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Dante's Fleece: Instilling the Divine, Transfiguring the Human in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars[1]

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Abstract

At the outset of *Paradiso* 25, Dante imagines himself returning triumphant as *poeta* (8) "with altered fleece, with altered voice" (7) to his beloved Florence after long exile, so as to be crowned with the poet's laurel at the font of his baptism. At first glance, this seems a strangely presumptuous and poignantly personal ambition for one who has supposedly risen above all such earthly concerns. But a closer reading will suggest otherwise. Teetering between hubris and humility as he strives to give voice to the unbounded reaches of his vision, Dante may now dare to count himself among the poets of old; indeed, he has surpassed them, for his is a poetry, "to which both Earth and Heaven have set their hands" (1-2). The fleece that Dante seeks to bear back to the world is far greater than the golden treasure sought by Jason (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.720-7.158). Where Jason's magnanimous journey has as its end mere earthly glory and leaves in its wake a trail of destruction, Dante's purpose in ploughing a furrow through the ocean of Heaven, drawing us in his wake (*Par.* 2.18) is to transhumanise

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us (*Par.* 1.70), to open us up to the infinite possibilities of the divine within us. His "altered fleece" is the dew-impregnated fleece of Gideon (*Vulgate Bible,* Judg. 6.36-40), traditionally interpreted as a type of the Incarnation, because, like the Virgin Mary, the poet wants to "magnify the Lord" (Luke 1.46). His poem, far from being some sort of personal vindication, bears a message of conversion for the world that lives so badly (*Purg.* 32.103) that it might rediscover the God who "open[ed] the road that runs from Heaven to earth" (*Par.* 23.37).

Keywords: Dante, *Commedia*, Virgin Mary, incarnation, poetics, divinization

Se mai continga che 'l poema sacro
al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro,
vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
del bello ovile ov' io dormi' agnello,
nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra;
con altra voce omai, con altro vello
ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte
del mio battesmo prenderò 'l cappello.

Paradiso 25.1-9

[Should it ever come to pass that this sacred poem, / to which both Heaven and earth have set their hand / so that it has made me lean for many years, / should overcome the cruelty that locks me out / of the fair sheepfold where I slept as a lamb, / foe of the wolves at war with it, / with another voice then, with another fleece, / shall I return a poet and, at the font / where I was baptised, take the laurel crown.][2]

At the outset of *Paradiso* 25, Dante imagines himself returning triumphant as *poeta* (8) "with altered fleece, with altered voice" (7) to his beloved Florence after long exile, so as to be crowned with the poet's laurel at the font of his baptism. At first glance, this seems a strangely presumptuous and poignantly personal ambition for one who has supposedly risen above all such earthly concerns. But a closer reading will suggest otherwise. Few lines in the *Commedia* are as dense in significance as these, focusing as they do on Dante's self-designation as *poeta* and on the nature of his "*poema sacro*" ("sacred poem"; *Par.* 25.1). Teetering between hubris and humility as he strives to give voice to the unbounded reaches of his vision, Dante may dare to count himself among the poets of old: indeed he has surpassed them, for his is a poetry to which "both earth and Heaven have set their hands" (1-2). The fleece that Dante seeks to bear back to the world is far greater than the golden treasure sought by Jason (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.720-7.158). Where Jason's magnanimous journey has as its end mere earthly glory and leaves in its wake a trail of destruction, Dante's purpose in ploughing a furrow through the ocean of Heaven, drawing us in his wake (*Par.* 2.18) is to *transhumanise* us (*Par*. 1.70), to open us up to the infinite possibilities of the divine within ourselves. His "altered fleece" may, I believe, be also understood as the dew-impregnated *vellus Gedeones* (*Vulgate Bible*, Judg. 6.36-40), traditionally interpreted as a type of the Incarnation,[3] because, like the Virgin Mary, the poet wants to "magnify

[2] Italian text from Petrocchi. Translations (occasionally modified) from Hollander.
[3] See Judges 6.36-40; and Psalms 71.6 [LXX].

the Lord" (Luke 1.46). His poem, far from being some sort of personal vindication, bears a message of conversion for the "*mondo che mal vive*" ("world that lives so badly"; *Purg.* 32.103) that it might rediscover the God who "*aprì le strade tra 'l cielo e la terra*" ("open[ed] the road that runs from Heaven to earth"; *Par.* 23.37).[4]

In re-incarnating the Word through the text of the *Commedia* Dante sees himself as an *alter Mariae* who, like her, is called upon to generate the Word for the world by opening himself radically to God's will (*Par.* 19-21). The glory that he hopes will result from this enterprise is not the *kleos* of the ancient Greeks nor the *claritas* of the Romans, who believed that immortality was conquered through the doing of great deeds (witness the Ulysses episode in *Inferno* 26), but rather that of Mary, who rejoices at the great things the Lord has done *in* her, for which reason *all generations shall call her blessed* (see Luke 1.48).[5] Mary has not been accused of vanity for these sentiments, and no more so should Dante, for if one does not achieve fame in the world one cannot transform it. The poem must excel then, both because the author uses his God-given talents to the full, and because he is transparent to the Spirit who inspires him, if it is to succeed in its goal of bringing about a *spiritual* conversion which will lead as a consequence to a transformation in the civic and religious spheres, just as the Virgin envisages in the Magnificat—"He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away" (Luke 1.52-53). Unless we understand this, we shall fail to appreciate the nexus that Dante weaves between poetic composition, Incarnation (Mary and Christ), humility, pride, transgression, and transcendence, and we will not be able to appreciate how we as readers should receive this polysemous text as transformative for ourselves and the world

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[4] The reading of the fleece of Gideon as a type of the Incarnation goes back at least as far as Ambrose († 397), who interprets the dew that falls on the fleece as the salvation wrought by Christ taking flesh from the Virgin Mary (325B), as does Jerome († 419), who interprets Psalm 71.6 in a similar fashion (865B, 1028C-D), possibly following Hilary of Poitiers († 367), who may have been the first to use this passage (449B-450A). In the Middle Ages the type was also widespread. It is found in various antiphons, including this one for Advent, "The Lord descends like rain upon the fleece," and this for Christmas Eve, which refers to Deuteronomy 32.2: "The Saviour of the World has risen like the Sun and descended into the womb of the Virgin like a shower of rain upon the grass" (Barré 167, 168). Anthony of Padua († 1231) provides a complex explanation of Christ's descent as dew, rain, and hail in his sermon for the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (8). Bernard of Clairvaux († 1153) interprets the dew falling on the fleece as the Word becoming incarnate in Mary, while the floor represents the people who were subsequently evangelised by preachers (*Sermone secondo* 218) and returns to the type in his famous "Aqueduct" sermon (*Nella Natività* 251). The type is also to be found in *Sull'Assunzione della B. V. Maria, Sermone sesto* (277), attributed to Bonaventure († 1274). Translations from Latin, Italian and French are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

[5] See Reynolds, "Patristic and Medieval Roots."

in which we live. With this in mind, I shall begin with some broader considerations on how this nexus operates, especially in the *Paradiso*, before turning to a more detailed analysis of canto 25.

It is surely no coincidence that the designations of the *Commedia* as "*sacrato poema*" (*Par.* 23.62) and "*poema sacro*" (*Par.* 25.1) come immediately before and after the pilgrim's examination on faith, and that he terms himself "*poeta*" at "the structural point of transition between the examination on faith and that on hope," as Montemaggi has observed ("Theology" 45). What distinguishes Dante from his classical counterparts, Virgil, who introduces himself with the words "*Poeta fui*" ("I once was a poet"; *Inf.* 1.73)—notably in the past historic, thus cutting off any present significance for his poetic activity—or Homer, Horace, and Ovid, whom he encounters in Limbo (*Inf.* 4.88-93) and with whom he daringly, some might say presumptuously, aligns himself—"*ch'e' sì mi fecer de la loro schiera*" ("for they made me one of their company"; *Inf.* 4.101), is that he is a faithful Christian.[6] He is in possession of the three theological virtues that they lacked, and may therefore look forward with certain hope to the glory of the resurrection, as may those who open themselves up to what his poem is signifying: "'*Spene,' diss' io, 'è uno attender certo / de la gloria futura, / il qual produce / grazia divina e precedente metro*'" ("'Hope,' I said, 'is the certain expectation / of future glory, springing / from heavenly grace and merit we have won'"; *Par.* 25. 67-69).

While the figures of classical antiquity may have performed great deeds and possessed admirable human abilities, they were lacking in grace, that key element necessary for the leap that poet and poem must make in order to undertake the journey and figure Paradise: "*e così, figurando il paradiso, / convien saltar lo sacrato poema*" ("And so, in representing Paradise, the sacred poem must make its leap"; *Par.* 23.61-62).[7] This is not to say that Dante does not give value to human action. *The Letter of St. James*, which is the scriptural subtext to Dante's examination on hope by the eponymous apostle,[8] is well-known for its emphasis on the importance of works, that is to say, merit, alongside grace, as necessary for salvation. And this is fundamental to Dante's understanding of human

[6] Barolini puts it thus: "Although that hope was never fulfilled, the impact of the phrase 'ritornerò poeta' remains undiminished at a textual level, since it reveals the arc Dante has inscribed into his poem through the restricted use of the word *poeta*: the poetic mantle passes from the classical poets, essentially Vergil, to a transitional poet [Statius], whose Christianity is disjunct from his poetic practice (and hence the verse with its neat caesura: 'Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano'), to the poet whose Christian faith is a sine qua non of his poetics. This is Dante himself, the [only] *poeta* of *Paradiso*" (269).

[7] On the complex relationship between classical magnanimity and Judeo-Christian humility see Gauthier; Daley; and Reynolds, "Patristic and Medieval Roots."

[8] Stephany, "*Paradiso* XXV," has shown how pervasive is the presence of James in this canto.

responsibility, of our capacity, indeed our duty to make full use of our God-given talents and reason in doing all those things that humans do (form families, build societies, do politics, create laws, philosophise, write poetry, love, and so on). We are called by God to do great things, to be co-creators alongside him, indeed to be gods (Ps. 81[82].6; John 10.34).[9] But in so doing, where the ancients sought to achieve a magnanimous autonomy, Christians must root themselves in humility, recognising God as the ground of all things. With humility we can dare to "*seguir virtute e canoscenza*" ("pursue virtue and knowledge"; *Inf.* 26.120), as Ulysses urges his companions to do, but avoid the presumptuous "*folle volo*" ("mad flight"; *Inf.* 26.125) that led to his destruction.

Nevertheless, the audacity of what Dante is attempting is breath-taking—to be, in some sense, another Mary, another Evangelist, by writing a poem that will incarnate the Word in the manner of Scripture. This is not to say that Dante is claiming the mantle of fifth Gospel-writer,[10] still less that he would presume to put himself on a par with the Virgin, but rather that the Christological and Mariological fulcrum on which the whole enterprise turns is his conviction that it is only by re-proclaiming the Good News of Christ's birth, crucifixion, and resurrection, that he will have fulfilled his divine commission.[11] In reality, this is no different from what is asked of every Christian, though particularly of those men and women who have received a special charism from the Spirit (1 Cor. 12), such as the founders of religious orders.[12] But what marks Dante out as unique is that he, unlike other charismatic figures in the history of the Church (Benedict, Augustine, Francis, Catherine of Siena, to name but some), is a *poet*, so that he conveys his vision of the divine and his prophetic message, not through the more normal medium of prose, but in the form of a "*tëodia*" (*Par.* 25.73), a "god-song" as Hollander translates it, the term he coins for the psalmody of David, as putative author of the Psalms, with whom he feels such a close affinity. At the same time, since he makes repeated claims as to the veracity of his experience (which he is therefore implicitly labelling mystical,

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[9] On divinisation in the *Commedia*, see Chiavacci-Leonardi, "'*Le bianche stole*.'"

[10] I would agree with Benfell, who asserts that Dante "writes his poem, at least in part, to bring readers back to an encounter with the Bible, which he believes is no longer being read as it should, that is, as a 'sacred text,' in which understanding and truth emerge, which ultimately change the reader" (36).

[11] It is precisely the fact that Christ has re-opened that path between heaven and earth that permits the writing of the *Commedia*. On this, see Montemaggi, *Reading* 124-25. In another of his studies, Montemaggi comes close to recognising the Marian resonance of these lines without actually identifying the typological significance of the "*vello*": "It might be possible to read *Paradiso* XXV.1-2 also as a reference to the *Commedia*'s understanding of itself of being like Mary and like all Christic words and actions, a locus for the enfleshment of the divine truth" ("Theology" 51).

[12] See Nardoni for further elaboration on this subject.

prophetic, and revelatory), we, the readers are required to make a leap of faith in believing that this truly is a God-bearing text if we are truly to follow in his wake.[13]

Addressing his readers at the opening of *Paradiso* 2, Dante warns us to turn back and not attempt to follow him unless we have fed sufficiently on the "bread of angels" (Ps. 77[78].25; Wisd. 16.20), a reference to the wisdom of Christ (which is available in Scripture and in the Eucharist), food for the journey to heaven.[14] Otherwise, in lines that echo Dante's own perilous state in the opening canto of *Inferno*—the *via [. . .] smarrita* of the first terzina, and the simile of the shipwrecked man who makes it to shore from the *pelago*, "the open sea" (*Inf.* 1.22-24)—we will suffer the same fate as Ulysses and his companions, who presumptuously attempted to reach the antipodes by dint of human endeavour alone (see *Inf.* 26.90-142 for the full account):

> *O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,*
> *desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti*
> *dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,*
> *tornate a riveder li vostri liti:*
> *non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,*
> *perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.*
> *L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse;*
> *Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,*
> *e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse.*
> *Voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo*
> *per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale*
> *vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,*
> *metter potete ben per l'alto sale*
> *vostro navigio, servando mio solco*
> *dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale.*
> *Que' gloriosi che passaro al Colco*
> *non s'ammiraron come voi farete,*
> *quando Iasón vider fatto bifolco.*
>
> *Paradiso* 2.1-18

[O you, eager to hear more, / who have followed in your little bark / my ship that singing makes its way, / turn back if you would see your shores again. / Do not set forth upon the deep, / for, losing sight of me, you would be lost. / The seas I sail were never sailed before. / Minerva fills my sails, Apollo is my guide, / nine Muses point me toward the Bears. / You other few who craned your necks in time / to reach

[13] The bibliography on the truth claims is vast. See in particular Franke; and for this author's position "Morphing Mary" 22.

[14] On the resonances of these words see O'Brien.

> for angels' bread, which gives us life on earth, / yet never leaves us satisfied, / you may indeed set out, your ship afloat / upon the salty deep, keeping to the furrow / I have made, before the sea goes smooth again. / Those famous men who made their way to Colchis / when they saw Jason had become a plowman, / were not as stunned as you shall be.]

Dante here replaces one transgressive figure for another, Jason on his unprecedented journey across the deep to Colchis, for Ulysses, who foundered out of an excess of hubris, but this is a corrected Jason, who relies on the combined forces of a Christianised Minerva and Apollo, and the nine Muses for good measure, to plough his furrow through the deeps of heaven on his journey towards the Bears (who in one interpretation may represent Mary and her Son).[15] Should we choose to follow in his wake, we must have the audacity of the Argonauts, but also the humility to recognise that our true compass lies beyond our contingent selves.

Several commentators have noted the coincidence between the metaphors of the sea journey, ploughing, and the act of writing. As Peter Hawkins points out, all three leave a trace, no matter how ephemeral, that we can follow: "Dante asks us to imagine the venture of the *Argo* as an 'imprint' ('impressa'; cf. *Par.* 33.59), as a watery script no more substantial or enduring than a shadow or 'ombra' cast on the sea" (*Dante's Testaments* 280). Dante's audacious "going out upon the circumference" (281) is transgressive and therefore perilous, yet because of his willingness to make himself vulnerable by opening himself to grace, it is also looked upon benignly by God who in the marvellous image of the final canto of *Paradiso* is likened to Neptune gazing with wonderment from the depths at Jason's boat tracing its path across the surface of the sea: "*Un*

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[15] The commentary tradition has been less than perceptive in recognising the significance of Ursa Major and Minor here as part of a larger "Callisto programme" in which Dante re-writes the Ovidian episode of the nymph's ravishment by Jupiter (see *Met.* 2.401-53; *Met.* 8.207; *Fasti* 2.155-92) in terms of Christ's Incarnation in the Virgin. Dante, at *Paradiso* 31.32-33 completely re-writes this episode, with Callisto, in the shape of Ursa Major as a figure for Mary and Arcas, as Ursa Minor, representing Christ. Jacoff writes of the relationship between these two readings, though she does not take account of *Par.* 2.9: "It was of course Jupiter and not the victimized Helice who had felt the poison of Venus, but Dante here concentrates on Diana's chastity as an analogy for Mary's. Helice's motherhood becomes a curse to her, the sign of her violation of Diana's standard. In the *Paradiso* Dante seems to re-write his own critique of Helice-Callisto by speaking of her in her final metamorphosis as a type of Mary rather than as her opposite. [. . .] Dante describes the relationship between Helice and her son in language that one might expect to find in a description of Mary's relationship to Jesus. Dante compares his stupefaction at the sight of the Empyrean to the barbarians *'venendo da tal plaga / che ciascun giorno d'Elice si cuopra, / rotante col suo figlio ond'ella è vaga'* (*Par.* 31.31-33) coming from such region as is covered every day by Helice, wheeling with her son whom she delights in. *'Vaga'* is a word that belongs to the pastoral and to the love lyric, and its use in an explicitly maternal context fuses all these registers in the way that Marian poetry and prayer often does" (245).

punto solo m'è maggior letargo / che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa / che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo" ("My memory of that moment is more lost / than five and twenty centuries make dim that enterprise / when, in wonder, Neptune at the Argo's shadow stared"; *Par.* 33.94-96). Dante's self-identification with Jason is thus to be understood precisely in this context of a radical openness towards grace that sets one free to achieve great things without falling into the trap of hubris, an openness that permits one to receive the Word and communicate it to others with unwavering confidence, in other words to be a "*scriba Cristi*" (*Mon.* 2.8.14; and see *Par.* 10.27).

It could be that in the oblique reference to Jason's "ploughing" of the virgin sea, Dante also had in mind the Marian type of the unploughed earth of Eden, which prefigured Mary's virginal conception of the Word.[16] This would certainly tie in with the use of *vello* in canto 25, and what I believe to be Dante's understanding of himself as an *alter Mariae*. I have argued elsewhere that Dante makes a connection between humility, grace, and poetic activity when he rewrites a series of Ovidian texts that describe the failed attempts of the gods and human women to form unions, setting them up as antitypes of the Incarnation because they lacked the central kenotic ingredient that characterises both Mary's attitude towards the angel's words ("*fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*"; Luke 1.28), and the Christian God's self-abasement in seeking the Virgin's assent for him to unite himself to her (see Reynolds, "Morphing Mary").

This same nexus between humility or kenotic self-emptying, birth-giving, and the act of poetic writing is evident in the opening invocation of *Paradiso* 1, which like *Paradiso* 2 anticipates several of the motifs in canto 25, most obviously Dante's hope to be crowned poet:

> *O buono Appollo, a l'ultimo lavoro*
> *fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso,*

[16] The notion that Mary is the new Garden of Eden, from whom the new Adam, Christ, was generated seems to originate with Irenaeus (†c. 202) as part of his theory of recapitulation in his *Adversus Haereses*, where he compares Adam's birth from the virgin earth with Christ's birth from the Virgin Mary (3.21.10). Closer to Dante's time, Anthony of Padua († 1231), writes in his sermon for the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary: "At first the earth which was cursed in Adam's labour brought forth thorns and thistles, with hard work. Our earth, the blessed Virgin, brought forth a blessed fruit without human labour" (1). In a number of Medieval texts one finds the types of the dew and the earth being joined together, for instance Stephen Langton († 1228), who salutes Mary thus: "Hail, earth of glory, unploughed earth that is nevertheless abundantly fruitful through of the dew of grace; you bear the fruit whose taste recreates the offspring of ancient Adam, long held prisoner" (134). The principle theme of Bonaventure's dubious third sermon on the Annunciation (*Dominus dabit benignitatem* col. 667a–670a) is the metaphor of Mary as the fertile earth because of her virginity, her humility, her receptivity to the rain of grace, and her fecundity.

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 petto mio, e spira tue
sì come quando Marsïa traesti
de la vagina de le membra sue.
O divina virtù, se mi ti presti
tanto che l'ombra del beato regno
segnata nel mio capo io manifesti,
vedra' mi al piè del tuo diletto legno
venire, e coronarmi de le foglie
che la materia e tu mi farai degno.
Sì rade volte, padre, se ne coglie
per trïunfare o cesare o poeta,
colpa e vergogna de l'umane voglie,
che parturir letizia in su la lieta
delfica deïtà dovria la fronda
peneia, quando alcun di sé asseta.

Paradiso 1.13-33

[Enter my breast and breathe in me / as when you drew Marsyas, / out from the sheathing of his limbs. / O holy Power, if you but lend me of yourself / Enough that I may show the merest shadow / of the blessèd kingdom stamped within my mind, / you shall find me at the foot of your belovèd tree, / crowning myself with the very leaves / of which my theme and you will make me worthy. / So rarely, father, are they gathered / to mark the triumph of a Caesar or a poet— / fault and shame of human wishes— / that anyone's even longing for them, / those leaves on the Peneian bough, should make / the joyous Delphic god give birth to joy.]

This striking rewriting of Ovid in which Dante calls on God, in the form of Apollo, to enter into him and inspire him, just as, in an act of extreme violence, the Olympian deity flayed Marsyas and drew him out from the "*vagina*" of his skin (see *Met.* 6.382-400), recalls both Christ's Incarnation and his laying down of his mortal body in order to take on the glorified one of the Resurrection (see Levenstein). Along with other allusions in this canto, the invocation signifies the poet's desire to be reborn as a Pauline "new man" (Rom. 6.6; Eph. 2.15; 4.22-24; and Col. 3.9-11) by taking his place under the Cross,[17] for it is only by participating in the Passion that he too may receive the crown of victory, which is first and foremost to rise to eternal life in a glorified body, but also, for

[17] That one cannot but pass through the Cross to be born anew is a classic Pauline theme. See, for instance, Faw; and specifically on Dante, Di Scipio, who argues that Dante draws on the notion of putting off the old man here and elsewhere in the poem. See also Brownlee, "Pauline Vision"; and Gragnolati.

Dante, the Ovidian laurel crown of the poet. Mary, of course, was *the* model of the *compassio*, the sharing in the Passion of Christ, for Medieval Christians, so taken alongside the allusions to birth-giving, it could be that Dante is associating himself with the tradition of the Virgin having suffered the pangs of parturition under the Cross from which she had been exempted at the nativity of her Son, thereby co-operating in the birth of the Church, symbolised in the blood and water that flow from Christ's side when he is pierced with the spear (John 19.34), a Church to which she then becomes Mother, represented in the figure of John: "Woman, behold thy son. After that, he saith to the disciple: Behold thy mother" (John 19.26-27).[18] Implicit, then, in the poet's laureation would be the understanding that his Pauline new voice and the Marian new fleece of his poem are directed towards a regeneration of the Church, which, as her faithful son, is the mission with which God has entrusted him (see *Par.* 25.52). This would be consistent with the overall focus on the relationship between the Virgin, and the Church Militant and Triumphant in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars.[19]

Having considered something of the background to the opening lines of *Paradiso* 25, and how their concerns are anticipated elsewhere in the poem, especially in the opening cantos of *Paradiso*, let us now examine their significance in more detail and consider how they resonate in the canto as a whole. Amongst the more prominent commentators of this canto, there is broad agreement that Dante does not intend us to understand his hope to return to Florence for his poetic laureation in a literal sense. For Chiavacci-Leonardi, the subjunctive *continga* indicates that Dante knows he will never receive the crown, nor will he return to Florence; instead his hope is now directed towards another kind of glory in a different homeland—the Heavenly Jerusalem (See Chiavacci-Leonardi, "Canto XXV"). Peter Hawkins agrees to some extent: "[T]he major effort of these cantos is to cut his losses with the earthly city, to redefine his homeland as heaven's 'dolce vita' (25.93). Therefore, it is in paradise that he puts his hope,

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[18] The notion that Mary suffered the pangs of labour during Christ's Passion, which she had avoided at his birth, appears in several of the later Eastern Fathers, such as Andrew of Crete (†c. 740) in his *Triodion della Domenica delle Palme* (464) and John of Damascus († 749) in *Esposizione della fede ortodossa* (493-94). Closer to Dante's time, Bonaventure writes of Mary's agony at the foot of the Cross as a spiritual birth-giving in which she shares in the Passion of her Son under the fifth and sixth gifts in his *Collationes de septem donis Spiritus Sancti* (455-503; Tavard 177-79). Commentary on the entrustment of Mary to John goes back as far as Tertullian († after 220) in *De praescriptione haereticorum* 22; and Origen in *Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis* 1.4. Typical of Medieval commentaries on the subject are Anselm of Lucca († 1086), *Cinq textes* 51-52; and Rupert of Deutz († 1130), *Commentaria in Evangelium S. Joannis* 13.

[19] On the coincidence between Mary and the Church see Montemaggi, *Reading* 131; and also his "La rosa."

an expectation nurtured both by a belief in God's grace and by virtue of his own acts of merit" (Hawkins, "Self-Authenticating Artefact" 388). He goes on to argue that Dante also hopes in "the future glory of his 'tëodia,'" but does not explain precisely in what that glory will consist. Kevin Brownlee argues that the future conditional construction of these lines is "nothing more than a possible future reaffirmation of a situation that *exists already* in the diegetic present of *Paradiso* XXV" (Brownlee, "Why" 606), a position with which I wholeheartedly agree. I would add, however, that the present is more than diegetic, it is the *eternal present* that is God and the life of Paradise, figured through the historic person of Dante whose poem is capable of signifying the divine realities that he has experienced unfettered by the contingencies of time and place.

While Dante holds out little hope of his being crowned at the site of his baptism within his own lifetime, here in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, which is the horizon between heaven and earth, he envisions the earthly success of poem and poet through the lens of divine providence. What he is hoping for from his readers is a re-enactment of his own transfiguration, a radical conversion of self and a willingness to be open to the divine that alone will allow us to enter into conversation with the poem and its author in the dimension of sacred time, an eternal present that synchronically links us to the poet-voyager. In other words, we need to follow the exegetic practices adopted in the reading of Scripture. In such a hermeneutic, although all reality is contained in the Christ event, it is not revealed all at once with the incarnation and death of the Son, but rather continues to unfold over time, through the circumstances of history, right up to the time of the *Parousia*. There is therefore a dynamic process of mutual enrichment, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, between the historical past in which the author lived and the text was written, and the present existence of the reader, which already contains confident hope of future glory. By entering into this sacred space in which past, present, and future are one, the exegete can access the meaning of the Christ event within his or her own cultural and historical context.[20] This is precisely how Dante wishes us to interact with his poem, so that we may unlock the incarnational potential of the text to which "Heaven and earth have set their hands." Only an incarnational poem can hope to convey a message that transcends the contingency of language and the inevitable caducity that befalls any text that is not a "God-song."[21]

[20] On Patristic and Medieval exegesis see, among others, O'Keefe and Reno; Young; and Simonetti. Also essential, especially on Medieval exegesis, is Henri de Lubac's magisterial *Exégèse médiévale*; and see also this author's "Marian Typological."

[21] Hawkins notes the inevitable decline that Virgil and Ovid attribute to Jason's transgressive enterprise, something that Dante was no doubt acutely aware of in his attempt to convey the infinite in the

We must not understand the poet's desire to return to Florence to be crowned as a static, temporal event. To do so would be to tie Dante exclusively to his own historically contingent personhood, which is the very obstacle that he must overcome if he wishes to claim the authority of heaven for his poem.[22] In fact, given that Peter has already crowned him, implicitly at *Paradiso* 24.152 when encircling him three times ("*tre volte cinse me*"), and more explicitly at *Paradiso* 25.12 ("*Pietro per lei sì mi girò la fronte*"; "because of it [faith], Peter encircled thus my brow"), one might say that his coronation in heaven already guarantees his earthly crowning. Claire Honess suggests as much when she argues that Dante's return to Florence can only be metaphorical, that his hope is to be one day accepted by his fellow Florentines, not as a returned exile who is politically exonerated but as a poet whose *Commedia* they will digest, "so that acting on its message and filled with hope, they may ultimately come [to] be joined in citizenship with the *exul immeritus*, not in Florence, but in heaven" (Honess, "'Ritornerò poeta . . . '" 102). In fact, one might say Dante's message has had an impact greater than his wildest imaginings, given the extraordinary place that the poem continues to hold to this day far beyond his native city.

But this Dantean crowning also has another parallel in the poem, the crowning of Mary by the angel Gabriel in *Paradiso* 23: "*per entro il cielo scese una facella, / formata in cerchio a guisa di corona, / e cinsela e girossi intorno ad ella*" ("there descended through the sky a torch that, / circling, took on the likeness of a crown / it encircled her and wheeled around her"; 94-96). I do not have the space here to consider the full resonances of that crowning, which is not just a re-enactment of the Annunciation, but also represents the Coronation of Mary as Queen of Heaven upon her bodily Assumption, a subject that, not by chance, will occupy the final part of *Paradiso* 25. It would seem clear, however, that the repetition of the verbs *cinsela / cinse* and *girossi / girò* is intentional, meaning that Dante wants to associate his crowning with that of the Virgin, both because of the incarnational nature of his poem, and, I would argue, the importance he attributes to the Virgin's bodily assumption, both as pilgrim (he alone among humans shares Mary's status of being in heaven in body, albeit not a glorified one), and as poet, because the ultimate goal of the poem is to bring his readers back

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finite and contingent language of humans: "[T]he innovations of boat and plow are associated quite specifically with the passing of the Golden Age, and therefore with a 'fall' into experience, history and loss. The *Argo*'s accomplishment, if indisputable, is also tainted, its *ombra* an ambiguous foreshadowing. So too (according to Ovid in *Met.* 7.121-42) when Jason 'turned plowman' and opened virgin territory, he sowed the serpent's teeth and reaped a harvest of destruction" (*Dante's Testaments* 282).

[22] On the complex question of authority and authorship, see Ascoli, particularly chapter 7, sections 5-6, which deal with Dante's examination by the apostles.

into communion with God so that they will eventually come to share in the glory of Paradise in body and soul, as the Virgin already does, something that I shall discuss further in the concluding section of this article.[23]

The certain hope, expressed in that *ritornerò* is not, I believe, that he will return in person to the sheepfold of the Florentine Christian community to which he was admitted at his baptism as the Dante of old,[24] but that he will come back as the Pauline "new man" *through his poetry: "con altra voce omai, con altro vello / ritornerò poeta."* His physical presence at the Baptistery is not required for him to *return* as poet, but the voice of his poem is. It is crucial therefore for Dante, like Jason, to return from his journey if he is to give the world, and more particularly Florence, the treasure of his *vello*—the poem whose purpose is to effect a radical transformation in those who read it. It is not enough for him to have simply undertaken the journey. The poem must be written and his voice must be heard—hence the absolute necessity that he achieve recognition, symbolised by the laurel crown, for what he is, not just any poet, but *the poet* who has written a poem that signifies in the manner of Scripture.

This is why there is such a strong focus in these three cantos dedicated to the theological virtues on the capacity of language (which as we learn in the closing encounter of the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, with Adam, has never been anything other than mutable and contingent) to convey eternal truths. Dante's repeated recourse to Scripture in his examination on the theological virtues reminds us that the word lies at the heart of Christian belief and is the foundation of its theology. The typological imagery of these cantos, with its repeated recourse to rain, distillation, and the dew-stoked fleece of Gideon, draws our attention to the close parallel between the Incarnation and the act of writing divinely inspired texts, both of which entail the action of the Spirit (note the repeated use of variations on *spirare/spirito* in these cantos—24.55; 24.82; 24.91-92; 24.138; 25.82; 25.85; 25.132; 26.3; 26.71; 26.103) and the freely offered co-operation of the human subject. The *vello* that figures Mary is also the vellum ("*cuoia*") upon which the Old and New Testaments are written, while

[23] On this subject, see Chiavacci-Leonardi, "'Le bianche stole.'"

[24] Baptism is a highly personal moment, when the individual soul is wiped clean and given a name, but it is also a collective act, when the person is admitted into the Christian community, to a participation in the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. In the Heaven of the Stars, Dante not only sees but is admitted to and participates in the communion of the Church Triumphant, in some sense a second baptism. For exegetes of the Patristic and Medieval periods, without this participation in the *Ekklesia*, it would not have been possible for him to penetrate the hidden meaning of Scripture which is at the basis of his faith, love, and above all hope.

the rain, or dew ("*ploia*") that allows mutable language to signify God is that same *virtù* (*Par.* 24.90) of the Holy Spirit which makes it possible for the Logos to take human nature from the Virgin:

> *[. . .] La larga* ***ploia***
> *de lo Spirito Santo, ch'è diffusa*
> *in su le vecchie e 'n su le nuove* ***cuoia,***
> *è silogismo che la m'ha conchiusa*
> *acutamente sì, che 'nverso d'ella*
> *ogne dimostrazion mi pare ottusa.*
>
> *Paradiso* 24.92-96

> [. . . The abundant rain / of the Holy Ghost, / poured out onto the parchments old and new, / is the syllogism that has proven it to me / with such great force that any other demonstration, / compared with it, would seem completely pointless.]

This same language of distillation we find again in *Paradiso* 25, where Dante explains to St. James what the source of his hope is, with reference to David's *tëodia* and the Letter of the eponymous apostle:

> *Da molte stelle mi vien questa luce;*
> *ma quei la* ***distillò*** *nel mio cor pria*
> *che fu sommo cantor del sommo duce.*
> *"Sperino in te", ne la sua tëodia*
> *dice, "color che sanno il nome tuo":*
> *e chi nol sa, s'elli ha la fede mia?*
> *Tu mi* ***stillasti****, con lo* ***stillar*** *suo,*
> *ne la pistola poi; sì ch'io son pieno,*
> *e in altrui vostra* ***pioggia*** *repluo*
>
> *Paradiso* 25.70-78

> [This light comes down to me from many stars, / but he who first instilled it in my heart / was that exalted singer of our exalted Lord. / "Let them have hope in you," he declares / in his god-song, "those who know your name." / Among those who share my faith, who does not know it? / After he had imbued me with his song, you poured / your epistle down on me so that I / overflowing, now rain your rain on others.]

The same light that was distilled in Dante's heart by the books of Scripture he now rains down on his readers through his poem (note that he does not claim equivalency to Scripture; rather he "rains" on others, the "rain" he has received from the inspired texts of the Bible), in the same way that the Word came down like a dewfall upon Mary.

This, of course, does not mean that there is not a vast gulf between what Dante sees on his otherworldly journey and his ability to convey that vision in finite language.[25] Indeed, the Incarnation itself is but a shadowing of God's divinity, a kenotic act in which he veils himself in the human nature that he takes from the Virgin.[26] But it is precisely this enfleshment that allows us to look upon the face of God, as the Church Fathers understood,[27] just as the *Commedia* performs an allegorical veiling of the truth—a "*ver c'ha faccia di menzogna*" ("truth what has the face of a lie"; *Inf.* 16.124), for us readers. This is why the *Commedia* is akin to Scripture in its use of the "allegory of the theologians."[28] It too is a polysemous text that incarnates the Word in a manner that makes it possible for those who seek its truth to decodify its allegory. Benfell cites Augustine's *De Trinitate* in explaining this relationship between the inner meaning of words and their external expression, and the Incarnation of the eternal Logos: "The word which makes a sound outside is the sign of the word which lights up inside, and it is the latter that primarily deserves the name of 'word' [. . .] just as the Word of God became flesh by assuming that in which it too could be manifested to the sense of men (*De Trinitate* 15.11.20; Benfell 24).

The contrast between Dante's grace-impregnated, incarnational text and that of his great poetic forbears is highlighted, most likely not by chance, in the numerically corresponding canto of *Inferno* where we are witness to an elaborate metamorphic display of parodic "incarnations" as the serpentine thieves interweave and fuse together, prompting our poet to vaunt his superiority over Lucan and Ovid—and implicitly Virgil, whom the pilgrim gestures to remain silent (*Inf.* 25.44-54):

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[25] On ineffability in the *Commedia* see the many studies by Ledda, most especially *La guerra*, and "Teologia."

[26] This is a frequent trope in Medieval writings on the Virgin. Adam of Perseigne († 1221), for instance, writes: "Since the splendour of heavenly realities is unbearable for our weak sight, let us turn our sick eyes to the pillar of cloud (Ex. 13.21). That pillar is certainly to be identified with the sublime height of the Virgin Mary, in whom the divine light veiled itself as in a cloud. In fact, when the splendour of the almighty Word, being conceived of the Virgin, wrapped himself in the cloud of flesh, what else was the likeness of sin in that flesh if not the opaqueness of the cloud itself? 'Clouds and darkness are round about him' (Ps. 96.2), says the Psalmist, because the splendour of the Word, while it veiled itself in most pure flesh as in a cloud, also took on weakness from that same flesh" (*Epistola* 16).

[27] See, for instance, Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* 5.16.2, quoted and discussed in Reynolds, *Gateway* 110-12.

[28] See Dante's treatment of the fourfold meaning of texts and the difference between poetic and sacred texts in *Convivio* IV.1.2-8. The author of the *Epistola a Cangrande* (*Epistola 13*), who is not universally accepted to be Dante, claims that the *Commedia* uses the same form of allegory as Scripture. For just one discussion of the question, see Cecchini.

Taccia Lucano omai là dov'e' tocca
del misero Sabello e di Nasidio,
e attenda a udir quel ch'or si scocca.
Taccia di Cadmo e d'Aretusa Ovidio,
ché se quello in serpente e quella in fonte
converte poetando, io non lo 'nvidio;
ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte
non trasmutò sì ch'amendue le forme
a cambiar lor matera fosser pronte.

Inferno 25.94-102

[Let Lucan now fall silent where he tells / of poor Sabellus and Nasidius / and let him wait to hear what comes forth now! / Let Ovid not speak of Cadmus or Arethusa / for if his poem turns him into a serpent / and her into a fountain, I grudge it not / for never did he change two natures, face to face / in such a way that both their form / were quite so quick exchanging substance.]

Here Dante is not pridefully claiming that he has outdone his classical counterparts in technical ability, any more than his declared hope to be crowned poet is a manifestation of his vanity. Rather, where Lucan and Ovid's metamorphoses were a mere shadow of the transformation that has been wrought on human nature through Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, Dante's poetry offers us a way to re-enact that incarnation in our present lives, and one day undergo that divinization—*trasumanar*—which he has had the unique privilege of experiencing while still in the flesh. *Purgatorio* 25 likewise joins together incarnational and poetic themes, as well as the port-mortem fate of the body, in Statius's lengthy discourse on the generation of the body and ensoulment (34-78), which he follows with an explanation of the aerial bodies that the souls generate in the afterlife (79-108) in anticipation of the general resurrection when they will be reunited with their corporeal selves.

If further proof were needed of the intimate relationship between poetic production, the Incarnation, and the resurrection of the flesh, Brownlee notes the hardly coincidental link between the three 25's of the *Commedia* and the *Vita nuova*, pointing out that in *Vita nuova* 25 Dante for the first time claims the title of *poeta* for himself, and in *Inferno* 25 he uses the term *poetare* for the first time, while in *Purgatorio* 25 his choice of a Christianised classical poet is not without significance (Brownlee, "Why" 597-610). Meanwhile Mazzotta has argued that in *Purgatorio* 25, there is a parallel between the generation of the body and the act of making poetry (210). Of course, the common thread in all of this is the date of March 25: the vernal equinox according to the Julian calendar, coinciding with the Feast of the Annunciation, which was the first day of

the Florentine new year and probable date for the beginning of the *Commedia*, held since Patristic times to be the date of Adam and Eve's creation, the Incarnation, and the Crucifixion.[29]

Before we conclude our reading of *Paradiso* 25, I must give account of Dante's encounter with St. John, which is intimately bound up with the overall concerns of the canto. In *Paradiso* 26 John will examine Dante on the greatest of the theological virtues, charity, but the pilgrim's main concern is to ascertain whether Christ's beloved apostle is present in heaven in his glorified body (the belief that Enoch, Elijah, and John shared Mary's destiny was widely held in the Patristic Church and continued into the Middle Ages):[30]

> *"[. . .] Perché t'abbagli*
> *per veder cosa che qui non ha loco?*
> *In terra è terra il mio corpo, e saragli*
> *tanto con li altri, che 'l numero nostro*
> *con l'etterno proposito s'agguagli.*
> *Con le due stole nel beato chiostro*
> *son le due luci sole che saliro;*
> *e questo apporterai nel mondo vostro"*
>
> *[. . .]*
>
> *Ahi quanto ne la mente mi commossi,*
> *quando mi volsi per veder Beatrice,*
> *per non poter veder, benché io fossi*
> *presso di lei, e nel mondo felice!*
>
> *Paradiso* 25.122-29

> [. . . "Why do you blind your eyes / trying to behold what is not here to see? / In earth, earth is my body and there shall it lie / among the others until our number / shall be equal to the eternal purpose / With the two robes in the blessèd cloister / are the two lights alone who have ascended / and let this be the news you bring back to your world." [. . .] / Ah, how troubled was my mind / when I looked back for Beatrice / and could not see her, even though I was / so near to her and in that happy world!]

That Dante should go out of his way at this juncture in the poem to reject

[29] See, for instance, Augustine († 430), *De Trinitate* 4.5; Anastasius of Antioch († 599), *Omelia I sull'Annunciazione*, 6-7; and Bonaventure, *In Evangelium Lucae* 1.1 (Tavard 61-62).

[30] Augustine, for instance, accepts the popular belief that John had not truly died (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 124). See the *Post Sanctus* of the Mozarabic *Missa in diem Sancti Joannis Evangelisti*. And see Spivey Ellington 106-07. Also relevant is Pelikan 34-35.

categorically the possibility that anyone other than the Virgin Mary and Jesus possess glorified bodies in advance of the Eschaton is striking.[31] Whenever our poet deliberately highlights a matter of controversy, there is always good reason. Far from being a kind of filler to bring us into the next canto, where Dante will undergo his third examination (as Bosco and Reggio, for instance, claim),[32] this episode is absolutely fundamental to Dante's overall message of the great dignity to which human nature is called. The principal concern of the *Commedia* is the restoration of humanity, which can only come about through a re-enactment of the Incarnation in each individual, in the body politic, and in the *Ekklesia*, the community of believers who form the Church. But, to adapt Athanasius of Alexandria's († 373) well-worn dictum, God did not become human simply to restore our humanity, but in order that we might become gods (see *De incarnatione* 54.3). It is the Eschaton that Dante finally invites us to consider, the time when we will live in glory in our "*due stole*" ("two robes"; *Par.* 25.127), as Jesus and Mary already do, offering us a prophetic vision of our divinization when we, along with all of creation will participate fully and forever in the life of the Trinity. If poet and poem (*voce* and *velle*) succeed in conveying to the reader the implications of this great dignity to which we are called for our own betterment and that of the world, then Dante is truly worthy of being crowned in glory.

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[31] Bonaventure wrote at least five sermons for the Assumption (see Graef 1: 288-90). Although it is clear that his personal belief is that Mary's body was preserved from the corruption of death and was raised to heaven, he is careful to avoid stating this claim in doctrinal terms. Aquinas († 1274) argues in favour of the bodily assumption in his *Expositio super salutatione angelica* and also implicitly accepts the Assumption, citing the Pseudo-Augustinian *De assumptione*, in his argument against the Immaculate Conception in *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 27. a. But neither go out on a limb about the issue, nor do they assert that this privilege is Mary's alone.

[32] "Perhaps, having finished the material for the 'examination,' with some expedient the poet could have fitted what is, after all, not a long discussion on charity in canto 25; but he wished to dedicate a separate canto to each of the three virtues, so the rest of canto 25 is dedicated to the apparition of St. John (110-17) and to the rebuttal of the belief that the apostle had been taken up to heaven in his body" (Bosco and Reggio, *Paradiso* 25.118-29).

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但丁的羊毛：《神曲》的神性灌輸與人性轉化

摘要

在〈天堂篇〉第25章的開頭，但丁想像自己是以一位詩人的身份勝利返鄉，「披著不同的羊毛，帶著不同的聲音」，在長久的流放之後，回到他摯愛的佛羅倫斯，爲的是在他領洗的聖洗池旁，戴上詩人的桂冠。乍看之下，這似乎是一個奇怪、放肆且極度個人化的野心，特別是對一個應該已經超脫此番世俗利害的人來說。但細讀之後，會有不同的見解。在驕傲與謙遜之間擺盪，他努力表達他無所不及的視界，如今但丁可能敢將自己視爲古代詩人之列，甚至超越他們，因爲他的詩作「由天與地一起命筆」。但丁企圖帶回給這個世界的羊毛，遠比傑森（《變形記》6.720-7.158）追尋的黃金寶藏更爲珍貴。傑森的高尚旅程之目的在於塵世的榮耀，並且留下毀滅的痕跡；但丁在天堂海洋中破浪、引領我們跟隨其後（〈天堂篇〉2.18）之目的，在於轉換我們的人性（〈天堂篇〉1.70），以開啓我們內在神性的無限可能。「另一種羊毛」於他而言是蘸滿露水的「基德紅的羊毛」（民長記 6.36-40），傳統上被詮釋爲道成肉身的象徵，因爲如同瑪利亞，詩人創作《神曲》的目的在於「頌揚上主」（路加福音 1.46）而非個人的辯護。透過他的詩作，這個作孽的凡塵（〈煉獄篇〉32.103）能夠重新發現「開啓從天堂到人間道路」（〈天堂篇〉23.37）的天主。

關鍵字：但丁、《神曲》、聖母瑪利亞、道成肉身、詩學、占卜