poetical style.⁴⁴

The Homeric episode of the Sirens, monsters who attract sailors with the enchantment of their song, is picked up and recalled in *Pg.* 19.16-24:

Poi che’ ell’ avea il parlar così disciolto,
cominciava a cantar sì, che con pena
da lei avrei mio intento rivolto.

“Io son”, cantava “io son dolce serena
che’ marinai in mezzo mar dismago;
tanto son di piacer a sentir piena!

Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago
al canto mio; e qual meco s’ausa,
rado sen parte; sì tutto l’appago”

The word ‘cantare’ is used here with a poetical, epic and musical significance, which discloses an open relationship between this passage and the episode of Ulysses and the Sirens passed down by the tradition.

Initially, the first aspect of the Siren’s voice that appears in *Pg.* 19.16-24 is linked with the classical topos of *cantus dulcedo* and its captivating power.⁴⁵ According to ancient sources, poetical

⁴⁴ Cf. Barański 1997, 14: ‘other writers could not provide appropriate models for him to *imitate*, since they were limited formally and thematically by their adherence to the canons of the *genera dicendi*. The *Commedia* seeks its legitimization in God, the supreme *auctor* and the one *auctoritas* able to ensure that its original syncretism could not be dismissed as an aberration’. On the divine authorship of the *Commedia*, cf. *Pd.* 25.1-2, ‘l poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra’.

song is connected with sweetness, smoothness and its effect of enchantment on the listener: the song as a captivating and soothing pleasure is denoted in Latin poetry by the verb *mulceo* ('to soothe the passions') and the adjective *blandus* ('charming', 'seductive', 'attractive');⁴⁶ the source of this *topos* lies in Homer, who uses specific vocabulary to describe the song (either of bards or supernatural creatures) and its effect on the listeners⁴⁷ – the audience is bewitched and utterly attracted by its sweetness, like Dante before the 'serena': 'io la mirava' (Pg. 19.10), which means 'I contemplated her with attention and marvel', almost as if under the effect of hypnosis. The terminology used by Dante is suitably eloquent: 'il parlar così discolto' (Pg. 19.16), 'cantar sì, che con pena / da lei avrei mio intento rivolto' (Pg. 19.17-18), 'io son dolce serena' (Pg. 19.19), 'marinai in mezzo mar dismago' (Pg. 19.20), 'io volsi Ulisse [...] al canto mio' (Pg. 19.22-3), 'tutto l'appago' (Pg. 19.24).⁴⁸

From the Latin texts we evince that the Sirens are monstrous creatures with the sweetest voice ever heard, living on sea rocks (or generally 'in mezzo mar'), and described as singers and poetesses:⁴⁹ the Siren poetesses in Ov. *Met.* 5.555-66, *doctae Sirenes [...] ille canor mulcendas natus ad aures / tantaque dos oris*, are likely to correspond or be similar to the figure of the Muses

⁴⁵ *Cantus* and *incantus* have the same etymology (cf. s.v. 'Cantus', LEW, vol. 1, 155-6; s.v. 'Cano', DELL, 93-4; and s.v. 'Chant' and 'Enchant', OED, vol. 3, 21, and vol. 5, 209), as seen in other Latin texts, where *cantus* is used as 'spell' or 'charm': Ov. *Met.* 7.195, *cantusque artisque magorum*; 7.200-1, *concuusaque sisto / stantia concutio cantu freta*; Virg. *Geo.* 4.510, *mulcentem tigris et agentem carmine quercus*; Tib. 1.2.45-7, *fluminis haec rapidi carmine vertit iter, / haec cantu finditque solum manesque spulcris / elicit*.

⁴⁶ Hor. *Carm.* 1.12.7-12; 1.24.13-4, *si Threicio blandius Orpheo / auditam moderere arboribus fidem*; 3.11.24, *grato Danai puellas carmine mulces*; Ov. *Met.* 5.561, *ille canor mulcendas natus ad aures*; 10.301, *mea si vestras mulcebunt carmina mentes*; Ars 3.315, *res est blanda canor*; Stat. *Theb.* 6.355, *cantu [...] nobile mulcens*. Cf. Hor. *Ars Poet.* 99, [poemata] *dulcia sunto*.

⁴⁷ Τέρπειν 'to delight' (Hom., *Od.* 8.45, 12.52 and 188); ἥδεῖαν ἀοιδήν 'sweet song' (*Od.* 8.64); κηληθμός 'rapture' (*Od.* 11.334); θέλγειν 'to enchant', 'to bewitch' (*Od.* 12.40 and 44); μελίγηρος 'mellifluous' (*Od.* 12.187).

⁴⁸ The commonplace of the enchantment of song is found also in *Detto d'Amore* 239-41, 'il su' danzar e 'l canto [of the woman] / val vie più ad incanto / che di nulla serena'; Pd. 12.7-8, 'canto che tanto vince [...] / nostre serene in quelle dolci tube'; and Pd. 23.128-9, 'cantando sì dolce / che mai da me non si partì 'l diletto'. The effect of Casella's musical performance at Pg. 2.108-19 can be compared to that of the 'femmina balba': 'quetar tutte mie voglie / [...] consolare alquanto / l'anima mia [...] / [...] sì dolcemente, / che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi sona / [...] / [...] parevan sì contenti, / come a nessuno toccasse altro la mente. / Noi eravam tutti fissi e attenti / alle sue note'. On this comparison cf. Pinto 2006, 115.

⁴⁹ Stat. *Sil.* 2.2.116-7, *hinc levis e scopulis meliora ad carmina Siren / advolat*; Virg. *Aen.* 5.864, *scopulos Sirenum*; Ov. *Met.* 14.88, *Sirenum scopulos*; 5.555-62, *doctae Sirenes [...] ille canor mulcendas natus ad aures / tantaque dos oris*; Ars 3.311-14, *monstra maris Sirenes errant, quae voce canora / quamlibet admissas detinuere rates / his sua Sisyphides auditis paene resolvit / corpora, nam sociis illita cera fuit?*

as authentic inspirers and authors of epic poetry,⁵⁰ thanks to the presence of the expression *doctae Sirenes*, which is presented as the allusive alternative to the more frequent *doctae Musae*.⁵¹ Ovid's *doctae Sirenes* also implies a connection with Homer's Sirens, who have the knowledge of everything, being closer to the picture usually given of the Muses as authors and guides of epic poetry.⁵² *Od.* 12 narrates the episode of Ulysses and his expedient to overcome the seduction of the Sirens, who aim to attract him to their shores by singing the deeds of the heroes of Troy, especially those of Ulysses himself: Homer describes the Sirens initiating their song as if they were taking the place of the performing bard in *Od.* 8 singing the deeds of men and gods.⁵³

Through Ovid's literary interaction with Homer, the correspondence and allusion between the learned Siren poetesses (Ov. *Met.* 5.555, *doctae Sirenes*) and the learned Muse poetesses (Ov. *Met.* 5.255, *doctas [...] sorores*; and 5.662, *doctos [...] cantus*) confirms the epic character of the song of the Siren in Pg. 19 too. Her song speaks words of epic resonance: firstly, the triple mention of 'cantare', which is the main terminological index for epic poetry, and the direct speech to explain the subject of the song (*Pg.* 19.17, 19, and 23); secondly, the typical sweetness of the poetic song (19.17-8, 'con pena / da lei avrei mio intento rivolto'; 19.19, 'dolce serena'; 19.21, 'tanto son di piacer a sentir piena'; and 19.22-3, 'volsi Ulisse [...] / al canto mio'), often used and embedded in tradition by Homer; and thirdly, the mythological source for the characters introduced (*Pg.* 19.19, 'serena'; and 19.22, 'Ulisse').

⁵⁰ Cf. *infra* 54ff.

⁵¹ Ov. *Met.* 5.255: *doctas [...] sorores*; 662: *doctos [...] cantus*; Il. 2.484: *ἴστε πάντα*. 'Doctus ist das Klassische Epitheton für die Musen' (Bömer 1976, 369).

⁵² Hom. *Od.* 12.189-91, *ἴδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ' ὅσ' ἐνὶ Τροίηι εύρειν / Ἀργεῖοι Τρῶές τε θεῶν ιότητι μόγησαν, / ίδμεν δ', ὅσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρηι*. Cf. Hes. *Theog.* 32, *ἴνα κλείοιμι τά τ' ἐσσόμενα πρό τ' ἔοντα*; and 36-8, *Μονσάων ἀρχώμεθα, ταὶ Διὶ πατρὶ / ύμνεῦσαι τέρπονσι μέγαν νόον ἐντὸς Όλύμπου, / εἴρουσαι τά τ' ἐσόντα τά τ' ἐσσόμενα πρό τ' ἔοντα*.

⁵³ Hom., *Od.* 8.75, *νεῖκος Όδυσσῆος καὶ Πηλεῖδεω Αχιλῆος; 8.266-7, αὐτὰρ ὁ φορμίζων ἀνεβάλλετο καλὸν ἀείδειν / ἀμφ' Ἀρεος φιλότητος εὐστεφάνου τ' Αφροδίτης; 8.489-93, λίην γὰρ κατὰ κόσμον Αχαιῶν οἵτον ἀείδεις / ὅσσ' ἔρξαν τ' ἔπαθόν τε καὶ ὅσσ' ἐμόγησαν Αχαιοί, / ὡς τέ που ἡ αὐτὸς παρεὼν ἡ ἄλλον ἀκούσας. / Άλλ' ἄγε δὴ μετάβηθι καὶ ἵππου κόσμον ἀεισον / δουρατέον*.

At this point in *Purgatorio* Dante is experiencing, after the example of Ulysses, the seductive power of the Siren, who is initially disguised under the appearance of a wretched woman⁵⁴ whose deceitful allurement leads only to perdition: in the epic version of the tale, Ulysses saves himself using his skilful wits and by tying himself to the mast of the ship,⁵⁵ while in the Christian *Commedia* Dante is saved from death by the intervention of a holy woman sent by God (*Pg.* 19.26, ‘donna santa’). Ulysses is sailing amid the ocean (*Pg.* 19.20, ‘in mezzo mar’) when experiencing the temptation of gaining knowledge from a false and hollow source,⁵⁶ while Dante is in the middle of his journey climbing the mountain of Purgatory and dreaming of this awful ‘femmina balba’ (*Pg.* 19.7); the intellectual device used by Ulysses to escape oblivion grants him the possibility of returning home to Ithaca, yet on the other hand, the God-sent help extended to Dante permits him not to lose his way and consequently enables him to ascend to Heaven and gain true salvation. In the Middle Ages, the Sirens were identified with the material charms and seductions of life, opposed to the Muses (or good Virtues), who were instead the true guides to Heaven;⁵⁷ the ‘donna santa’ helping Dante-the-pilgrim in his spiritual journey can be compared with the Muses as just and truthful tutors to Dante-the-poet, thanks to the epithets ‘sante muse’ (*Pg.* 1.8), ‘sacrosante vergini’ (*Pg.* 29.37), and ‘donne’ (*If.* 32.10). Dante’s ‘navicella’ of poetry (*Pg.* 1.2) is preserved from shipwreck upon the sea rocks of perdition; he is guided by divine will to overcome the hollowness of material poetry in order to write of more elevated matters. At the same time, Dante opposes his spiritual resistance to the Sirens and his spiritual salvation to Ulysses’ human skills and

⁵⁴ *Pg.* 19.7-9, ‘mi venne in sogno una femmina balba, / ne li occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta, / con le man monche, e di colore scialba’.

⁵⁵ Ulysses’ intelligence is proverbial: Hor. *Epist.* 1.2.17-8, *quid virtus et quid sapientia possit, / utile proposuit nobis exemplar Ulixen.*

⁵⁶ ‘Diversamente dal canto degli aedi la loro voce produce un effetto perverso: un incantesimo che causa la rovina di chi ascolta’ (Ferrari 2001, 451, footnote 39). Cf. Segal 1994, 105 and 134-5 (specific bibliography offered).

⁵⁷ Cf. Boeth. *Cons. Phil.* 1.1.35, *sed abite potius Sirenes usque in exitum dulces meisque eum Musis curandum sanandumque delinquite;* *Pg.* 31.44-7, ‘tuttavia, perché mo vergogna porte / del tuo errore, e perché altra volta, / udendo le serene, sie più forte / pon giù il seme del piangere e ascolta’; Dante *Epist.* 5.13, *more Sirenum, nescio qua dulcedine;* and s.v. ‘Sirena’, *ED*, vol. 5, 368-9. On the contrast between the ‘femmina balba’ and the ‘donna santa’ cf. Pinto 2006.

return home: Dante is driven by God to Heaven (where every human being belongs in their full existence), while Ulysses is guided by his own wits to Ithaca (his earthly homeland).

Dante’s homage to the classical authors is well testified by the adoption of specific vocabulary denoting the composition of poetry. This tribute shows Dante’s profound devotion to and love for his models, without casting shadows over his own poetic creativity. Material from the Classics is wisely used by Dante in order to pay reverence to antiquity while acknowledging his cultural background with authority, and at the same time it can be re-utilized with the intention of transcending it, setting up a *discrimen* between the pagan literature and Dante’s Christian poetry.

This is the case with the following lines:

Lì si cantò non Bacco, non Peana,
ma tre persone in divina natura,
e in una persona essa e l’umana

Pd. 13.25-27

‘Non Bacco, non Peana’ openly recalls Virg. *Geo.* 2.2, 2.393-4, *Aen.* 6.657, Ov. *Ars* 2.1, and Stat. *Theb.* 4.157, where Bacchus and Paean (or Apollo) are the subjects of the song in question.⁵⁸ Dante employs similar terminology to Virgil, yet with a deeper meaning. In Virgil, it is a common practice to give praise to gods such as Bacchus and Apollo, whereas in the *Commedia*, in its outstanding cultural and literary Christian context, worship can be dedicated exclusively to the one and only God. In order to better underline the difference in quality between the false and the true deity, Dante adduces the same elements from pagan literature in a negative form – ‘non Bacco, non Peana’ – and stresses the distance existing between the pagan and Christian realities by the repeated

⁵⁸ Virg. *Geo.* 2.2-3, *nunc te, Bacche, canam, nec non silvestria tecum / virgulta et prolem tarde crescentis olivae;* 2.393-4, *ergo rite suum Baccho dicemus honorem / carminibus patriis lancesque et liba feremus; Aen.* 6.657, *vescentis laetumque choro paeana canentis; Ov. Ars* 2.1, *dicite ‘io Paean’ et ‘io’ bis dicite ‘Paean’; Stat. *Theb.* 4.157, paeana canunt. Cf. Call., *Hym. ad Ap.* 21, 97 and 103, *iñ παιῆον iñ παιῆον.**

negatives and the adversative conjunction ‘ma’. In pointing out the greatness of the hymn of the ‘Gloria’ sung here to God by all the saints in Heaven, opposed to the simpler and hollow tunes for Bacchus and Apollo, Dante is considering the level of his poetry as far beyond that of the classical authors, which is still associated with the pagan world. This process of correcting ancient literature with a Christian interpretation is best explained by the notion of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* in Dante, expounded by Picone: renowned mythological episodes are reused in the *Commedia* with the aim of guaranteeing a sufficient understanding of the episode, yet simultaneously Dante works with Christian material taken from Scripture or theological treatises to confirm the superiority of the latter over paganism. *Imitatio* is the re-use of classical repertoire, such as in this case Bacchus and Paean; *aemulatio* is here the superseding of pagan gods by the juxtaposition of Christian elements.⁵⁹

One other place in the *Commedia* where the verb ‘cantare’ makes an appearance recalls quite patently a passage from the *Georgics*; the Dantean lines provide a further example of the poet’s use of classical topoi in order to point out their inadequacy compared with Dante’s own Christian poetry:⁶⁰

S’io avessi, lettore, più lungo spazio
da scrivere, i’ pur cantere’ in parte
lo dolce ber che mai non m’avria sazio;
ma poiché piene sono tutte le carte
ordite a questa cantica seconda,

⁵⁹ Picone 1993, 119-20: ‘[Dante] si serve dell’intertesto biblico o rituale o filosofico (comunque di modello analogico sacro), accede alla *veritas* finale che fissa il personaggio o l’evento su uno sfondo di eternità, manifestando così la *novitas* della sua scrittura rispetto a quella del poeta classico [...] Se dunque l’*imitatio* del testo classico serve al poeta moderno per presentare un termine analogo a quello che lui vuole descrivere, ed è quindi funzionalizzata al problema dell’espressione stilistica dell’oggetto, l’*aemulatio* invece instaura un dialogo polemico con quel particolare testo [...] L’*aemulatio* segna l’inizio della scoperta del senso autentico, e quindi del superamento della vecchia poesia classica da parte della nuova poesia cristiana [...] L’*aemulatio* suscita in verità un effetto che potremmo chiamare di stereofonia semantica: l’*altra* voce, quella del poeta antico, senza della quale la voce di fondo, quella del poeta moderno, non riuscirebbe mai a sortire il risultato armonico voluto’. For further bibliography on this topic cf. Barański 1996, 134, footnote 9.

⁶⁰ Cf. again Picone 1993.

non mi lascia più ir lo fren de l’arte.
io ritornai da la santissima onda
rifatto sì come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salir le stelle

Pg. 33.136-45

At equidem, extremo ni iam sub fine laborum
vela traham et terris festinem advertere proram,
forsitan et, pinguis hortos quae cura colendi
ornaret, canerem [...]
Verum haec ipse equidem spatiis exclusus inquis
praetereo atque aliis post me memoranda relinquo

Geo. 4.116-48

Dante, as he explicitly points out, is at the very end of the second cantica, and he uses the literary device of *recusatio* to address the reader, following the example of Virgil; Dante turns to the reader, giving a reason for putting an end to the *Purgatorio*, saying that the impossibility of relating what he had experienced in the terrestrial paradise prevents him from further composition. We have indeed reached the completion of the poetical project he had in mind for this cantica (Pg. 33.139-41, ‘poiché piene son tutte le carte / ordite a questa cantica seconda, / non mi lascia più ir lo fren de l’arte’). Hence ‘in parte’ (that is ‘limitedly’) and ‘lo fren de l’arte’ are what keep Dante from continuing his poetry, i.e. the ineffability of his subject and the poetical balance of the number of verses, cantos, and canticas decided by the author when commencing his poem.

The topic of ineffability is deeply ingrained in the *Commedia*, and it expresses the incapacity of Dante to embody in words his overpowering perceptions in the underworlds; in other words, ‘la grande difficoltà di riferire ciò che ha veduto nel suo viaggio escatologico’.⁶¹ Most of the lines

⁶¹ S.v. ‘Ineffabile’, *ED*, vol. 3, 428-9.

dedicated to ineffability are in the *Paradiso*, since the spiritual and poetical depth of Dante's experience is shown especially in this section of the poem.⁶²

The literary device of ineffability finds its origin in Western literature in Homer⁶³ and spreads over the centuries to medieval mystical theology,⁶⁴ which is initiated by St. Paul's vision of Heaven, as he relates in the second letter to the Corinthians.⁶⁵ Dante's experience of God is beyond every attempt to describe it in words, and implies a 'disproportion between his experience and his powers' to do so.⁶⁶ Therefore there is no category of words within human capability to elucidate or express such overwhelming comprehension. Despite increasing the sublimity of epic poetry and the poetical means which now have the task of relating an intensely rich experience of such calibre, the power of the written word fails when confronting the ultimate truths of existence. It is interesting to note that the *topos* of ineffability in classical literature is particularly connected with epic poetry (being firstly used in epic poems), as is *cano*: in Pg. 33.136-45 Dante associates the ineffability *topos* with 'cantare', apparently following the tradition, yet he combines these elements with a new viewpoint, since he is unable to recount the blessings of the river Eunoè (Pg. 33.38, 'lo dolce ber che mai non m'avria sazio').

The expression of Dante's poetical insufficiency is also given in *Pd.* 23.56-63:

⁶² *Pd.* 1.4-9, 'nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende / fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire / né sa né può che di là su discende'; 1.22-4, 'se mi ti presti / tanto che l'ombra del beato regno / segnata nel mio capo manifesti'; 1.70-2, 'transumanar significar per verba / non si poria; però l'esempio basti / a cui esperienza grazie serba'; 33.55-6, 'da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio / che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede'; 33.90, 'ciò ch'i dico è un semplice lume'; 33.106-8, 'ormai sarà più corta mia favella, / pur a quel ch'io ricordo, che d'un fante / che bagni ancor la lingua alla mammella'; 33.121-3, 'oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco / al mio concetto! E questo, a quel ch'i vidi / è tanto, che non basta a dicer "poco"'.

⁶³ *Il.* 2.488-90, πληθὺν δ'oὐκ ἄν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὄνομάνω / οὐδ'εὶ μοι δέκα μὲν γλῶσσαι, δέκα δὲ στόματ' εἰεν, / φωνὴ δ' ἄρρηκτος χάλκεον δέ μοι ἥτορ ἔνειη.

⁶⁴ Cf. Hawkins-Schotter 1983, 5-12; Fish 1974, 1-43; Curtius 1953, 159-62.

⁶⁵ 2 Cor 12:3-4, 'I know that this man (still in the body? or outside the body? I do not know, God knows) was caught up into Paradise and heard words said that cannot and may not be spoken by any human being'. On the ineffability of St. Paul's vision cf. Manzi 2002, 286: 'le parole ascoltate da quell'uomo sono *indicibili*. Perciò Paolo non si sente tenuto a rivelarle, dato che sono parole che non è lecito a uomo dire'; Barbaglio 1990, 551-74; and Thrall 2000. On the ineffability of the experience of God cf. Kellenberger 1979, 311 (in particular in Dionysius the Areopagite): 'the Cause of all things, which transcends affirmation and negation, may nevertheless consistently be said to be ineffable and beyond our concepts'; Mondin 1988, 186 ff., and Hawkins 1999, 213-28 (in St. Augustine); and Mondin 1998, 114-5 (in the Mystics in general).

⁶⁶ Kirkpatrick 1978, 38.

Se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue
che Polimnìa con le suore fero
del latte lor dolcissimo più pingue,
per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero
non si verria [...]
[...]
e così, figurando il paradiso,
convien saltar lo sacrato poema,
come chi trova suo cammin riciso.

On a textual level, there is a correspondence with Virg. *Aen.* 6.625-7 (*non mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum, / ferrea vox, omnis scelerum comprehendere formas, / omnia poenarum percurrende nomina possim*)⁶⁷ and with Ov. *Met.* 8.533-5 (*non mihi si centum deus ora sonantia linguis / ingeniumque capax totumque Helicona dedisset, / tristia persequerer miserarum dicta sororum*). The reference is established by the initial hypothetical clause, the presence of *linguae-* ‘lingue’, the negative subjunctive *non possim*-‘non si verrà’, and also by the mention of a strongly epic element, *Helicona*-‘Polimnìa con le suore’. Significantly, Virgil and Ovid are unable to express horrendous, sad happenings, while Dante is unable to express the beauty of Beatrice and that of Paradise: once again Dante builds his Christian poetic identity on his classical heritage.

Botterill refers to Dante’s problem of verbal insufficiency as follows: ‘Dante the poet is Ulysses’ spiritual kinsman in the audacity of his (poetic) voyage [...] Linguistically the poet travels as far as he can, sailing unknown waters and exulting in the experience’.⁶⁸ Facing the limit of human eloquence, Dante recognizes his boundaries, yet nonetheless risks the most exciting challenge ever undertaken in poetry by coining a large number of new words for the purpose.

⁶⁷ *Geo.* 2.43-4 reports the same words as *Aen.* 6.625-6, *non, mihi si linguae centum sit oraque centum, / ferrea vox*, which is from *Il.* 2.288-90, cf. *supra* footnote 63. On the topic of *centum linguae* cf. Gowers 2005 and Hinds 1998, 35-9 and 42-7.

⁶⁸ Botterill 1996, 154-62. On the relationship between Dante and Ulysses cf. *infra* 85.

Neologism is one of the major characteristics of Dante’s linguistic usage, especially because Italian ‘volgare illustre’ had never been used in elevated poetry prior to the composition of the *Commedia*.

Returning to Pg. 33.136-45, it has already been suggested that the hypothetical clause and its apodosis are taken from *Geo.* 4.166 ff.⁶⁹ The correspondence between the two passages is well established if we attentively analyze the vocabulary: Dante paraphrases *atque euidem extremo ni iam sub fine laborum* (*Geo.* 4.115) and *spatiis exclusus iniquiis* (*Geo.* 4.147) with ‘s’io avessi, lettore, più lungo spazio / da scrivere i’ pur cantere’ in parte [...] ma perché piene son tutte le carte / ordite a questa cantica seconda’ (Pg. 33.136-40);⁷⁰ furthermore, the most interesting correspondence here is the conditional ‘cantere’’ (Pg. 33.137) matching the subjunctive *cancerem* (*Geo.* 4.118) and both are employed to express the ineffable, which discloses a further direct link between the passages. Virgil and Dante are moreover entwined in these lines if we consider the two poetical metaphors proposed in *Geo.* 4.116 (*vela traham et terris festinem advertere proram*) and in Pg. 33.141 (‘non mi lascia più ir lo fren de l’arte’). Virgil adopts the renowned sailing metaphor to indicate the poetic work of the author, saying that he would rather guide his ship to a harbour and conclude his work;⁷¹ Dante, by contrast, describes his poem as a chariot, himself as its charioteer, and the art of poetry as the reins. The image of the work of poetry as a chariot is attested in Latin literature in Ovid and in Greek literature by the poems of Pindar, but perhaps more importantly by Virgil himself at the end of an earlier book of the *Georgics* (the *second* book, as in Dante this image appears at the end of the *second* cantica):⁷² now that he has come to the end of the *Purgatorio*,

⁶⁹ Chiavacci Leonardi 1997, vol. 2, 980.

⁷⁰ ‘Spazio’ corresponds to *spatiis* and ‘piene son tutte le carte’ to *extremo [...] sub fine laborum*.

⁷¹ On the sailing metaphor in classical literature cf. De Saint-Denis 1935, 365-9; and Kenney 1958.

⁷² Cf. Virg. *Geo.* 2.541-2, *sed nos immensum spatiis confecimus aequor / et iam tempus equum fumantia solvere colla*; Ov. *Ars* 1.39-40, *hic modus, haec nostro signabatur area curru, / haec erit admissa meta premenda*; 2.426, *interior curru meta terenda meo est*; 3.467-8, *fert animus propiu consistere. Supprime habenas / Musa, nec admissis excutiare rotis*; cf. Pind., *Pae.* VIIb 10-22; *Pyth.* 4.247 ff.; and Call., *Aitia* 1 fr. 1.25-8, *τὰ μὴ πατέονσιν ἄμαζαι / τὰ στείβειν, ἔτέρων ἵγνια μὴ καθ’όμα / δίφρον ἐλᾶν μηδ’οἶμον ὅντα πλατόν, ἀλλά κελεύθουνς / ἀτρίπτονς, εἰ καὶ στεινοτέρην ἐλάσσεις*. On the chariot imagery cf. Bowra 1964, 230; and Pfeiffer 1949, 5.

Dante should set a conclusion to his poetry by pulling the reins of his chariot, as Virgil should conclude the *Georgics* by sailing towards a harbour.

The parallelism between the two texts can be taken further: Dante’s ‘piante novelle, / rinovellate di novella fronda’ (*Pg.* 33.143-4) might be taken to suggest all the species of plants listed in *Geo.* 4.141 ff.: *tiliae, uberrima pinus, flore novo, fertilis arbos, ulmos, pirum, pruna, platanum.*⁷³ Notwithstanding the greater variety of plants and the finer care in their description, Virgil lacks the depth of significance conferred by Dante upon the new life of vegetation. The Virgilian *flore novo* corresponds to ‘piante novelle’, ‘rinovellate’, and ‘novella fronda’, to which we may add ‘rifatto’ as ‘renewed’ (the latter actually applied to Dante, coming out from the river Eunoè like a new plant) which together stress, with the help of alliteration, the renewal of the pilgrim’s spirit after bathing in the holy waters of Eunoè, and the regeneration of the poet’s poetry since he is now ready to ascend to, and describe, Paradise (*Pg.* 33.145, ‘puro e disposto a salir a le stelle’). Dante’s rebirth represents not only a new start for nature (as it is in Virgil), but also for his poetry and his soul,⁷⁴ going beyond the classical imagery originally imitated. Rather, Dante makes use of pagan elements in order to express and confirm his faith in Christ, almost allowing the classical authors to participate in his Christian mission as a poet. Finally, the very last line of *Pg.* 33 draws the reader’s attention to the last line of Hor. *Carm.* 1.1, *sublimi feriam sidera vertice*, as if Dante had gained permission from God to be accepted into the ranks of Christian poets by ascending to the stars, like Horace’s ascent into the ranks of lyric poets by the consent of the Muses and Maecenas.

By concluding the second cantica and hazarding to reach for the stars above (standing both for elevation of spirit and poetry) Dante knows that, by closing the door of *Purgatorio* behind him, he

⁷³ The miraculous rebirth of nature is also described in Virg. *Aen.* 6.205, *quale solet silvis brumali frigore viscum / fronde virere nova*. Dante’s ‘novella fronda’ openly corresponds to *fronde [...] nova*.

⁷⁴ On Christian rebirth cf. Cave 1931.

is about to venture on to the skies of Paradise in all their glory: Virgil is once again the starting point, encouraging him to make the most of his poetical challenge, and Dante promptly follows him by recuperating Virgil’s poetical imagery, aware that his loving master, the source of his style, must now be left behind so that he can step forward with his new poetry. Yet the immeasurable experience of Heaven is sometimes too high even for an audacious poet like Dante: Dante admits that the poetry and music heard in Heaven are far above human standards, calling poetry ‘nostre muse’, and music ‘nostre serene’, in a comparison where the Heavens are the sun (‘primo splendor’) and the human world the reflection of its rays (‘quel ch’e’ rifuse’):

Canto che vince tanto nostre muse
nostre serene in quelle dolci tube,
quanto primo splendor quel ch’e’ rifuse

Pd. 12.7-9

This time there is no attempt on the part of Dante to stand out and supersede previous poetry; rather he displays an attitude of reverence and enchantment towards the melodies of the saints, for he declares that the song heard in Paradise is superior to ‘our’ poetry (‘nostre’ as ‘human’). In fact, as we find several Latin authors using the word *musa* to signify a work of poetry,⁷⁵ and *siren* to denote enchanting song,⁷⁶ Dante implicitly assimilates himself to one of these authors. When the Heavens sing the glory of God there is no human poet able to confront it, not even a Christian poet ordained by God himself, like Dante.

The humanity of the poet measured against the sublimity of the matter of his poetry is again treated indirectly in the following lines:

⁷⁵ Virg. *Aen.* 10.191, *dum canit et maestum musa solatur amorem*; Hor. *Serm.* 2.6.17, *quid [...] illustrem satiris musaque pedestri*; Mart. 2.41.21, *tantum tragicis vacare musis*.

⁷⁶ Cf. *supra* 41-2.

Io non lo ‘ntesi, né qui non si canta
l’inno che quella gente allor cantaro,
né la nota soffersi tutta quanta

Pg. 32.61-3

The singing of the ancient fathers of the Old and New Testaments in the terrestrial Paradise is incomprehensible to Dante’s senses: the human faculty of understanding is much weaker than the heavenly chant. Even the most beautiful harmonies ever produced on earth are considered to be inferior to such a song, the charm of which is so powerful over Dante’s perception that it makes him fall asleep.⁷⁷ The use of ‘cantare’ in *Pg. 32.61* is reinforced by the high poetical context of the preceding and following lines: the allegory of Incarnation, which is actually the subject of the song in question (*Pg. 32.59-60*: ‘s’innovò la pianta / che prima avea le ramora sì sole’); and the myth of Argus, who fell asleep enchanted by the tale of Pan and Syrinx (*Pg. 32.64-6*: ‘s’io potessi ritrar come assonnaro / li occhi spietati udendo di Siringa, / li occhi a cui pur vegghiar costò sì caro’).

What is more striking about this passage (and what links it to our discussion) is its shared relationship with another passage in Dante:

Euripilo ebbe nome, e così ‘l canta
l’alta mia tragedia in alcun loco:
ben lo sai tu che la sai tutta quanta

If. 20.112-14

A formal parallelism between the two passages is established by their similar rhyme scheme (the first is ABA, the second ACA) and by the same words rhyming with one another (‘canta’ rhymes with ‘quanta’ in both texts). This suggests a connection also between the contexts: in fact, here Dante enacts a process called *oppositio in imitando*, or rather a recall of previous poetical material (*imitatio*) which leads to a new interpretation and proposition of the classical elements

⁷⁷ Dante’s reaction to this hymn is correlated to that of Argus: cf. Ov. *Met.* 1.568-747.

(*oppositio*) by superseding that precise material considered in the beginning (*aemulatio* or *temptatio*), a process that is common in Dante’s reception of classical literature.⁷⁸

In *If.* 20.112-14 where Dante employs vocabulary from classical poetry in a classical context, the subject of the song is epic (‘Euripilo’ from the *Aeneid*, and ‘alta tragedia’), whilst in *Pg.* 32.61-3 it is religious (‘inno’). The former is taken from an unspecified place in the *Aeneid* (‘in alcuno loco’) which Dante knows by heart (‘la sai tutta quanta’); on the other hand, in *Pg.* 32 the religious hymn cannot be sung on earth, but only in the underworld (‘qui non si canta’ and ‘allor cantaro’). Both the epic poem and the hymn are deliberately not referred to with precision in the *Commedia*, the former because its contents have already been memorized by Dante (and are therefore easily intelligible, with no need for bibliographical determination), the latter because its notes were impossible to conceive: the “knowableness” of human things contrasts with the “unknowableness” of divine things.

A deeper opposition lies between ‘ben lo sai tu che la sai tutta quanta’, and ‘io non la ‘ntesi’ or ‘né la nota soffersi tutta quanta’, stressed even further by the identical rhyme. This is the Christian awareness that what belongs to the classical tradition is the outcome of the noblest human effort to uplift the human spirit by means of intelligence, but when it comes to the dimension of God, even the finest elevation of mind fails in its capacity to face the infinite. If human understanding and capacity are sufficient to comprehend the Classics fully (‘tutta quanta’), represented here by Virgil’s *Aeneid*, so are they too frail to grasp God’s reality: Dante’s ambition is to relate in poetry the beauties of Heaven (distinguishing himself from former literature), yet this is sometimes too arduous a task and above his limits (‘io non la ‘ntesi’). Even the universalizing scope of epic *cantus* cannot comprehend the fullness of the divine.

⁷⁸ On the process of *oppositio in imitando* (mostly used in Hellenistic poetry) cf. Giangrande 1967, Farrell 1991, 3-25; and more generally Reiff 1959.

Part Three

The Proemial Invocations: Emulation, Superseding and Redemption of the Classics

One of the first and most prominent characteristics of ancient epic is the initial proem containing the invocation to special gods related to poetry (traditionally the Muses), who have the task of providing the poet with inspiration, memory and guidance throughout his work. This concept of divine inspiration of poetry lies at the very beginning of Greek literature, and as such it has been inherited by most authors as a traditional convention.¹ The relationship between the god and the bard is the reflection of a particular interdependence between the spheres of immortality and mortality, inspiration and performance, thought and action: immortality, inspiration, and thought are the poetical features of the epic song related to the Muse, while mortality, performance, and action are related to the bard. Gentili states that the Muse is the true inspirer and the true author of the poetical work, which consequently becomes the report of true happenings, whilst the poet – or, initially, the bard – is the spokesperson of the deity:

‘In rapporto all’idea, secondo la quale [il poeta] non concepisce sé stesso come creatore autonomo ma come depositario di un patrimonio appreso dall’esterno, si definisce il concetto di *ispirazione poetica*, quasi che il fare poetico non sia attribuibile alla personalità del singolo cantore, ma discenda direttamente dall’intervento delle divinità preposte al suo canto, le Muse o Mnemosyne’.²

¹ Cf. s.v. ‘Muses’, *NP*, vol. 9, 322: ‘the related view of poetic inspiration established a tradition in all of ancient and post-antique literature’.

² Gentili 1995, 12. Cf. Simon 1978, 53-88; Ziolkowski 1990; Race 1992; Wheeler 2002; Hom. *Il.* 1.1, *μῆνιν ἀειδε, θεά, Od.* 1.1, *μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα;* 1.10, *θεά, θύγατερ Διός, εἰπὲ καὶ ἡμῖν;* 8.73, *μοῦσ’ ἄρ’ ἀοιδὸν ἀνηκεν ἀειδέμεναι κλέα ὄνδρῶν;* 8.499, *όρμηθεὶς θεοῦ;* Virg. *Aen.* 7.641-5, *pandite nunc Helicona, deae, cantusque movete [...] et*

Nevertheless, Homeric epic reserved for the poet the least possibility of expressing his personal poetical inclination and giving voice to his own *ego*, yet this was an exception:³ ‘the relationship is one of partnership between poet and Muse, who informs a mortal whom she has privileged of the truth of matters which he would not otherwise be aware’.⁴ The invocation to the Muses and the appeal of the poet often introduced a section of the poem of elevated difficulty or gravity, i.e. *incipita*, catalogues, heroic deeds, and the recall of origins (*aītia*).⁵ This formula was accepted into Hellenistic epic⁶ and later adopted by Latin poets in imitation of their Greek models, though its original religious aspect had declined long before:⁷ Virgil is the first Latin epic poet to speak in the first person, at the opening of the *Aeneid*, and to make the address to the Muses slide down to line 8, while Ovid adds an open rejection of the Muses’ authority in a continuous parody.⁸

meministis enim, divae, et memorare potestis; Ov. Ars 3.548, numen inest illis; Met. 15.143-4, et quoniam deus ora movet, sequare ora moventem / rite deum; and Pont. 4.2.25, inpetus ille sacer qui vatum pectora nutrit.

³ The poetical inspiration is driven by the poet’s soul or *animus* in *Od.* 5.298, θυμόν; cf. Pind. *Nem.* 3.26, θυμέ; *Ol.* 2.8, θυμῷ; *Pyth. Ode* 3.61, φίλα ψυχά; Ov. *Met.* 1.1, *animus*; Stat. *Theb.* 1.3, *calor*; 32, *Pierio* [...] *oestro*; and Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 1.67, *animus*.

⁴ S.v. ‘Muses, acclamation of the’, *NP*, vol. 9, 322; cf. Thalmann 1984, 157-84; and Hom. *Od.* 8.488, ἦ σέ γε μοῦσος ἐδίδαξε, Διὸς πάϊς, ἦ σέ γ' Ἀπόλλων.

⁵ Cf. s.v. ‘Invocazione alle Muse’, *ED*, vol. 3, 496: ‘quando più arduo si presenti l’impegno dell’arte’; Dante, *Epist.* 13.45-7, *et hoc est eis conveniens, qui multa invocatione opus est eis, cum aliquid contra communem modum hominum a superioribus substantiis petendum est, quasi divinum quoddam munus*. Cf. Hom. *Il.* 2.484ff., ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὄλύπτια δόματ' ἔχουσαι / [...] / οἵ τινες ἡγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοιρανοὶ ἥσαν; Virg. *Aen.* 1.8, *Musa, mihi causas memora;* 9.77-9, *quis deus, o Musae, tam saeva incendia Teucris / avertit? Tantos ratibus quis depulit ignis?* / *Dicite;* Stat. *Theb.* 1.3-6, *unde iubetis / ire, deae? Gentisne canam primordia dirae, Sidonis raptus et inexorable pactum / legis Agenoreae scrutantemque aequora Cadmum?; Ach.* 1.1-3, *magnanimum Aeaciden formidatamque Tonanti / progeniem et patrio vetitam succedere caelo, / diva refer;* Val. Flacc., Arg. 6.515-6, *quis tales obitus dederit, quis talia facta / dic age tuque feri reminiscere, Musa, furoris; Sil. Ital., Pun.* 1.3-5, *da, Musa, decus memorare laborum / antiquae Hesperiae, quantosque ad bella crearit / et quot Roma viros;* this is but a short list of the repertoire. Cf. Hollander 1971, 31-8.

⁶ Apollonius Rhodius is the first to address Apollo in an opening proem, although his devotion to the Muses remains traditional: *Arg.* 1.1-2, ἀρχόμενος σέο, Φοῖβε, πάλαι γενέων κλέα φωτῶν / μνήσομαι; 4.1-2, θεά [...] / ἔννεπε Μοῦσα; cf. Wheeler 2002, 45-46.

⁷ S.v. ‘Muses’, *NP*, vol. 9, 322: ‘the gradual detachment of the Muses from the pagan religious context and their slow development into a primarily literary motif has secured their continued existence in the visual arts and in literature until the present day’.

⁸ Cf. *Fast.* 5.1-110; *Ars* 2.704, *ad thalami clausas, Musa, resiste fores; Rem.* 387-8, *si mea materiae respondet Musa iocosae, / vicimus, et falsi criminis acta rea est;* and also Prop. 2.1.3-4, *non haec Calliope, non haec mihi cantat Apollo. / Ingenium nobis ipsa puella facit;* and Hor. *Ars Poet.* 83-5, *Musa dedit fidibus divos puerosque deorum / et pugilem victorem et equum certamine primum / et iuvenum curas et libera vina referre.* On the decline of the figure of the Muse cf. Curtius 1953, 234-5: ‘a characteristic of Imperial Age is that the Muses lose ground, are devaluated or replaced [...] The religious significance of the Muses during the decline of paganism is in all likelihood the fundamental reason for their express rejection by early Christian poetry’; and Miller 1986.

With the advent of Christianity and the decline of pagan culture, any remaining belief in the Muses and in the *topos* of invocation came to an end, and from the fourth century on, ‘this rejection became a poetic *topos* itself [...] frequently connected with the attempt to find a Christian substitute for the antique Muse’,⁹ namely the Holy Ghost, Christ himself, and the saints, who were deemed to be the new sources of poetry.

The first medieval poet to pay homage to the ancient goddesses and to restore the obsolete tradition with a new purpose and meaning, and an utterly new attitude towards the Classics, is Dante.¹⁰ He dedicates seven invocations to the Muses, equally distributed between the three canticas of the *Commedia* (two acclamations each in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and three in *Paradiso*).¹¹

These fictional prayers will now be analyzed according to their programmatic function within the poem and with respect to the evolution in the *Commedia* of Dante’s conception of the Classics, from which, as we have already learned, he claims increasing independence as he ascends the skies of Heaven.

O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m’aiutate;
o mente che scrivesti ciò ch’i’ vidi,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate

If. 2.7-9

⁹ Curtius, 1953, 235. Cf. Klopsch 1980, 22.

¹⁰ Cf. s.v. ‘Muse’, *ED*, vol. 3, 1060: ‘di quest’uso Dante offre numerosi esempi, direttamente modellati su antecedenti classici giacché nulla di simile offre, prima di lui, la tradizione della poesia romanza’.

¹¹ The first and third acclamations to the Muses in *Paradiso* are not proper prayers; the first should be considered as a plain statement, and the latter as a hypothetical clause, although the vocabulary of both passages belongs to the classical scheme of invocational prayer: *Pd.* 2.8-9, ‘Minerva spira, e conducemi Apollo, e nove Muse mi dimostran l’Orse’; and 23.55-60, ‘se mo sonassere tutte quelle lingue / che Polimnia con le suore fero / del latte lor dolcissimo più pingue, / per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero / non si verria, cantando il dolce riso / e quanto il santo aspetto facea mero’.

The structure, as we can see from the many examples provided in note 5, agrees with the traditional structure of the proem: it contains the vocatives ‘o Muse’, ‘o alto ingegno’, and ‘o mente’, referring to the Greek goddesses and to Dante’s own natural skills and memory, together with the imperative ‘aiutate’ (*If.* 2.7). The same scheme of direct acclamation of the goddess/goddesses accompanied by the imperative form of the verb¹² (although this scheme can be substituted by a question clause) is frequent in Latin literature, and it can be found not only in epic poetry but also in other genres, such as elegy and satire.¹³ In *Virg. Aen.* 7.641-6, *Hor. Serm.* 1.5.53-4, *Stat. Theb.* 7.288-9 and 10.628-31, the figure of the Muse/Muses is accompanied by verbs that mean ‘to remember’, recalling Dante’s ‘o mente che scrivesti ciò ch’i’ vidi’ (*If.* 2.8). According to the definition of ‘mente’ given in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, ‘il termine designa la somma delle capacità più alte dell’uomo e, di volta in volta, l’intelletto, la ragione, la memoria’.¹⁴ Dante makes use of ‘mente’ several times, as a place where events are recorded and written as if in a book or on a wax tablet, with the explicit meaning of ‘memory’:¹⁵ thus the appropriate significance of ‘mente’ is

¹² The imperative appears several times in classical authors (sometimes alternating with the exhortatory/jussive subjunctive): *Virg. Ecl.* 6. 13, *pergit*; *Aen.* 1.8, *Musa, mihi causas memora*; 7.641, *pandite [...] movete*, and 9.79, *dicite*; *Hor. Epist.* 1.1, *dicte*; *Ov. Met.* 1.3-4, *adspirate [...] / deducite*, 10.148, *move*, and 15.621, *pandite*; *Stat. Theb.* 7.288, *ite*; 10.630, *incipe*; and *Ach.* 1.3, *refer*. In the *Commedia* we read: *If.* 2.7, ‘aiutate’, 32.10, ‘aiutino’; *Pg.* 1.7-9, ‘resurga [...] / surga’, 29.41, ‘m’aiuti’; *Pd.* 18.85, ‘illustrami’, and 1.14-19, ‘fammi [...] / entra’. This last appeal is addressed to Apollo. Cf. Wheeler 2002.

¹³ *Virg. Aen.* 7.641-6, *pandite nunc Helicona, deae, cantusque movete / [...] / et meministis enim, divae, et memorare potestis*; *Hor. Serm.* 1.5.53-4, *Musa, velim memores, et quo patre natus uterque / contulerit litis*; *Ov. Am.* 1.1.29-30 *cingere litorea flaventia tempora myrto / Musa, per undenos emodulanda pedes*; *Met.* 1.1-4, *in nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora: di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illa) / adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi / ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen*; 10.148-9, *ab Iove, Musa parens, [...] / carmina nostra move*; 15.621-2 *pandite nunc, Musae, praesentia numina vatum / scitis enim, nec vos fallit spatiosa vetustas*; *Stat. Theb.* 7.288-9, *ite alacres, numquam vestri morientur honores / bellaque perpetuo memorabunt carmine Musae*; 10.628-31, *nunc, age, quis stimulos et pulchrae gaudia mortis / addiderit iuveni (neque enim haec absentibus umquam / mens homini transmissa deis), memor incipe Clio, / saecula te quoniam penes et digesta vetustas*; *Boeth. Cons. Phil.* 1.1.3, *ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda Camenae*.

¹⁴ S.v. ‘Mente’, *ED*, vol. 3, 899.

¹⁵ Cf. *Rime* 47.59, ‘nel libro de la mente che vien meno’; *Pd.* 1.23-4, ‘l’ombra [...] / segnata nel mio capo’; 17.91, ‘e portera’ne scritto ne la mente’; ‘mente’ is substituted by ‘memoria’ in a similar context in *VN* 1.1, ‘in quella parte del libro della mia memoria’; and 2.10, ‘verrò a quelle parole le quali sono scritte ne la mia memoria’. The image of *mens* as a book is taken from the classical repertoire: cf. *Plat. Theae.* 191.d, *δῶρον τοῖνν αὐτό φῶμεν εἶναι τῆς τῶν Μονσῶν μητρὸς Μνημοσύνης, καὶ ἐς τοῦτο, ὃ τι ἀν βουληθῶμεν μνημονεῦσαι ὃν ἀν ἰδμεν ἡ ἀκούσωμεν ἡ αὐτοὶ ἐννοήσωμεν, ὑπέχοντας αὐτὸ ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι καὶ ἐννοίαις, ἀποτυποῦσθαι ὥσπερ δακτυλίων σημεῖα ἐνσημαίνομένους· καὶ ὃ μὲν ἀν ἔκμαγῇ, μνημονεύειν τε καὶ ἐπίστασθαι ἔως ἀν ἐνῇ τὸ εἴδωλον αὐτοῦ· ὃ δ’ ἀν ἐξαλειφθῇ ἡ μὴ οἰόν τε γένηται*

likely to be ‘memory’ also in *If.* 2.8. The combination of ‘Musa’ with ‘mente’/memory should not surprise us, as the Muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory herself, thanks to whom the spoken truth of the events narrated in poetry is assured. The question of telling the truth is fundamental also for Dante, since in the *Commedia* he often seeks to make the reader believe that his journey through the underworlds has truly been undertaken, and he tries by any poetical means to be a truthful relater of this supernatural experience, despite the problem of ineffability considered above.¹⁶ Dante addresses the Muses not merely as an epic convention (although an epic beginning is more than suitable for an epic adventure such as Dante’s), but in a more urgent attitude, with a greater need for reliability than the classical authors, as he is about to narrate events concerning faith and theology: ‘Dante conferisce alle Muse, sin dalla preghiera che apre l’azione vera e propria del poema [...] una dignità ben maggiore che non quella puramente strumentale ad esse riconosciuta dagli autori classici, invitandole a legittimare il grado assoluto di verità inerente alle sue parole e al suo conoscere’.¹⁷

The word *mens* appears also in Latin literature as an important element in poetical production, sometimes on its own, and in other instances along with *ingenium*. In Dante the word ‘ingegno’ indicates the natural inclination of the person, ‘l’insieme delle facoltà innate, il patrimonio di doti naturali insite nell’uomo e che si esprimono nell’“indole” o “talento” [...] tutte quelle capacità spontanee, acquisite con la nascita e non con l’uso o l’esercizio’.¹⁸ For Latin

ἐκμαγῆναι, ἐπιλελῆσθαι τε καὶ μὴ ἐπίστασθαι; Cic. *De Or.* 2.86.354, *itaque eis qui hanc partem ingeni exercent locos esse capiendos et ea quae memoria tenere vellent effigenda animo atque in eis locis collocanda: sic fore ut ordinem rerum locorum ordo conservaret, res autem ipsas rerum effigies notaret, atque ut locis pro cera, simulacris pro litteris uteremur;* Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.53, *Naevius in manibus non est et mentibus haeret / paene recens?*; on this topic cf. Nardi 1960; Weinrich 1976, 49-53; and s.v. ‘Memoria’, *EE*, vol 8, 1068-109.

¹⁶ Cf. *supra* 46-8. Dante’s concern about poetical truth is expressed throughout the *Commedia*: cf. *If.* 32.12, ‘si che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso’; *Pg.* 5.103, ‘io dirò vero, e tu ‘l ridi tra’ vivi’; 8.19, ‘aguzza qui, lettore, li occhi al vero’; 16.23 ‘tu vero apprendi’; *Pd.* 16.124, ‘dirò cosa incredibile e vera’; 18.86, ‘le lor figure com’io l’ho concette’; 23.58, ‘per aiutarmi al millesimo del vero’; 25.43, ‘veduto il ver di questa corte’; 28.136, ‘ver di questi giri’.

¹⁷ Pagliaro 1965, 18. Cf. Pagliaro 1966.

¹⁸ S.v. ‘Ingegno’, *ED*, vol. 3, 441-2. In the *Commedia*, ‘ingegno’ is accompanied by ‘arte’ (its contrary, i.e. practice and theory) four times: *Pg.* 9.125, ‘d’arte e d’ingegno avanti che disserri’; 27.130, ‘tratto t’ho qui con ingegno

authors, *ingenium* is a gift granted by the deity or by some comparable divine figure.¹⁹ The Roman rhetors and poets set a definite distinction between the natural talent for writing or for speaking publicly (*ingenium*) and the skills acquired through practice and dedication (*ars*).²⁰ A fine orator or poet must possess that inner tendency, which is only to be perfected by study and exercise: the complementary elements of *ars* and *ingenium* are reused by Dante with their original significance. *Mens* and *ingenium* occur in Horace with the meaning of ‘inclination’ and ‘divine inspiration’, representing the closest parallel to *If.* 2.7-9. According to Horace, *mens* and *ingenium* (together with *os sonaturum*, omitted by Dante in this passage in *Inferno*, yet included in *Pg.* 21.88, ‘tanto fu dolce mio vocale spirto’) represent the specific attributes with which a poet should be endowed:

Primum ego me illorum, dederim quibus esse poetis
excerpam numero: neque enim concludere versum
dixeris esse satis, neque siqui scribat uti nos
sermoni propiora, putes hunc esse poetam.
Ingenium cui sit, cui mens divinior atque os
magna sonaturum, des nominis huius honorem

Hor. *Serm.* 1.4.39-44²¹

e con arte’; *Pd.* 3.10, ‘perch’io lo ‘ngegno e l’arte e l’uso chiami’; and 14.117, ‘la gente con ingegno e arte acquista’. The poet’s ‘ingegno’ is strengthened and eternalized by the Muse in *Pd.* 18.82-3, ‘o diva Pegasëa che li’ngegni / fai gloriosi e rendili longevi’.

¹⁹ For the definition of *ingenium* given by the classical authors cf. Cic. *De Or.* 1.4.14, *qui neque exercitationis ullam vim neque aliquod praeceptum artis esse arbitrarentur, tantum, quantum ingenio et cogitatione poterant, consequebantur*; 2.3.11, *quod quisquam summis ingeniis, acerrimis studiis, optima doctrina, maximo usu cognosci ac percipi potuisse arbitraretur*; Quint., *Inst. Or.* 10.2.12, *ea, quae in oratore maxima sunt, imitabilia non sunt, ingenium, inventio, vis, facilitas et quidquid arte non traditur*; Prop. 2.1.3-4, *non haec Calliope, non haec mihi cantat Apollo. / Ingenium nobis ipsa puella facit*; Hor. *Ars Poet.* 323-4, *Grais ingenium, Grais dedit ore rotundo / Musa loqui, praeter laudem nullius avaris*; *Ars Poet.* 408-10, *natura fieret laudabile carmine an arte / quaesitum est. Ego nec studium sine divite vena / nec rude quid prosit video ingenium*; Ov. *Am.* 1.15.2, *quid mihi Livor edax, ignavos obicis annos, / ingeniique vocas carmen inertis opus*; 3.1.25, *materia premis ingenium*; 3.12.15-6, *cum Thebae, cum Troia foret, cum Caesaris acta, / ingenium movit sola Corinna meum*; Met. 8.252, [Minerva] *quae favet ingeniis*; 8.533-5, *non, mihi si centum deus ora sonantia linguis, / ingeniumque capax totumque Helicona dedisset / tristia persequerer miserarum vota sororum*; and Everardus Alemannus, *Laborintus* 1-4, *Pyerius me traxit amor iussitque, Camena, / scribere materiem: me dedit illa tibi. / Viribus ingenii discussis, utpote parvis / mens opus iniunctum deposatura fuit*. In Ovid and Propertius the gift of *ingenium* is granted by the loved maid.

²⁰ Ov. *Am.*, 1.15.14, *quamvis ingenio non valet, arte valet*; *Tr.*, 2.424, *Ennius ingenio maximus, arte rudis*; and 5.1.27, *non haec ingenio, non haec componimus arte*.

²¹ This passage is not only linked to *If.* 2.7-9, but is full of other resemblances to Dante: first of all, the *topos of primus* (lines 39-40) recalled in *Pd.* 2.7, ‘l’acqua ch’io prendo già mai non si corse’; secondly, the poetic word *versum*

The number of classical reminiscences in *If.* 2.7-9 shows that Dante imitates his models within the furrow of tradition, yet at the same time distinguishes himself by adopting a nobler theme of poetry, and thus superseding any other epic poet.²²

The second invocation in *Inferno* is at the beginning of canto 32, after a nine-line rhetorical device of *recusatio*,²³ in which the poet claims to be unable to express fully the pit of hell, in perfect conformity with the habit of addressing the Muses in time of greater need.²⁴

S'io avessi le rime aspre e chiocce,
come si converrebbe al tristo buco
sovra 'l qual pontan tutte le rocce,
 io premerei di mio concetto il suco
più pienamente; ma poiché io non l'abbo,
non sanza tema a dicer mi conduco;
 ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo
disriver a fondo tutto l'universo,
né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo:
 ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso
ch'aiutaro Anfione a chiuder Tebe,
sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso

If. 32.1-12

(line 40), which is the Latin equivalent of ‘verso’ in *If.* 32.10, ‘ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso’; thirdly, *os / magna sonaturum* (lines 43-4) can be found in Pg. 21.88, ‘tanto fu dolce mio vocale spirto’, thanks to the correspondence between *os [...] sonaturum* and ‘vocale spirto’; finally, the expressions *putes hunc esse poetam* (line 42) and *des nominis huius honorem* (line 44) are summed up in Pg. 21.85, ‘col nome che più dura e più onora’.

²² The question of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* is widely discussed in Gmelin 1932, Reiff 1959, Ronconi 1964, and Brugnoli 1981; cf. s.v. ‘Latino (lingua)’, *ED*, vol. 3, 591-8.

²³ The device of *recusatio* was common in Latin literature. Here are some examples: Hor. *Carm.* 1.6.5-9, *nos [...] neque haec dicere nec gravem / Pelidae stomachum cedere nescii / nec cursus duplice per mare Ulixei / nec saevam Pelopis domum / conamur ; Carm.* 4.15.1-4, *Phoebus volentem proelia me loqui / victas et urbes increpuit lyra, / ne parva Tyrrhenum per aequor vela darem;* Ov. *Tr.* 2.331-2, *numeris levioribus aptus / sim satis, in parvos sufficiamque modos; 339, ad leve rursus opus [...] veni;* *Pont.* 2.5.26-30, *materiae gracili sufficit ingenium / [...] / ausus sum tantae sumere molis opus / [...] / nec potui coepti pondera ferre mei;* Stat. *Silv.* 4.4.97-9, *stabuntne sub illa / mole umeri an magno vincetur pondere cervix? / dic, Marcelle, feram?*

²⁴ Virgil offers an example of this type of invocation, though addressing not the Muses but gods of the underworld, in *Aen.* 6.264-7, *Di [...] / [...] sit mihi fas audita loqui; sit numine vestro / pandere res alta terra et caligine mersas.*

If Dante had the competence and knowledge to adapt his style with such promptness to all situations in poetry, he would have been skilled enough to express the inexpressible; however, Dante needs the divine help of the goddesses, since baby-talk language – or everyday language²⁵ (*If.* 32.9, ‘lingua che chiami mamma o babbo’) – is insufficient to face this difficulty.

The reference to the Muses is enriched with the mythological episode of Amphion (*If.* 32.11), taken from Stat. *Theb.* 10.873-7,²⁶ and Hor. *Ars Poet.* 394-6,²⁷ who both underline the supernatural power or enchantment of the song/poetry.²⁸ The Dantean passage contains the word ‘donne’ referring to the Muses, an unusual title for the goddesses in previous literature, which shows how Dante re-elaborates classical elements by adapting them to his own poetics. ‘Donna’ is widely used in Dante’s works and in all previous stilnovistic vernacular poetry, and covers a wide array of significance. As a result of its etymology from the Latin *domina*, in Dante ‘donna’ is usually tinted with nobility and awe, referring to respectable human females with an inclination to love, mistresses, the Virgin Mary, female saints, mythological deities, and also personifications of virtues and sciences, such as Knowledge and Philosophy.²⁹ Furthermore, Dante’s concern for speaking the truth with authority as the principal factor for the validity of poetry is expressed in *If.* 32.12, ‘sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso’. Once again, Dante collects epic features (the truth of

²⁵ For the interpretation of this line cf. Buti ed. 1982, vol. 1, 806: ‘[nē lingua che chiami mamma o babbo] si dè pigliare da perfetto ingegno e con diligenza’; and D’Ovidio 1901, 516-19.

²⁶ *Humilesne Amphionis arces, / pro pudor! Hi faciles carmenque imbelle secuti, / hi mentita diu Thebarum fabula muri? / Et quidam egregium prosternere moenia molli / structa lyra?*

²⁷ *Dictus et Amphion, Thebanae conditor urbis, / saxa movere sono testudinis et prece blanda / ducere quo vellet.*

²⁸ Regarding the enchantment of poetry cf. Hom. *Od.* 8.44-5, *τῶι γάρ ῥα θεὸς πέρι δῶκεν ἀοιδὴν / τέρπειν;* 8.367-8, *ταῦτ' ἄρ' ἀοιδὸς ἔσιδε περικλυντός· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς / τέρπετ'* ἐνὶ φρεσὶν ἡσιν ἀκούων ἦδε καὶ ἄλλοι; cf. *supra* 40-4.

²⁹ Cf. s.v. ‘Donna’, *ED*, vol. 2, 571-4. In Dante ‘donna’ often refers to divine or celestial women, or to the soul, virtues, or Philosophy: *If.* 2.53, ‘donna è gentil nel cielo’ (Beatrice); *Pg.* 1.53, ‘donna scese del ciel’ (Beatrice); 29.1, ‘cantando come donna innamorata’ (Matelda); *Pd.* 33.13, ‘donna se’ tanto grande e tanto vali’ (Virgin Mary); *Conv.* 2.15.3, ‘questi mi face una donna guardare. Ove si vuole sapere che questa donna è la Filosofia; la quale veramente è donna piena di dolcezza, ornata d’onestade, mirabile di savere, gloriosa di libertade’; 3.14.9, ‘per donna gentile s’intende la nobile anima d’ingegno e libera ne la sua propria potestate, che è la ragione’. More on this topic is found in Vasoli-De Robertis 1988, 264 and *passim*; regarding the theological significance of Beatrice cf. Pazzaglia 1998, and Picchio Simonelli 1994.

poetry, the fascination of song, mythological episodes, the invocation of the Muses before a difficult part of the poem) and combines them with aspects which have a Christian connotation in the *Commedia* (the use of ‘donne’, for example).

Moving on to *Purgatorio*, the invocations bear more traces of reference to Latin texts, and therefore are poetically stronger, in the sense that Dante recuperates the Classics in order to transcend them, in a process that will be more definite and more perfected in *Paradiso*.

The first prayer to the Muses in *Purgatorio* is at the beginning of canto 1:³⁰

Per correr migliori acque alza le vele
omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele;
e canterò di quel secondo regno
dove l’umano spirto si purga
e di salire al ciel diventa degno.

Ma qui la morta poesi resurga,
o sante Muse, poi che vostro sono;
e qui Caliopè alquanto surga,
seguitando il mio canto con quel sòno
di cui le Piche misere sentiro
lo colpo tal, che disperar perdonò

Pg. 1.1-12

This proem is divided into four sections: the sailing metaphor, the epic usage of ‘cantare’, the invocation of the Muses, and the mythological reference.

The first three lines express the metaphor of the work of the poet as the *iter navale* with specific classical vocabulary: ‘correre’, ‘alza le vele’ (both Pg. 1.1), ‘navicella del mio ingegno’ (Pg.

³⁰ For further explanation of these lines of Pg. 1 cf. Raimondi 1967.

1.2).³¹ Dante's intention of elevating his poetry (*Pg.* 1.1, 'per correre migliori acque') strongly contrasts with the adoption of a lighter topic in *Ov. Ars* 3.26, *conveniunt cumbaे vela minora meae*, and *Prop.* 3.9.3-4, *quid me scribendi tam vastum mittis in aequor? / non sunt apta meae grandia vela rati*, consequently diverges from classical literature, which does not undertake such a high theme.

Then follows the declaration of the content of the second cantica with the typical epic conventions already taken into consideration (*Pg.* 1.4, 'canterò di quel secondo regno'): ³² the subjects of poetry are no longer the *κλέα* of heroes, arms, kings, or gods of the classical world (although the underworlds are divided into three major 'kingdoms', each of which is subdivided into minor realms)³³ but the actions of penance and purification of the souls, whose ultimate desire is to be 'face to face'³⁴ with God. The invocation proper starts at *Pg.* 1.7: Dante wants to refresh and reinvigorate his poetry from the dullness of Hell, as if the old style of *Inferno* should be left behind and upgraded. The concept of 'dead' and 'living' poetry is stressed by the words 'morta', 'resurga' (both *Pg.* 1.7), and 'surga' (*Pg.* 1.9). Along with the resurrection of the new poetry, even the pagan deities become holy, almost like saints, gaining a place among the blessed of Heaven (*Pg.* 1.8, 'o

³¹ These expressions are used extensively in Latin literature: for 'correre' cf. *Ov. Am.* 2.11.24, *currit in inmensum panda carina salum*; *Tr.* 3.4.16, *haec mea per placidas cumba cucurrit aquas*; *Pont.* 2.6.12, *qua mea debuerit currere cumba via*; for 'alza le vele' cf. *Cic. De Or.* 2.46, *vela do*; *Ov. Tr.* 1.4.17, *vela dedisse rati*; 2.548, *dedi nostrae grandia vela rati*; for 'navicella del mio ingegno' cf. *Prop.* 3.3.22, *ingenii cymba*. Cf. *infra* 76ff. for deeper analysis of the nautical imagery.

³² Cf. *supra* 27ff.

³³ *If.* 8.85, 'va per lo regno de la morta gente'; 8.90, 'sì ardito intrò per questo regno'; 34.28, 'lo 'imperador del doloroso regno'; *Pg.* 1.4, 'canterò di quel secondo regno'; 1.82, 'lasciane andar per li tuoi sette regni'; 7.22, 'tutti i cerchi del dolente regno'; 11.7, 'vegna ver' noi la pace del tuo regno'; 22.78, 'l'eterno regno'; 24.92, 'in questo regno'; 32.22, 'celeste regno'; *Pd.* 1.10, 'regno santo'; 1.23, 'beato regno'; 2.20, 'deifrome regno'; 3.83, 'per questo regno, a tutto il regno piace'; 5.93, 'corremmo nel secondo regno'; 11.116, 'tornando al suo regno'; 24.43, 'questo regno ha fatto civi'; 30.98, 'l'alto triunfo del regno verace'; 31.25, 'questo sicuro e gaudioso regno'; 31.117, 'questo regno'; 32.61, 'questo regno'. As previously stated, the subjects of the *Commedia* are now the kingdoms ruled by divine Justice, and *supra* 27ff.

³⁴ St. Paul, 1 *Cor.* 13.12, *facie ad faciem*.

sante Muse'): a hint of the sanctity of the Muses was already expressed in *If.* 32.10, 'quelle donne aiutino il mio verso', and is now made clear through evangelical vocabulary.³⁵

This passage recalls the works of Horace, Virgil, and Ovid. The correspondence with *Pg.* 1 is clear if we compare the expressions *dic [...] tibia / [...] melos / seu voce [...] / seu fidibus citharave* (Hor. *Carm.* 3.4.1-4), and *Calliope [...] praetemptat [...] chordas / atque haec percussis subiungit carmina nervis* (Ov. *Met.* 5.339-40) with 'Calliopè [...] / seguitando il mio canto con quel suono' (*Pg.* 1.9-10); *vester, Camenae, vester* (Hor. *Carm.* 3.4.21), and *haec sat erit, divae, vestrum cecinisse poetam* (Virg. *Ecl.* 10.70) with 'o sante Muse, poiché vostro sono' (*Pg.* 1.8); and *surgamus* (Virg. *Ecl.* 10.73), *surgit [...] / Calliope* (Ov. *Met.* 5.338), and *surge, age, surge* (*Ars* 1.548) with 'resurga' and 'Calìopè alquanto surga' (*Pg.* 1.7 and 9).³⁶ The sailing simile is exemplified in *libens / insanientem navita Bosphorum / temptabo et urentis harenas / litoris Assyrii viator* (Hor. *Carm.* 3.4.29-32).

The fourth section of the proem in *Pg.* 1 is dedicated to another mythological episode³⁷ – the song contest between the Muses and the Pierides related in Ov. *Met.* 5.302 ff. and summarized in 'quel suono / di cui le Piche misere sentiro / lo colpo tal, che disperar perdonò' (*Pg.* 1.10-12).³⁸ It is

³⁵ Death and resurrection to eternal life are the key concepts of the passion of Christ and Christianity. *John* 10.26, *Ego sum resurrectio et vita*; 1 *Cor* 14.12, *resurrectio mortuorum*; 1*Pt.* 1.3, *per resurrectionem Iesu Christi*; and *passim*.

³⁶ *Surgo* is a common verb for invocational contexts: cf. s.v. 'Surgo', *OLD*, 1887.

³⁷ Note that the mention of the mythological episode in this canto lies in *Pg.* 1.11, the same line as the mythological reference in the previous invocation at the end of the *Inferno* (*If.* 32.11).

³⁸ There is considerable doubt over the identity of the Pierides. According to Dantean commentators (Buti, Sapegno, Chiavacci Leonardi), who follow the description given by Ov. in *Met.* 5 and Antoninus Liberalis (*Μεταμορφώσεων Συναγωγή* 9), Dante believes the Pierides to be the daughters of Pierius, defeated by the Muses in a poetry contest because they presented themselves as false Muses, and transformed into magpies. Despite this interpretation, most Latin poets consider the Pierides as the Muses themselves, with no distinction between them, from the Hesiodic tradition (*Theog.* 53): Cic. *Nat. Deo.* 3.21.54, *Musae [...] quas Pieridas et Pierias solent poetae appellare*; Hor. *Carm.* 4.3.18, *dulcem quae strepitum, Pieri, temperas*; 4.8.20, *Calabrae Pierides*; *Ars Poet.* 404-6, *gratia regum / Pieris temptata modis*; Virg. *Ecl.* 3.84-5, *Pollio amat nostram [...] Musam: / Pierides...; 6.13, pergite, Pierides; 8.63, dicite, Pierides; 9.32-33, me fecere poetam / Pierides; 10.70-3, divae [...] / [...] / Pierides*; Ov. *Ars* 3.548, *numen inest illis Pieridesque favent*; *Fast.* 4.222, *Pieri orsa loqui; Pont.* 2.9.62, *lucida Pieria tendis in astra via*; 4.12.28, *te Pieriae perdocuere deae*; Juv., 4.35-6, *puellae / Pierides*; Stat. *Silv.* 1.2.6, *de Pieris vocalem fontibus undam*; 2.2.42, *Pieris aequare modis*; 3.1.66-7, *novosque / Pieridum flores intactaque carmina discens*; 5.2.71, *tibi Pieriae tenero sub pectore*

worth noticing that Ovid's passage mentioned above (*Met.* 5.338-9, *surgit [...] / Calliope*) as relevant to 'Calliopè al quanto surga' (*Pg.* 1.9) is from the same episode of the poetical contest between the Muses and the Pierides in the *Metamorphoses*, referring in particular to the start of the Muses' performance. 'Con quel sòno' (*Pg.* 1.10) is a parallel for *sono* at the end of the dispute (*Met.* 5.664), and 'piche' ('magpies', *Pg.* 1.11) for *picae* (*Met.* 5.676).

Whereas the classical poets claim inspiration from both the Muses and the Pierides indistinctly,³⁹ Dante selects the Muses only as his true poetical patrons (*Pg.* 1.8, 'vostro sono'), pointing out that the Pierides are on an inferior level to the Muses. This may suggest that Dante interprets the Muses as goddesses of true poetry and the Pierides those of false poetry (according to Dante's Christian interpretation), and consequently believes that the classical poets simultaneously wrote good and bad poetry, alternating the sublime investigation of the human spirit to the hollowness of their pagan background. If Dante intended the Classics as inspired by truth and falsity at the same time, then *Pg.* 1.10-12 openly questions whether classical poetry had constantly been inspired by "valid" poetical inspirers. In the *Commedia* the truthful Muses exclusively sustain Dante (*Pg.* 1.10, 'seguitando il mio canto con quel sòno') in defeating the deceitful goddesses and their protected poets (*Pg.* 1.11-12, 'le Piche misere sentiro / lo colpo tal'). At this point we can see a development in Dante's concept of classical poetry; whereas at the beginning of the *Inferno* the Classics were the only poetical anchor of salvation for Dante,⁴⁰ now Dante matures a critical approach towards them, by stating their spiritual inconsistency and their shallow poetry, not always guided by truth. Dante is willing to leave behind any trace of falsity in his poem, by tossing it down

curae; 5.53-4, sorores / [...] Pieriae; Theb. 1.3, Pierius menti calor incidit; 7.628, nunc age, Pieriae [...] sorores. For further discussion on this topic, cf. s.v. 'Pieridi', *ED*, vol. 4, 492; and s.v. 'Pierides', *NP*, vol. 11, 236-7.

³⁹ Cf. *supra* footnote 38.

⁴⁰ Cf. *supra* 7-13.

to Hell, where lies no forgiveness (*Pg.* 1.12, ‘disperar perdono’), and by devoting himself to poetry that speaks of truth *only*.

From this analysis we can conclude that Dante largely adopts classical topics, such as the sailing metaphor, the proposition of poetic subject, the prayer to the Muses, the devotion of the poet to his patrons, the characters of epic song, and the mythological episode of the Pierides, in order to enrich his poetry with classical authority and elevate it with new Christian interpretation (*Pg.* 1.1, ‘per correr migliori acque’; 1.6 ‘salire al ciel diventa degno’; 1.7 ‘la morta poesi resurga’; 1.8 ‘sante Muse’; 1.9 ‘Caliopè alquanto surga’).

Near the end of the second cantica we encounter another invocation:

O sacrosante vergini, se fami,
freddi o vigilie mai per voi soffersi,
cagion mi sprona ch’io mercé vi chiami.

Or convien che Elicona per me versi,
e Uranie m’aiuti col suo coro
forti cose a pensar mettere in versi

Pg. 29.37-42

The vocative formula already found in *Pg.* 1.8 (‘o sante Muse’) is increased in reverence in *Pg.* 29.37 (‘o sacrosante vergini’) through the presence of the attribute ‘*sacrosanta*’, generally related to sacred things belonging to the Christian Church;⁴¹ the difficulty of poetry in the Earthly Paradise (where the pilgrim begins to experience a hint of Heaven) requires holier protectors.⁴²

The most direct reference to the Classics here is *Pg.* 29.41, ‘Uranie [...] col suo coro’, possibly recalling *Phoebi chorus adsurrexerit omnis* (*Virg. Ecl.* 6.66) – where Dante substituted

⁴¹ Cf. s.v. ‘*Sacrosancta*’, *GMIL*, vol. 7, 19: ‘*sacrosanctitas*’ is the attribute of *Sancta Evangelia, sacrae reliquiae, crux, et alia, super quae sacramenta in Ecclesiis peragebantur*.

⁴² Bosco-Reggio 1979, vol. 2, 495-6: ‘questa invocazione è forse la più solenne e la più intensa, perché la sacra rappresentazione che Dante sta per descrivere, con la sua profonda simbologia e la ricchezza di invenzione, è certo una delle più difficili creazioni fantastiche del poeta’.

Phoebi with ‘Uranie’ – and perhaps also *vestris* [of the *Cameneae*] *amicum* [...] *choris* (Hor. *Carm.* 3.4.25), and *Pieridumque choro* (Ov. *Tr.* 5.3.10). At this stage, Dante is more in need of poetical support than ever, acting as if he were a classical poet invoking the Muses; yet his Christian re-reading of the classical schemes (visible in ‘*sacrosante Muse*’) is inevitable when approaching Heaven.

The longest and richest proemial invocation is at the beginning of *Paradiso*:

O buon Apollo, a l’ultimo lavoro
fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso,
come dimandi a dar l’amato alloro.

Infino a qui l’un giogo di Parnaso
assai mi fu; ma or con amendue
m’è uopo intrar ne l’aringo rimaso.

Entra nel mio petto e spira tue
sì come quando Marsia traesti
de la vagina le membra sue.

O divina virtù, se mi ti presti
tanto che l’ombra del beato regno
segnata nel mio capo manifesti,
vedra’mi al piè del tuo diletto legno
venire, e coronarmi de le foglie
che la matera e tu mi farai degno.

Sì rade volte, padre, se ne coglie
per trünfare o cesare o poeta,
colpa e vergogna de l’umane voglie,
che parturir letizia in su la lieta
delfica deità dovria la fronda
peneia, quando alcun di sé asseta.

Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda:
forse di retro a me con miglior voci
si pregherà perché Cirra risponda

Unlike *If.* 2.7-9 and *Pg.* 1.1-12 (where the invocation was reserved for the Muses), Dante here invokes Apollo for the first time.⁴³ Passing over the *propositio* (*Pd.* 1.1-12) of this opening, which contains the ineffability *topos* (*Pd.* 1.4-9) and the proposition of the theme of the third cantica (*Pd.* 1.10-12),⁴⁴ in the remaining twenty-three lines Dante concentrates a number of classical references which have not previously been experienced in his poetry.

To begin with, the expression ‘o buon Apollo’⁴⁵ can be compared with Ov. *Tr.* 5.3.35, *bone Liber*, since it is likewise an appeal for poetical help – *fer, bone Liber, opem*⁴⁶ – especially if we consider the mention of Apollo as the inspirer of poetry further on in the same Ovidian poem (*sic igitur dextro faciatis Apolline carmen*, line 57), and the reference to floral garlands (*festaque odoratis innectunt tempora sertis*, line 2, and *e sacris hederae cultoribus*, line 15) recalled by Dante in *Pd.* 1.15, 26 and 32. The resemblance of ‘o buon Apollo’ to *bone Liber* suggests a different meaning for ‘buon’ than ‘valente’ or ‘eccellente’:⁴⁷ according to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *bonus* means ‘obliging’, ‘accommodating’, ‘kind’, ‘gracious’, ‘good’, when accompanied by the name of a

⁴³ Commentators agree that the appeal to Apollo reflects the level of hardship in the last task of the *Commedia*: ‘Dante si rivolge qui ad Apollo stesso, non bastandogli più le Muse (vv. 16-8). Ciò significa che ci si innalza ora da argomenti umani a argomenti divini’ (Chiavacci Leonardi 1997, vol. 3, 15-16); ‘la materia del *Paradiso* abbisogna dell’aiuto del dio stesso della poesia’ (Bosco-Reggio 1979, vol. 3, 10); ‘ora invoca Apollo, cioè la poesia stessa, in quanto ha la sua fonte prima in Dio, e da Dio discende nel petto dell’artista’ (Sapegno 1957, 783); and ‘in fine a questa cantica li è vastato lo studio delle scienze pratiche [...] imperò che non basterebbe pur la pratica’ (Buti ed. 1982, vol. 3, 14).

⁴⁴ An analysis of the topic of the theme proposition in *Pd.* 1 is given in Olson 1962.

⁴⁵ The invocation to Apollo is in line with the presence of the god in Latin literature in contexts of poetry and music: Hor. *Carm.* 1.31.1, *quid dedicatum poscit Apollinem / vates?*; 4.6.29-30, *spiritum Phoebus mihi, Phoebus artem / carminis nomenque dedit poetae; Ars Poet.* 406-7, *ne forte pudori / sit tibi Musa lyrae sollers et cantor Apollo; Ov. Her.* 15.183, *grata lyram posui tibi, Phoebe, poetria Sappho; Ars* 2.493-4, *haec ego cum canerem, subito manifestus Apollo / movit inauratae pollice fila lyrae; Rem. Am.* 704-5, *tuque, favens coepitis, Phoebe saluber, ades / Phoebus adest: sonuere lyra, sonuere pharetrae; Stat. *Silv.* 4.8.19, laurus promisit Apollo; and Theb.* 8.373-4, *alias nova suggere vires, / Calliope, maiorque chelyn mihi tendat Apollo.*

⁴⁶ Bacchus was also considered a protector of poetry: Hor. *Epist.* 1.5.19, *fecundi calices quem non fecere disertum?*; 1.19.3-6, *ut male sanos / adscripsit Liber Satyris Faunisque poetas / vina fere dulces oluerunt mane Camenae. / Laudibus arguitur vini vinosus Homerus; Ov. Tr.* 5.3.1-2, *te celebrare poetae, / [...] Bacche, solent.*

⁴⁷ Chiavacci Leonardi 1997, vol. 3, 15-16. The same adjective refers to kings in *If.* 1.71 and *Pg.* 21.82, and to poets in *If.* 4.139.

god.⁴⁸ Thus Dante's 'o buon Apollo' is 'o propitious Apollo', since Dante wants the god to help and favour him in the task. Moreover, the usage of *bonus* with the name of the Christian God is also common in early Christian literature.⁴⁹ The relationship between Dante and these passages in Augustine is stronger if we consider further in *Pd.* 1.28 the vocative 'padre': this confirms once more the correspondence between Apollo and God/Christ, and Dante's process of re-inventing the Classics with a Christian approach.

'L'ultimo lavoro' (*Pd.* 1.13), clearly referring to the third cantica,⁵⁰ suggests Virg. *Geo.* 4.116 (*extremo [...] sub fine laborum*), and more openly *Ecl.* 10.1 (*extremum hunc, Arethusa, mihi concede laborem*). Both *Ecl.* 10 and the whole *Paradiso* are the last parts of longer works of poetry. Virgil is calling on the Sicilian spring to succour him at the end of his *Eclogues*, while Dante is asking for the help of Apollo himself (i.e. God)⁵¹ to conclude his 'poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano cielo e terra',⁵² superseding any model he attempted to imitate.

Moreover, 'o divina virtù' (*Pd.* 1.22) is the expression which shows the Christian features of Apollo: the occurrence of these two words together is not traceable in classical authors, yet they appear coupled in early Christian authors.⁵³ This suggests a detachment from the mere pagan attributes of Apollo and a reconsideration of them under Christian sensibility: in fact, Apollo will succour Dante in recollecting what he had seen in Heaven (*Pd.* 1.22-4, 'se mi ti presti / tanto che l'ombra del beato regno / segnata nel mio capo manifesti'). The epithet 'padre' (*Pd.* 1.28), which

⁴⁸ Cf. s.v. 'Bonus', *OLD*, 238-9, especially Cic. *Nat.* 3.84, *bonorum deorum*; Hor. *Carm.* 4.2.38, *bonique divi*; Stat. *Theb.* 10.163, *bonus [...] Apollo*; Pers., 2.22-3, *o bone [...] / Iuppiter!*; Florus, *Verg. Or.* 3, *bone Iuppiter*.

⁴⁹ Aug., *Conf.* 2.6, *Deus bone*; 3.6, *mi Pater summe bone*; 3.11, *tu bone omnipotens*; and *passim*.

⁵⁰ *Labor* is also connected to poetry in Latin literature: in addition to the Virgilian passages cited above, cf. Hor. *Serm.* 1.4.12, *scribendi ferre laborem*; Ov. *Ars* 1.771, *pars superat coepit, pars est exhausta, laboris; Tr.* 2.322, *pius est patriae facta referre labor*; and *Pont.* 3.9.20, *longi ferre laboris onus*.

⁵¹ Buti ed. 1982, vol. 3, 14: 'lo nostro poeta lo invoca come Iddio della sapienza, e per lui intese lo Verbo divino ch'è sapienza del Padre'.

⁵² *Pd.* 25.1-2.

⁵³ Cass. *De An.* 13.3, *divina virtute*; *Inst.* 1.16.1, *divina virtus*; Isid. *Etym.* 6.19.40, *divina virtus*.

also confers on Apollo a Christian tint, is also used for the god in classical Latin literature:⁵⁴ the re-elaboration of a strong pagan element (that of the god of poetry himself) forming a compound of both Christian and non-Christian characteristics, not only shows that Dante's reception of the Classics is on a par with that of the Middle Ages (which tried to redirect the previous culture bringing it into a Christian vision of history) but also testifies to Dante's replacement of pagan inspirers of poetry with the one and only true God.

Immediately after the invocational prayer, the mythological episode of Apollo and the defeat of Marsyas is mentioned after a poetical contest between the god and the satyr who had challenged him (*Pd.* 1.20-1). Commentators have pointed out the similarities between this episode and that of the Pierides; both illustrate the tragic end of whoever claims to be a better poet than the god and goddesses of poetry themselves.⁵⁵ Yet for Dante this assumes a deeper meaning: Apollo/God will help him and prevent him from failure in his errand, and at the same time He will grant him power to overcome the poets who lack divine guidance.⁵⁶

The act of inspiration described in Dante as a divine breath (*Pd.* 1.19, 'entra nel mio petto, e spira tue') undoubtedly reveals classical roots.⁵⁷ *Luc. Bell. Civ.* 1.63-5 offers the most explicit correspondence with *Pd.* 1.19, since it also involves the two peaks of Parnassus (Cirrha/Apollo and Nysa/Bacchus): *sed mihi iam numen, nec, si te pectore vates / accipio, Cirrhaea velim secreta moventem / sollicitare deum Bacchumque avertere Nysa*:⁵⁸ the relationship between *te pectore vates*

⁵⁴ Virg. *Geo.* 2.4, *pater*; *Aen.* 3.251, *Phoebo pater omnipotens*; 11.785-90, *Apollo [...] pater [...] omnipotens*; Ov. *Met.* 2.36-8, *Phoebe pater [...] genitor*; Stat. *Silv.* 1.4.114, *pater vatum Thymbraee* (Thymbraeus is the epithet for Apollo also in *Pd.* 12.31); *Theb.* 1.696, *Phoebe parens*.

⁵⁵ Cf. Venturi 1911, 352: 'punizioni ambedue dell'ignoranza audace'.

⁵⁶ Cf. Buti ed. 1982, vol. 3, 15: 'quando lo stolto [...] contendé col savio [...] elli è vinto da lui e fa nota la sua stoltia, et elli scorre come fiume con la sua stoltia'. The same happens when poetry inspired by pagan gods is confronted with the Word of God who inspires Christian poets.

⁵⁷ Virg. *Aen.* 6.101, *sub pectore [...] Apollo*; Hor. *Carm.* 2.19.7, *plenoque Bacchi pectore*; Ov. *Met.* 1.3, *adspirate*; and *Pont.* 3.4.93, *ista dei vox est, deus est in pectore nostro*.

⁵⁸ Note the other parallelism with *Pd.* 1.36: *Cirrhaea [...] / sollicitare deum* and *avertere* (lines 64-5) are the equivalent of 'si pregherà perché Cirra risponda'. The reference to the two yokes of Parnassus (*Pd.* 1.16-7, 'infino a qui l'un giogo di Parnaso / assai mi fu; ma or con amendue [...]') is another debt to classical poetry: Virg. *Ecl.* 10.11,

/accipio and ‘entra nel mio petto’ shows that Dante adopts the epic modality of inspiration, literally by the infusion of the god into the poet. Another example of Apolline inspiration is to be found in Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 5.148-50,⁵⁹ from where the vocabulary in *Pd.* 1 is recalled, through the correspondence between *sub pectore* and again ‘entra nel mio petto’. Whereas in Dante Apollonian inspiration is requested to relate true events of his journey, in Lucan it is simulated to utter false words (5.149-50, *ficta [...] / verba*).⁶⁰

The image of poetical inspiration and coronation appears throughout *Pd.* 1.14-33: ‘fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso’ (*Pd.* 1.14), ‘dar l’amato alloro’ (*Pd.* 1.15), ‘entra nel petto mio, e spira tue’ (*Pd.* 1.19), ‘al piè del tuo diletto legno / venire, e coronarmi de le foglie / che la materia e tu mi farai degno’ (*Pd.* 1.25-7), ‘se ne coglie / per triūnfare cesare o poeta’ (*Pd.* 1.28-9), ‘fronda / peneia’ (*Pd.* 1.32-3). These profoundly classical topoi are evoked by Dante in order to attribute solemnity to his poetry and respect to the Classics, although in his mind the pagan god is replaced by the inspiring power of God. Latin texts are full of relevant expressions: ‘fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso’ finds a source in Virg. *Aen.* 3.434, *animum si veris implet Apollo*, even though in Virgil Apollo is granting the gift of pagan prophecy and in Dante Apollo-God is legitimising Christian

Parnasi [...] iuga; Ov. Met. 1.316-7, *mons ibi verticibus petit arduus astra duobus, / nomine Parnasos;* 2.221, *Parnasosque biceps;* Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 1.63-5, *nec, si te pectore vates / accipio, Cirrhaea velim secreta moventem / sollicitare deum Bacchumque avertere Nysa;* 5.72-4, *Parnasos gemino petit aethera colle, / mons Phoebo Bromioque sacer, cui numine mixto / Delphica Thebanae referunt trieterica Bacchae;* Stat. *Theb.* 5.532, *cornua Parnasi;* *Silv.* 4.4.90, *Parnasique iugis;* Pers., *Prologus* 2, *in bicipiti [...] Parnaso.* The identification of the yokes of Parnassus in *Pd.* 1 is not yet solved: some scholars identify one of the yokes with Apollo and the other with the Muses (Sapegno 1957, 783: ‘l’uno, Cirra, era sacro al dio [Apollo]; l’altro, Nisa, è assegnato dal poeta alle Muse’; Singleton 1975, vol. 3, 13: ‘Cirra was also the name sometimes given to the peak of Parnassus sacred to Apollo’). Other scholars, instead, recognize both peaks as sacred to Apollo (s.v. ‘Parnassus’, *NP*, vol. 10, 543: ‘the term dual-peaked refers to the Phaedriades [with no distinction of gods]’). Other commentators state that the two mountain peaks were dedicated to Apollo and Bacchus respectively (De Angelis 1993, 185 ff.), taking into consideration Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 1.63-5 and 5.72-4 (cf. above). Finally, other scholars admit Dante’s misinterpretation of the Greek mountain, owing to earlier confusion in the tradition of this myth. This conclusion is the most plausible. Cf. Chiavacci Leonardi 1997, vol. 3, 16: ‘il Parnaso era un monte della Beozia con due cime, o gioghi, sacri l’uno ad Apollo, l’altro a Bacco. L’Elicona, sacro alle Muse, era in realtà un’altra montagna, ma Isidoro (*Etym.* 14.7.11) ritiene che fosse proprio uno dei due gioghi del Parnaso, e Probo dice che con Bacco abitavano le Muse [...] Quello che è certo è che Dante intende l’un giogo come abitato dalle Muse’; and Ziolkowski 1990, 16.

⁵⁹ *Deum simulans sub pectore ficta quieto / verba refert, [...] / instinctam sacro mentem testata furore.*

⁶⁰ For the priority of truth in poetry cf. 54-9.

poetry. Furthermore, the gifts of Apollo are gathered together in *Aen.* 12.393-4, *ipse suas artes, sua munera, laetus Apollo / augurium citharamque dabat celerisque sagittas*; in Prop. 1.2.27-8, *cum tibi praesertim Phoebus sua carmina donet / Aoniamque libens Calliopea lyram*; and summed up in Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.216 as *munus Apolline dignum*. In *Pd.* 1.15, ‘dar l’amato alloro’ the gift of prophecy, poetry, art, and music are transferred to the one element which crowns them all (the entire laurel alone).⁶¹ This Dantean expression recalls Virg. *Ecl.* 7.61-2, *gratissima [...] / [...] sua laurea Phoebo*, Hor. *Carm.* 4.2.9, *laurea donandus Apollinari*, and Ov. *Met.* 1.553, *hanc quoque Phoebus amat*. While Latin poets seek poetical accomplishment by composing theologically-poor verses, Dante prays for laurel coronation as the reward for his Christian poetry, which has no equal in literature. Further on in *Pd.* 1.25-7, Dante will pay homage to the laurel tree if he is found to be worthy of being crowned with it. The major reward a poet could desire is articulated in several expressions: ‘coronarmi de le foglie’ (*Pd.* 1.26) and ‘la materia e tu mi farai degno’ (*Pd.* 1.27), in accordance with Stat. *Theb.* 3.105, *lauruque sua dignatus Apollo est; Ach.* 1.8-10, *si veterem digno deplevimus haustu, / da fontes mihi, Phoebe, novos ac fronde secunda / necte comas*; and Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.216, *munus Apolline dignum*. Moreover, the image of military and poetic triumph in *Pd.* 1.29 (‘trūnfare cesare o poeta’) is indeed another classical inheritance (later picked up by Petrarch),⁶² and ‘fronda’ (*Pd.* 1.32) appears widely in Latin literature in a context of laurel coronation in its equivalent

⁶¹ The comparison between the quoted texts is established by the presence of *munera/munus* and *dabat* in the Latin authors, and of ‘dar’ in Dante. Latin references to coronation with leaves of laurel, ivy, myrtle, olive tree, and other plants, are numerous: Virg. *Ecl.* 6.68, *floribus atque apio crinis ornatus amaro*; 7.25-28, *hedera nascentem ornate poetam / [...] / [...] baccare frontem / cingite*; 8.12-13, *tempora circum / inter victricis hederam tibi serpere laurus*; Hor. *Epist.* 1.3.25, *prima feres hederae victricis praemia*; 1.19.26, *me foliis ideo brevioribus ornes*; *Carm.* 3.30.15-16, *mihi Delphica / lauro cinge volens, Melpomene, comam*; 4.8.33, *ornatus viridi tempora pampino*; Ov. *Am.* 1.1.29, *cingere litorea flaventia tempora myro*; *Met.* 5.338, *inmissos hedera collecta capillos*; 11.165, *ille caput flavum lauro Parnaside vinctus*; *Tr.* 4.2.51, *tempora Phoebea lauro cingetur*; Stat. *Theb.* 6.366, *chelyn lauro tectumque inlustre coronae*; 7.784, *accipe commissum capiti decus, accipe laurus*; *Ach.* 1.9-10, *fronde secunda / necte comas*.

⁶² Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.49-52, *hic magnos potius triumphos, / hic ames dici pater atque princeps / neu sinas Medos equitare inultos / te duce, Caesar*; Ov. *Am.* 2.12.1, *ite triumphales circum mea tempora laurus*; *Met.* 1.560-1, *tu ducibus Latis aderis, cum laeta triumphum / vox canet*; *Fast.* 5.52, *illa coronatis alta triumphat equis*; *Epist.* 2.5.27, *huc magni pervenit fama triumphi*; 3.4.17, *spectatum vates alii scripsere triumphum*; Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 8.430, *caesareis [...] triumphis*, to name a few, including the clearer parallel with Stat. *Ach.* 1.15-16, *geminae florent vatumque ducumque / certatim laurus*.

*frons.*⁶³ A parallel to ‘delfica’ (*Pd.* 1.32) in a similar context is Hor. *Carm.* 3.30.15-6, *mihi Delphica / lauro cinge volens, Melpomene, comam*, even though the crown is granted by a Muse, and not by Apollo. The adjective *laetus* is frequently associated in Latin poetry with Apollo or other gods, or their attributes, and it is employed by Dante in ‘lieta / delfica deità’ (*Pd.* 1.31-2), maintaining the classical tradition.⁶⁴

From the archaic period onwards,⁶⁵ coronation with laurel was considered the defining honour for a poet. Dante’s Christian reception of the pagan Apollo and the laurel coronation is to be understood as a facet of his Christian interpretation of poetry: there is no poetry worthy of regard unless it is ordained by and entwined with God’s will, as his is. Thus, for Dante, accomplishment in the sphere of poetry corresponds to his spiritual fulfilment, and his poetry represents a mission dispatched from God, and proof of his faith: this is the reason why Dante depicts his own poetical coronation being held in the place where he had once been christened, the baptistery of St. John in Florence,⁶⁶ accompanied by the honorable title of ‘poeta’ which was usually conferred to Classical authors with clear distinction from the medieval *versilogi*. Once again, classical imagery is combined with Christian interpretation.⁶⁷

⁶³ Ov. *Fast.* 3.481-2, *Bacche, levis leviorque tuis, quae tempora cingunt, / frondibus;* 4.656, *sua faginea tempora fronde premit;* Tr. 3.1.45, *viret semper laurus nec fronde caduca;* Virg. *Aen.* 4.506, *fronde coronat;* 8.274, *cingite fronde comas;* Hor. *Epist.* 1.18.64, *velox victoria fronda coronet;* Stat. *Silv.* 1.5.14, *fronde verecunda, Clio me ludit;* 2.3.51, *Phoebi frondes;* Ach. 1.289, *fronde ligare comas;* Theb. 3.466-7, *gemini vates sanctam canentis olivae / fronde comam et niveis ornati tempora vittis;* 7.170, *nectere fronde comas;* 10.254-6, *ponit adoratas, Phoebea insignia, frondes, / longaeisque ducis gremio commendat honorem / frontis.*

⁶⁴ Virg. *Aen.* 6.657, *laetumque choro paeana;* 10.28, *laetum paeana;* 12.393, *laetus Apollo;* Stat. *Silv.* 1.2.143, *Amor laetamque [...] matrem;* Ach. 2.101, *laeti Bacchi;* Theb. 2.191, *laeta Venus.* The *laetitia* of a deity is a *topos* also in Greek literature: for example Hom. *Od.* 1.82, *μακάρεσσι θεοῖσι;* Aesch., *Suppl.* 526, *ὅλβιε Ζεῦ.*

⁶⁵ Hes., *Theog.* 30 ff.

⁶⁶ *Pd.* 25.1-9, ‘se mai continga che ‘l poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra / [...] / vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra / [...] / [...] / con altra voce omai, con altro vello / ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte / del mio battesmo prenderò ‘l cappello’. Dante calls himself ‘poeta’ here for the first time as a sign of poetical accomplishment: ‘poeta’ was the title reserved only for classical authors in the *Commedia* (cf. *If.* 1.73, 82, 130; 2.10; 4.14, 80, 88; *Pg.* 4.58, 136; 19.82; 22.73, 115, 139; *Pd.* 1.29, and *passim*).

⁶⁷ Weiss 1969, 20: ‘nel chiamare se stesso poeta Dante dunque si proclama [...] della stessa classe di Virgilio e degli altri grandi antichi, il sesto insomma della *bella scuola* capeggiata da Omero’. On laureation cf. Claud. *De Cons. Stil.* 62.

At the end of the passage, there is a three-line *recusatio* (*Pd.* 1.34-6, ‘poca favilla gran fiamma seconda: / forse di retro a me con miglior voci / si pregherà perché Cirra risponda’), where Dante re-elaborates four Latin passages at the same time.⁶⁸ The allusion that Dante makes to better-quality poetry here is rather ironic (‘**forse** [...] con migliori voci’), especially if we consider it alongside *Pd.* 2.1-7 (‘o voi che siete in piccioletta barca / [...] / non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse, / perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti’), which metaphorically expresses disdain towards any poet with theological weakness: no other author among the classical poets is capable of equalling such a sacred theme and a subject so worthy of praise.⁶⁹ In fact, Dante leaves the challenge not to previous authors, who would fail, but to succeeding authors (*Pd.* 1.35, ‘di retro a me’), who themselves might supersede the Classics as Dante does, by following in his footsteps, supported by God’s inspiration.

The longest metaphor of the poet as a sailor in the *Commedia* appears at the opening of *Pd.* 2. This is the second time in *Paradiso* that Dante mentions pagan gods relevant to poetry.⁷⁰ However, unlike canto 1, *Pd.* 2.8-9 is not a normal invocation, since there are no specific verbs (i.e. imperatives or subjunctives), appeals, vocatives, epithets, attributes, descriptions of particular deeds of the god, or devotional promises by the poet to denote it as a proem, even though Dante mentions Apollo, Minerva and the Muses as his guides. The beginning of canto 2 is a remark on the hardship of the poetical theme: ‘non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse, / perdendo me rimarreste smarriti. / L’acqua ch’io prendo già mai non si corse’ (*Pd.* 2.5-7) and ‘alto sale’ (*Pd.* 2.13) all underline the difficulty of

⁶⁸ Curt. Ruf., *Hist. Alex.* 6.3.11, *parva saepe scintilla [...] magnum excitavit incendium*; Ov. *Met.* 7.79-81, *ut solet ventis alimenta adsumere, quaeque / parva sub inducta latuit scintilla favilla / crescere*; Virg. *Geo.* 4.148, *aliis post me memoranda relinquō*; and Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 1.64-5, *Cirrhaea velim secreta moventem / sollicitare deum Bacchumque avertere Nysa*. Respectively, the first two quotations are sources for ‘poca favilla gran fiamma seconda’ (*Pd.* 1.34), the third for ‘forse di retro a me con miglior voci’ (*Pd.* 1.35), and the fourth for ‘si pregherà perché Cirra risponda’ (*Pd.* 1.36).

⁶⁹ *Pd.* 23.67, ‘non è pareggio da picciola barca’; 63, ‘sacrato poema’; 25.1, ‘poema sacro’; and *Pd.* 1.27, ‘la materia e tu mi farai degno’.

⁷⁰ Cf. *Pd.* 1.13 ff., ‘o buon Apollo [...].’

composing the *Commedia*, already expressed in *Pd.* 1.⁷¹ Despite this, *Pd.* 2.1-18 is nonetheless a declaration of Dante's poetics: Dante invites those who do not have the knowledge of God to restrain from reading the *Paradiso*, for they would fail in the task; only those who had studied theology and participate in God's wisdom may fully understand Dante's poetry. On the same level, only Christian poets may succeed in telling the truth in poetry, whereas pagan poets will fail. Dante expresses his confidence and superiority in composing the last cantica in order to spread the truth to generations to come.⁷² In surmounting the Classics, it is fundamental for Dante not only to have faith and divine inspiration, but also to know the Classics in depth so that he might fulfill their imperfect intentions.

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,
tornate a riveder li vostri liti:
non vi mettete in pelago, chè, forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.

L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse;
Minerva spira, e conducemi Apollo,
e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse.

Voi altri pochi che drizzaste il collo
per tempo al pan dell'i angeli, del quale
vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,
metter potete ben per l'alto sale
vostro navigio, servando mio solco
dinanzi all'acqua che ritorna equale.

Que' gloriosi che passaro al Colco
non s'ammiraron come voi farete,
quando Iasòn vider fatto bifolco

Pd. 2.1-18

⁷¹ Cf. *Pd.* 1.5-6, 'vidi cose che ridire / né sa né può chi di là su discende'; 17-8, 'ma or con amendue / m'è uopo intrar ne l'aringo rimaso'; and 23-4, 'l'ombra del beato regno / segnata nel mio capo manifesti'.

⁷² Cf. *Pd.* 33.70-2, 'fa la lingua mia tanto possente, / ch'una favilla sol della tua gloria / possa lasciare alla futura gente'. Dante considers himself a prophet of God's Truth, as well as its poet. On Dante's self-conception as a Christian prophet, cf. Morghen 1970, 30-1: 'Dante si considerò profeta nel senso biblico della parola, come consapevole portatore del monito di Dio, e come annunciatore di un messaggio che [...] superava i suoi tempi, elevandosi via via ad una visione sempre più alta della storia dell'umana redenzione'; and Nardi 1960².

A close study of each relevant Italian word reveals that Dante has a deep-rooted relationship with ancient literature, corresponding either in both vocabulary and context, or merely in vocabulary.

The **first section** consists of the first two terzine, containing the admonition to the weak reader (*Pd.* 2.1-6). Within the metaphor, the poet is guiding the readers on open waters (i.e. the difficulty of poetry), but those who are on board a small ship ('piccioletta barca', i.e. ignorance of Christian theology and philosophy) should navigate back to a safe harbour (i.e. intellectual and religious limitation) to avoid a shipwreck. The 'piccioletta barca' (*Pd.* 2.1) will be recalled in *Pd.* 23.67 ('picciola barca'), in another poetical invocation, with the same meaning of shallow background knowledge.⁷³ In Latin poetry, 'piccioletta barca' is the parallel of *cumba*, *ratis*, and *carina*,⁷⁴ and these words are often used in metaphorical contexts. An example of admonition is offered in Hor. *Carm.* 1.3.23-4, *impiae / non tangenda rates transiliunt vada. / Audax omnia perpeti / gens humana ruit per vetitum nefas*, and in *Hal.* 83-4, *nec tamen in medias pelagi te pergere sedes / admoneam vastique maris temptare profundum*, which can be compared with the temptation to undertake far too great deeds, expressed in 'non vi mettete in pelago' (*Pd.* 1.5).⁷⁵ Indeed, there are several mentions in Latin literature of shipwrecks during storms or general situations of failure, owing to the inexperience of the sailor or poet, which are the source for *Pd.* 2.1, 'o voi che siete in piccioletta barca', and 4-6, 'tornate a riveder li vostri liti: / non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse, /

⁷³ *Pd.* 23.55-69 (in particular 23.67-9, 'non è pareggio da picciola barca / quel che fendendo va l'ardita prora, / né da nocchier ch'a sé medesmo parca'). Dante has already used the image of the ship within a poetical metaphor in *Conv.* 2.1.1, 'lo tempo chiama e domanda la mia nave uscir di porto; per che dirizzato l'artimone de la ragione a l'òra del mio desiderio, entro in pelago con isperanza di dolce cammino e di salutevole porto e laudabile ne la fine de la mia cena'.

⁷⁴ *Cumba* is the Latin for 'small boat', 'skiff': cf. s.v. 'Cumba', *OLD*, 470; *ratis* is the equivalent of 'raft': cf. s.v. 'Ratis', *OLD*, 1577; *carina* is the metonym for 'ship': cf. s.v. 'Carina', *OLD*, 277.

⁷⁵ For the interpretation of Hor. *Carm.* 1.3.23-4 cf. Mandruzzato-Traina 1985, 467 ('questa elegia [è] contro la temerarietà e l'avventurosa audacia umana'), and Fenton 2008, 569 ('the poem is regularly read as a reference to Vergil's embarking on the literary *journey* of composing the *Aeneid*').

perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti':⁷⁶ limited horizons and ignorance in matters of faith are the worst opponents of success. Moreover, the word *pelagus* (*Pd.* 2.5, 'pelago') is commonly used in Latin literature to indicate dangerous seas and is associated with perilous enterprises;⁷⁷ according to Dante – and this is what distinguishes him from the Classics – nautical/poetic skills must come directly from God, otherwise failure will threaten the sailor/poet.

The expression 'desiderosi d'ascoltar' (*Pd.* 2.2) reveals an intellectual dependence of the readers on Dante (since Dante possesses knowledge of theological truths which the readers do not have), and confirms the innate inclination of man for knowledge.⁷⁸ Similar phrases are widely used in Latin authors, especially in Cicero's prose: *De Or.* 1.20, *Platonis studiosus audiendi fuisset; Rep.* 1.70, *ex me audire voluistis;* 2.1, *cupiditate audiendi; Brut.* 10, *tu audire velis;* 256, *audire volumus;* 280, *me audire voluisset; De Lege Agr.* 2.71, *me audire voltis.*⁷⁹ Every man desires to learn, be he from Christian or pagan background, but not every man is capable of fully understanding what he learns; to use Dante's metaphor, only those who have the wisdom of God ('pan de li angeli') can attain deep knowledge. Hence, the innate desire for knowledge leads each reader to follow the poet: 'seguiti / dietro al mio legno che cantando varca' (*Pd.* 2.2-3).⁸⁰ The act of following gods and constellations is particularly relevant in *Pd.* 8-9, since Dante says that Apollo and Minerva guide his

⁷⁶ Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.114, *navem agere ignarus navis timet;* Ov. *Tr.* 1.1.85, *et mea cumba semel vasta percussa procella;* 2.329-30, *non ideo debet pelago se credere, siqua / audet in exiguo ludere cumba lacu.*

⁷⁷ Virg. *Aen.* 3.555, *gemitum ingentem pelagi;* 5.212, *prona petit maria et pelago decurrit aperto;* 6.3, *obvertunt pelago proras;* 10.165, *pelagoque vehatur;* Stat. *Silv.* 2.2.50, *pelagi clamore fremuit;* *Theb.* 1.372, *pelagi tumultu;* Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 5.579, *minas [...] pelagi,* and *passim.*

⁷⁸ This concept has already been expressed by Dante in *If.* 26.119-20, 'fatte non foste a viver come bruti, / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza'.

⁷⁹ It can also be found in poetry: Ov. *Met.* 12.177, *cunctis eadem est audire voluntas.*

⁸⁰ 'Seguiti / dietro al mio legno che cantando varca' (*Pd.* 2.2-3). recalls passages where the verb *sequor* indicates poetical imitation: Hor. *Serm.* 1.4.6, *Lucilius, hosce secutus;* 2.1.34, *sequor hunc;* *Epist.* 2.2.95, *mox etiam si forte vacas, sequere et procul audi;* 2.2.8, *vis canere et contracta sequi vestigia vatum;* Stat. *Theb.* 12.816-7, *Aeneida [...] / sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora.* Moreover, other Latin authors use *sequor* in the case of following a ship, a model, a master, or a track: cf. Virg. *Aen.* 3.671, *fluctus aequare sequendo;* 8.333, *pelagique extrema sequentem;* Cic. *Phil.* 1.3, *auctoritatem eius summo studio secuti sumus* (this echoes the relationship between Dante-pupil and Virgil-scholar in *If.* 1.83-85, through the presence of *summo studio*-‘lungo studio’, and *auctoritatem*-‘autore’); *Tusc.* 2.9, *eum [Aristotelem] qui secuti sunt;* Hor. *Serm.* 2.1.34, *sequor hunc;* Ov. *Met.* 10.710, *vestigia certa secuti;* Stat. *Silv.* 5.2.6, *vela sequar;* *Theb.* 5.441, *audet iter magnique sequens vestigia mutat.* Note that Dante uses the expression ‘servando mio solco’ later in *Pd.* 2.14 (‘solco’ can be compared with *vestigium*).

ship, and that the Muses indicate to him the Ursae:⁸¹ ‘L’Orse’ (Ursa Major and Minor) are literally the means by which the sailor is guided along the right course, and in the context of the simile they stand for the rhetorical and poetical devices employed by the poet to create his poetry.⁸² Dante’s real guide, however, is not any pagan deity, but God Himself. Additionally, the stars indicate success for Dante as a man and a poet, gained by the grace of God, as we can see elsewhere in the *Commedia* (*If.* 34.139, ‘riveder le stelle’, and *Pg.* 33.145, ‘salir a le stelle’).⁸³

The quantity of classical sources used in *Pd.* 2.2 suggests a strong perception of self-identity on the part of Dante, since his detachment from and superiority to ancient authors is expressed through the conscious re-elaboration of the latter’s own material under a Christian light. This attitude is clear in *Pd.* 2.3, ‘dietro al mio legno che cantando varca’, and shows a strong confidence in using Latin expressions, yet at the same time a definite superseding of them: following an image taken from the Classics, Dante becomes the leader of real poetry.⁸⁴

The expression in *Pd.* 2.4, ‘tornate a riveder li vostri liti’, illustrates Dante’s disdain for poor poets and his invitation to turn from this dangerous enterprise. The Dantean use of ‘vostri liti’ in *Pd.* 1.4 suggests a sharp disapproval towards classical authors, rather than towards poets in general: classical poets are by antonomasia those who do not have theological awareness, and therefore are

⁸¹ Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 9.558, *sequerisque deum*; 1.636, *numerisque sequentibus astra*.

⁸² Buti’s commentary to this passage reads: ‘l’Orse che sono li modi del dire, e le parole e li colori retorici’.

⁸³ Cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1.1.36, *feriam sidera*; Ov. *Pont.* 2.9.62, *lucida Pieria tendis in astra via*, and s.v. ‘Stella’, *ED*, vol. 5, 428.

⁸⁴ In Latin literature *lignum* means ‘ship’ by metonymy: Ov. *Met.* 8.132, *secans aequora [...] potuit tenui fidere ligno*; *Pont.* 1.4.35, *nos fragili ligno vastum sulcavimus aequor* (although Dante is not on a fragile *lignum*); Virg. *Geo.* 2.440-3, *silvae [...] dant utile lignum / navigis pinos*; *Aen.* 12.767, *nautis olim venerabile lignum*. Furthermore, a correspondence with ‘varcare’ can be found in the Latin *arare* or *secare*: Cic. *Phaen. Arat.* 374, *rostro Neptunia prata secantes*; Virg. *Aen.* 2.780, *vastum maris aequor arandum*; 3.495, *nullum maris aequor arandum*; 5.2, *fluctusque atros [...] secabat*; 9.103, *secant spumantem [...] pontum*; 10.222, *fluctusque secabant*; 687, *alta secans*; Hor, *Carm.* 1.1.14, *pavidus nauta secet mare* (this line contrasts with Dante’s confidence in sailing the ocean, expressed also in *Pd.* 23.68, ‘quel che fendendo va l’ardita prora’); Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 5.418, *fluctus [...] secandi*; Ov. *Fast.*, 1.498, *nave secat fluctus*; *Pont.* 2.10.33, *rate caeruleas picta sulcavimus undas*; Ov. *Met.* 7.1, *fretum Minya Pegasea puppe secabant*. In this last passage, Dante picks from a classical author one single line, which is split into two or more lines in the *Commedia*, creating a thick net of cross references: this line from Ovid is linked also to *Pd.* 2.16, through the presence of *Minya* (the Argonauts) and *Pegasea puppe* (the ship Argo). The contrast (patent from *Pd.* 2.16-18) between Dante-the-sailor and the Argonauts becomes more and more evident (cf. *infra* 84ff.).

not able to write or read theological poetry. Further correspondences can be found in Virg. *Aen.* 12.262, *litora vestra*, which evokes Dante's thought that man cannot accomplish divine things (in this case divine poetry) without the guidance of God. 'Tornate a riveder li vostri liti' is also a sarcastic reference to the excuses for not undertaking poetical challenges (*recusatio* – a common *topos* in Latin literature), in the sense that Latin poets restrain themselves from undertaking too difficult a theme of poetry, as sailors adopt small sails for their journey and refuse to face the ocean:⁸⁵ 'vostri liti' stand for weak poetic themes chosen by classical poets, against the greatness (or 'alto sale') of the *Commedia*. Dante admits *recusatio* into the *Commedia* not because he is incapable of writing poetry, but because the theme sometimes surpasses his human limits and he cannot intellectually conceive it or remember it.⁸⁶ Dante cannot withdraw himself from the poetical mission he was destined for, with no example to follow (allegedly);⁸⁷ Virgil is gone, his classical models are far behind (although he constantly draws material from them), and the road ahead is not yet travelled.

The **second section** (*Pd.* 2.7-9) expresses the poet's self-confidence: 'l'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse' (*Pd.* 2.7), in line with the classical *topos* of 'I bring things never said before' often recalled by Horace⁸⁸ and particularly in the sailing metaphor in Manilius, 2.59, *propria rate pellimus undas*.⁸⁹ The number of Latin texts examined so far confirms that Dante possesses the

⁸⁵ *Recusatio* within the sailing metaphor occurs in Hor. *Carm.* 4.15.1-4, *Phoebus volentem proelia me loqui / victas et urbes increpuit lyra, / ne parva Thyrrenum per aequor / vela darem*; Ov. *Ars* 3.26, *conveniunt cumbae vela minora meae*.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Pd.* 1.5-8, 'v'idi cose che ridire / né sa né può chi di là sù discende; / perché appressando sé al suo disire, / nostro intelletto si profonda tanto, / che dietro la memoria non può ire'.

⁸⁷ Even though Dante expresses his poetical independence from the Classics, he continually uses their literature and poetical *topoi*, actually following their example, despite his declaration 'l'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse'.

⁸⁸ Curtius (1953, 85-6) devotes a whole paragraph to the 'topics of the exordium'. Cf. Hor. *Serm.* 1.19.21-2, *prima per vacuum posui vestigia princeps, / non aliena me pressi pede; Carm.* 3.1.2-4, *carmina non prius / audita [...] / [...] canto*; and Dante, *Mon.* 1.1.3, *intemperatas ab aliis ostendere veritates*.

⁸⁹ The whole section of Manilius 2.53-60 is a model for Dante. In these lines Manilius collects the poetical imagery of fresh meadows, of new streams, of the chariot, and that of the sea to express the novelty of his poetry from previous authors: *integra quaeramus rorantis prata per herbas / undamque occultis meditantem murmur in antris*,

means to overcome any danger whatsoever involved in the journey, even though he is the “first sailor”: these means are faith in God, and knowledge of the Classics.⁹⁰

As an indication of classical heritage fused with Christian belief, pagan gods are accompanying and helping Dante in the mission (*Pd.* 2.8-9), symbolizing the Holy Spirit. The divine guidance of the ship and the direction of the stars are commonly used in Latin poetry to assure protection during the journey,⁹¹ although in Dante these pagan elements assume a Christian significance and stand for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. According to Da Buti, Minerva is the wisdom of God, Apollo is the poetic *inventio*, and the Muses are the art and technique of poetry, who together represent the infusion of the Holy Spirit to the poet, on the example of the ship of Faith described by Tertullian.⁹²

In the **third section** (*Pd.* 2.10-15) Dante invites Christian readers to follow him, still using traditional classical imagery and vocabulary. An example of the poet’s exhortation towards his readers is again in Manilius, 3.36-7, *huc ades, o quicumque meis advertere coeptis / aurem oculosque potes, veras et percipe voces*, despite the fact that Manilius abandons the nautical imagery and is more concerned with apologizing for his non-poetical theme, rather than warning the readers of its theological content.⁹³ Focusing on the vocabulary chosen by Dante in *Pd.* 2.10-15,

quam neque durato gustarint ore volucres, / ipse nec aetherio Phoebus libaverit igni. / Nostra loquar, nulli vatum debebimus orsa, / nec furtum sed opus veniet, soloque volamus / in caelum curru, propria rate pellimus undas.

⁹⁰ Reading the Classics is fundamental for Dante’s poetry: cf. DVE 2.4.9, *prius Elicone potatus, tenuis fidibus ad supremum, secure plectrum tum movere incipiat; and supra part one.*

⁹¹ Ov. *Tr.* 1.2.88, *pronaque sint nostrae numina vestra rati*. Parallels to *Pd.* 2.8-9 are Virg. *Aen.* 6.56-9, *Phoebe [...] / [...] / [...] / tot maria intravi duce te* (*Phoebe*/“Apollo”, and *duce*/“conducem”; Ov. *Tr.* 1.10.1-2, *est mihi sitque, precor, flavae tutela Minervae / navis* (*Minervae*/‘Minerva’); 11-12, *perque tot eventus et inquis concita ventis / aequora Palladio numine tuta fuit* (*Palladio*/‘Minerva’).

⁹² Buti ed. 1982, vol. 3, 43-4. Cf. s.v. ‘Apollo’, *ED*, vol. 1, 318: ‘tale identificazione [di Apollo con lo Spirito Santo] non è di solo comodo [...] in quanto si rifa a un metro interpretativo di cui si trovano non pochi esempi nella cultura medievale (ad esempio non è raro trovare il nome *Minerva* chiosato come *Sapientia Altissimi* e commentato con versetti biblici)’. Cf. s.v. ‘Minerva’, *ED*, vol. 3, 959: ‘[Minerva] è figura certamente della sapienza che proviene da Dio [...] è colel la cui virtù produce frutti di gran lunga superiori a quelli delle Muse’ (Ov. *Met.* 5.269, *nisi te virtus opera ad maiora tulisset*). For the image of the ship of Faith guided by the Holy Spirit, cf. Tert. *De Idol.* 24.1, *inter hos scopulos et sinus, inter haec vada et freta idololatriæ velificata spiritu dei fides navigat, tuta si cauta, secura si attonita*.

⁹³ Constellations and planets were considered less poetically attractive than traditional epic themes: cf. Manilius 3.38-9, *nec dulcia carmina quaeras: / ornari res ipsa negat contenta doceri*.

‘alto sale’ (*Pd.* 2.11) is a metonymy for open/deep sea,⁹⁴ and is on a par with ‘pelago’ (*Pd.* 2.5), both implying the difficulty and danger of the journey, yet the latter connotes risk of shipwreck and impossibility of control, especially on board a ‘piccioletta barca’ (i.e., failure for non-Christian readers or poets), whilst the former also involves the possibility of a breakthrough on board a more solid ‘navigio’ (*Pd.* 2.14) if the guidance is entrusted to God. The course of the ship steered by Dante (‘solco’, *Pd.* 2.14) is another classical reminiscence,⁹⁵ and Dante adopts it to indicate that he and his followers are fully confident in their accomplishment (‘metter potete ben per l’alto mare / vostro navigio’, *Pd.* 2.13-4): despite the use of classical vocabulary, Dante’s furrow in new waters is an outstanding image of independence from the Classics. It is worth observing that the more Dante confirms his separation from his models, the more he uses their poetical imagery and vocabulary through a mature process of re-elaboration, which requires deep familiarity with his sources, and their masterly re-creation and incorporation into Christian poetry.

In the **fourth section** (*Pd.* 2.16-18), another reference to classical mythology is presented: the journey of the Argonauts. Ovid provides us with sufficient references to establish a comparison between Argo and Dante’s ship; the wood of the ship (‘legno’) and the skimmed waters (‘l’acqua [...] si corse’) correspond to *trabs Colcha [...] cucurrit aqua* (*Pont.* 1.3.76). Furthermore, considering that in Latin literature sailing vocabulary is often associated with that of cultivation,⁹⁶ we may compare another passage from Ovid, *aratri [...] / insuetum ferro proscindere campum / mirantur Colchi* (*Met.* 7.118-20), with *Pd.* 2, for *insuetum ferro [...] campum* is the parallel of ‘l’acqua [...] già mai non si corse’ (*Pd.* 2.7), and *mirantur* that of ‘s’ammiraron’ (*Pd.* 2.17). For this

⁹⁴ S.v. ‘Altum’ and ‘Altus’, *OLD*, 110; cf. s.v. ‘Sal’, *OLD*, 1680.

⁹⁵ Virg. *Aen.* 10.197, *longa solcat maria alta carina*; 296, *sulcumque sibi premat ipsa carina*; Ov. *Met.* 4.707, *sulcat aquas*; *Pont.* 1.4.35, *nos fragili ligno vastum sulcavimus aequor*; 2.10.35, *sulcavimus undas*; Stat. *Theb.* 8.18, *fremit sulcator pallidus undae*; Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 2.703, *carinarum permixtis aequora sulcis*.

⁹⁶ For ploughing in a poetical context cf. Ov. *Tr.* 2.327, *tenuis mihi campus aratur*. The association of sailing with cultivation is given by the words *arare* and *pratum* used in sailing contexts: Cic. *Phaen. Arat.* 374, *rostro Neptunia prata secantes*; Virg. *Aen.* 2.780, *maris aequor arandum*; 3.495, *maris aequor arandum*.

reason, Jason-the-cultivator, who is regarded with wonder when ploughing fields never ploughed before, is on the same level as Dante-the-sailor, who is admired with marvel when sailing waters never sailed before. The Argonauts too are on a vessel that confronts unknown waters, and at the same time Jason (the Argonauts' leader) is ploughing fields not yet cultivated: hence, the comparison with Dante's journey is twofold. Yet, as Dante is a Christian sailor, he and his Christian followers sail the waters of the unknown, securely guided by the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, the last journey of Ulysses described in *If.* 26 is linked to *Pd.* 2 by the use of the same vocabulary, and can be evaluated as a parallel to Dante's journey.⁹⁷ For example, the desire for knowledge entailed by the expression 'desiderosi d'ascoltar' (*Pd.* 2.2) corresponds to 'l'ardore / ch'i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto / e de li vizi umani e del valore' (*If.* 26.97-9), highlighting the major feature of Ulysses' personality;⁹⁸ 'non vi mettete in pelago' and 'metter potete ben per l'alto sale' (*Pd.* 2.5 and 13) correspond to Ulysses' 'misi me per l'alto mare aperto' (*If.* 26.100), indicating the difficulty of both enterprises; 'legno che cantando varca' (*Pd.* 2.3) refers to 'legno' (*If.* 26.101 and 138), 'piccioletta barca' (*Pd.* 2.1) to 'compagna / picciola' and 'orazion picciola', in the sense of theological limitation (*If.* 26.101-2 and 122), since he does not lead his companions to spiritual truth;⁹⁹ 'li vostri liti' (*Pd.* 2.4) refers to 'l'un lito e l'altro' (*If.* 26.103); and 'metter potete ben per l'alto sale' (*Pd.* 2.13) to "ntrati eravam nell'alto passo" (*If.* 26.132). The similarities in

⁹⁷ The comparison between Ulysses' and Dante's voyages has already been established by Freccero 1986, Thompson 1967, and Corti 1989. For a philological survey of Dante's tale version of Ulysses in *If.* 26, cf. Reynolds 1960, Padoan 1960, and Brugnoli 1998.

⁹⁸ Dante himself was keen on knowledge, and for this reason he has often been compared with Ulysses (Nardi 1942, 125-34). 'No one of his age was more deeply moved than Dante by the passion to know all that is knowable, and nowhere else has he given such noble expression to that noble passion as in the great figure of Ulysses' (Sinclair 1958, vol. 1, 331). For Dante's declaration of man's natural desire for knowledge, cf. *Conv.* 1.1.1, 'tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere'; 3.11.6, 'lo naturale amore chi in ciascuno genera lo desiderio di sapere'; 4.12.11, 'la scienza, nell'acquisto della quale sempre cresce lo desiderio di quella; onde Seneca dice: se l'un de' piedi avesse nel sepolcro, apredere vorrei' (*Sen. Epist.* 76.3, *tamdiu discendum est quamdiu nescias; si proverbio credimus, quamdiu vivas*). For the moralising interpretation of Ulysses' travels, cf. Hor. *Epist.* 1.2.17-18, *quid virtus et quid sapientia possit, / utile proposuit nobis exemplar Ulixen.*

⁹⁹ *If.* 26.118-20, 'considerate la vostra semenza: / fatti non foste a viver come bruti, / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza', shows Ulysses' limitation in matter of faith: according to him, the ultimate aim of man is the knowledge of the world, without implying the experience of God.

vocabulary between these two cantos of the *Commedia* suggest a considerable relationship between the metaphorical meanings of the passages: in his love for knowledge, Ulysses exceeds his human limits without God's support, and, unlike Dante, fails in his enterprise, and becomes the emblem of *sapientia mundi* (or *superbum studium insanissimae gloriae*);¹⁰⁰ by dying in a shipwreck, because of his lack of faith, Ulysses opposes himself to Dante, who proceeds without obstacles with the assistance of God. Boyde notes that the difference between the Christian Dante and the pagan Ulysses lies in the accomplishment (or not) of the object of desire: 'Ulysses dies, frustrated, without ever setting foot on the shore which Dante [...] will later reach'.¹⁰¹ The unsatisfied desire for perfect knowledge (gained only through the wisdom of God) is also what the 'spiriti magni' in Limbo are longing for:¹⁰² for this reason, Ulysses' noble desire for pure knowledge and its consequent failure are also an allegory for the failure and decadence of antiquity in general, since the Classics (including Ulysses) did enhance their human virtues, but without the true light and revelation of God.¹⁰³ The 'failure' of the classical world, in both the human and the poetic sense, to reach the unreachable is expressed here in a subtle recall which carries a tragic reality: according to Dante's belief, man without God and poetry without Revelation remain vain and shallow. Dante is confident enough to leave his dear models behind and engage his inner and perpetual thirst for God as his

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Aug. *De Beata Vita* 1.2; and *Conf.* 10.35.52, *hinc ad perscrutanda naturae, quae praeter nos non est, operata proceditur, quae scire nihil prodest et nihil aliud quam scire homines cupiunt*. Ulysses' *cupiditas scientiae* was well known in the ancient world; cf. Boyde 2000, 249-50: 'for some Roman writers [especially Cic. *De Fin.* 5.18.49], he became the very embodiment of the distinctively human *pursuit* of the truth for its own sake; and his journey became a symbol of the *quest* for pure knowledge'. Cf. Fubini 1951; Reynolds 1960; Thompson 1967, 50-1; Hollander 1969; Thompson 1974; Iannucci 1976; Barberi Squarotti 1977; Scott 1977, 117-93; Avalle 1990, 209-33; Gorni 1990, 175-98; Borges 2001, 41-50; Ossola 2001; and s.v. 'Ulisse', *ED*, vol. 5, 803-9. The bibliography on this topic is extremely wide; most of it is collected in Cassell 1981 and Corti 1989.

¹⁰¹ Boyde 2000, 232.

¹⁰² If. 4.42, 'sanza speme vivemo in disio'.

¹⁰³ The concept of the shipwreck of antiquity is illustrated by Bull 2006, 2: 'the imagery of shipwreck was particularly associated with idolatry. Tertullian had ended his treatise on the subject [*De Idol.* 24.1] with a powerful image of the ship of Faith negotiating *the reefs and inlets, the shallows and straits of idolatry*. The ship of Faith, her sails filled by the Spirit of God, navigates *safe and cautious, secure if intently watching*. But those who fall overboard are lost in a fathomless deep from which they cannot swim away'.

poetical guide (*Pd.* 2.19-20, ‘la concreata e perpetua sete / del deiforme regno cen portava’, *Pd.* 2.29, ‘drizza la mente in Dio grata’).

The Classics’ blind desire for knowledge leads them to perdition: as Padoan states, it is necessary for the Christian-Dante to make a clear distinction between ‘*vera sapienza e vana sapienza*, cioè tra la sapienza [...] che si rivolge a Dio e la *sapienza mundi*’,¹⁰⁴ and therefore to damn in these terms Ulysses and the classical world which he represents.

Thanks to the correspondence between Ulysses’ and Dante’s journeys (the latter’s already compared with that of the Argonauts), we can consider Ulysses and the Argonauts on the same level contrasting with Dante, and mark once again his definite prevailing over the Classics.

The superseding of the Classics is perfected in the last canto of the *Commedia*, where Dante directly asks God to succour him in his poetry:¹⁰⁵

O somma luce che tanto ti levi
da’ concetti mortali, a la mia mente
ripresti un poco di quel che parevi,
e fa la lingua mia tanto possente,
ch’una favilla sol de la tua gloria
possa lasciare a la futura gente;
ché, per tornare al quanto a mia memoria
e per sonare un poco in questi versi,
più si conceperà di tua vittoria

Pd. 33.67-75

This passage shows that God’s help in poetry exceeds any other source of inspiration or human possibility (*Pd.* 33.67-8, ‘tanto ti levi / da’ concetti mortali’), and that the final aim of poetry

¹⁰⁴ Padoan 1977, 185.

¹⁰⁵ A similar invocation appears in *Pd.* 30.97-9, which emphasizes the contrast between the vision of God and its synthesis into words.

should be the glory and praise of God, despite the imperfection of human poetry, which cannot fully describe the majesty of God (*Pd.* 33.71 and 75, ‘ch’una favilla sol de la tua gloria’, and ‘più si conceperà di tua vittoria’); nevertheless, the epithet for God (*Pd.* 33.65, ‘somma luce’) and the words ‘mente’, ‘lingua’, and ‘possente’ (*Pd.* 33.68 and 70) are chosen from the Latin repertoire to confirm once again the classical roots of Dante’s education and culture.¹⁰⁶ Considering the vocabulary used by Dante in these lines, we notice that *Pd.* 33.67-75 is an explicit allusion to Hor. *Carm.* 4.8.26-9, *virtus et favor et lingua potentium / vatum [...] / dignum laude virum Musa vetat mori, / caelo Musa beat*, through the presence of *lingua* and *potentium* (*Pd.* 33.70, ‘fa la mia lingua tanto possente’), and through the similarity of the poetical context in both authors. In Horace, immortality is granted by the poet to the subjects of his poems, and the poet is immortalized in his turn by the Muse for the sake of his own poetical power (lines 28-9, *Musa vetat mori / caelo Musa beat*); on the other hand, Dante asks God for poetic skills (*Pd.* 33.70, ‘fa la mia lingua tanto possente’) and immortality (*Pd.* 33.72, ‘possa lasciare alla futura gente’), yet not for singing mythological sagas but just for giving a meagre little hint of God’s grace, which is the best he can do as a human being (*Pd.* 33.69, ‘**un poco** di quel che parevi’; 71, ‘**una favilla sol** de la tua gloria’; 74-5, ‘per sonare **un poco** / si conceperà di tua vittoria’). Pagan poets have the immortalizing power claimed by Horace, but – as Dante reveals – it is actually and only the gift of God; Dante’s attempted description of God will assure him eternity more than any pagan poem or deity has ever granted to his own poet.

¹⁰⁶ Stat. *Silv.* 1.2.137, *mea summa potestas*; 3.3.1, *summa deum*; *Theb.* 1.178, *summe deorum*; 9.22, *summe pater*; 11.2.10, *summe deum*; Luc. *Bell. Civ.* 4.110, *o summe parens mundi*. For ‘mente’ cf. *supra* 57-9 and footnotes. For ‘lingua’ cf. *supra* 47-8 and footnotes. For ‘possente’ cf. *If.* 2.11; *Pd.* 18.87; and 33.142. Dante’s independence from the Classics is constantly based on the Christian reproposal of their literature.

As we formulate the conclusions for Dante's poetical process of imitation, (in-)dependence, conflict, and superseding of his *auctores*, we perceive the direction of his long journey to a new personal identity: from *Inferno*, where he is lost in the Ovidian wood, and where he starts following Virgil's tracks; through *Purgatorio*, where the poetical guidance of the Classics becomes insufficient for his task; to the *Paradiso*, where the relationship between pagan and Christian poetry is more forcefully established and balanced. At the end of his poem there is no total separation from nor refutation of his models and masters, yet by incorporating the Classics into his poetry, and making use of them to express even the essence of God, Dante gives them the chance to redeem themselves from their pagan poetry and lack of faith¹⁰⁷ and to participate in the kingdom of God *on a literary level*, while he himself is redeemed by God during his spiritual journey. Since Dante feels deeply connected to the Classics as part of his culture and the basis of his poetry, he carries and elaborates them through the ways of Hell to the skies of Paradise, in order to make them *write* Christian poetry through his own verses. As Christ came to Hell with the crown of victory¹⁰⁸ to release Adam and the fathers of the Old Testament and to convey them to Heaven (for they were elected by God), so Dante redeems the classical authors (not as Christians but as poets)¹⁰⁹ with the crown of poetry for the sake of their human virtues.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ *If.* 4.40-2, 'per tai difetti, non per altro rio, / siam perduti, e sol di tanto offesi / che sanza speme vivemo in disio'.

¹⁰⁸ *If.* 4.54, 'con segno di vittoria coronato'.

¹⁰⁹ The final damnation of the classical authors is to be regarded as unchangeable and definite from any theological or religious perspective.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *Pd.* 1.26, 'coronarmi allor di quelle foglie'; 25.8-9, 'ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte / del mio battesmo prenderò il cappello'; and also *Aen.* 6.128-31, *superasque evadere ad auras, / hoc opus, hic labor est. Pauci quos aequus amavit / Iuppiter aut ardens evexit ad aethera virtus, / dis geniti potuere.*

Conclusion

The composition of the *Commedia* starts with the reading of the *auctores*. Dante finds no more suitable models for his poem than the Latin poets, setting the literary foundations of the *Commedia* principally on their literature, even though he anachronistically gives them a Christian interpretation by reading them through the eyes of his culture.¹

Dante evokes the ancient *auctores* in a dimension without time, or above time, where he can elevate himself and engage in dialogue with them transcending every boundary of faith or background. In the *Commedia* he sets them in the fortress of Limbo where the ‘bella scola’ is reunited in *If.* 4.94; Dante as a Christian could have not placed the *auctores* anywhere else and, even though he reluctantly damns them, he locates them in a place of stillness.²

Thus Dante sincerely intercedes for them by using their poetry to sing praises to God, leaving to Him the final judgment regarding their destiny, confident that God’s project of salvation spreads beyond human conception, and that man may experience Him in many ways that are not necessarily those of Christian faith, transcending the temporal and spatial limits of Christianity. Dante acts not like a man of the Middle Ages but like a modern Christian, believing that God can also reveal himself to the human being through the spirit and intellect, the ‘senno’,³ or *λόγος*, or *verbum*, with which man is endowed, and which is God’s fundamental nature: *in principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum* (John 1.1).

¹ This is actually the same process that every reader enacts by transferring to an author his own vision of things. Cf. Martindale 1993.

² *If.* 4.150, ‘queta’.

³ *If.* 4.102.

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