

Poetic Soteriology
Dante's Heroic Defence of Classical Heroism
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Modernity's confrontation with the question of authority is first and foremost a confrontation with the primordial incarnation of authority – the *father*. When Freud rooted heroism in the daring opposition to and overcoming of paternal authority,¹ he served as a spokesman for the modern revolution, which conceives of all authority as an imposition upon a nature divested of all inherent authority. For modern man *as such*, the only natural right to be spoken of seriously is a euphemism for brute force.² Yet, brute force is not enough to overcome 'the will of the father'. What is needed is a supplement: namely, cunning *art*. Art is supposed to be the means adopted by nature to free itself of all authority. Yet, freedom overcomes authority only in the act of converting into it: the son dethrones his father only in the act of occupying the throne anew. Hence the modern drama. Modernity's 'solution' to the conflict between 'filial' nature and 'paternal' authority consists in the *historical realisation* of the *mechanism* supposed to underpin the conflict.

As Hegel reminds us, modernity's 'History' entails the rise of a *new machine* (viz., that of the State) consummating and redeeming a long struggle between slave and master. The new machine is none other than brute nature (to evoke Hobbes) *evolved* through the slave-master 'dynamics'. Thanks to the son-father conflict, nature is transformed or transforms itself into a machine embodying ultimate fatherhood. The final machine is the consummate father, the highest authority. Here, in the 'end' or goal of 'History' – there where *historical consciousness* arises as the supreme mode of thought (*forma mentis*) – the 'natural machine' (nature conceived as subconscious mechanism) is converted into a self-conscious 'mechanical authority' – the machine as *true* authority, as highest *will* (or incarnation thereof).

The rise of modern technology bespeaks not the truth of the modernist reading of authority but the allure of that reading insofar as it fuels popular suspicion regarding all paternal authority. Technology – the product of the early-modern 'scientific' use of art/technique (*technē*) to redefine man's natural ends – has fulfilled early-modern theological-political promises merely by restricting people's vision within the boundaries of modern expectations. Beyond the reach

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*. New York: Knopf, 1939: 10. See further Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* [1909] and Other Writings, edited by Philip Freund. New York: Vintage Books, 1964 [1959]: 84.

² On the modern doctrine of natural right, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965 [1953].

of modern discourse's charm, nature and authority remain untouched by technological achievements. The son is still the son; the father still the father. Both beg for a messiah, a hero mediating their relationship, lest they, father and son, both fall prey to a 'divine machine' (*deus ex machina*) tyrannically imposed upon both nature and authority to 'resolve' their quarrel once and for all.

The classical *heroic* alternative to modern technology is the *poetry* that Dante Alighieri both represents and defends as the proper education of man as man. It is seeking guidance in appreciating the significance of poetry as the original alternative to all forms of tyranny that we turn to Dante, thereby betraying a simple truth about ourselves and our motives. For we thereupon attest to our being moved not by the curiosity of antiquarians but by a genuine desire for our good, approaching Dante as a teacher, almost a father, leading us beyond the reaches of any and all mechanically-induced fear.

In the fourth Canto of his *Inferno*, Dante paints an idyllic scene populated by noble, mythical characters among whom we find the illustrious philosophers of classical antiquity. These are enshrined *poetically* in a 'castle of nobility' (*nobile castello*):³ it is thanks to poetry that the great men of the past can thrive beyond fear and hope, or *abstracted* out of ordinary existential strife, into an isle of what, with Matthew Arnold, Dante might agree to call 'sweetness and light'. Accordingly, Dante's 'avatar' – his own self-projection into his dream, his *Comedy* – joins the company of renowned poets to discuss matters that he dares not retell. Poetry is the key to philosophy's own abstractions, or to the elevation of philosophy into the realm of ethereal discussions.

In the opening verses of his *Convivio*, Dante discloses before us a comparable, albeit not identical, theatrical stage, where an assembly of god-like intellects is feasting above the clouds of ordinary human life, while men live as livestock reminiscent of the herds which Cicero had once evoked by way of testifying to Orpheus's poetic power to save men from a bestial condition.⁴

³ For an exploration of Dante's Limbo, see my 'Unmasking Limbo: Reading *Inferno* 4 as Key to Dante's *Comedy*,' in *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 40.2 (2013): 199–219.

⁴ While the poetic 'stage' *exposes* Dante's heroism, or his heroic mediation of what is above man and what is below him, the fruit of Dante's mediation is the poetic stage itself. In this respect, Dante's hero may be said to forge *incognito* his own context. How are we to judge, however, of the *ontological status* of the hero and his context? When taken seriously, the hero is a philosopher, and his context – the context he shapes 'from within' – is political/ethical. That is why, for Dante, politics cannot be an obstacle to thought; indeed, as the *inner motor of politics*, thought is at home in politics: philosophy is primordially *political* philosophy. Otherwise phrased, the poetic-political world is the domain of thought, the domain in which and through which thought recognises its essence (what it is in itself), or what it 'was' (what it seems to leave 'behind') outside of its world. In this fundamental sense, politics remains necessarily open to transcendence, which, in relation to politics, is *religious*: not merely a dire expression of political aspirations, but that which the political is necessarily 'tied-back-to' (as primordial, *disclosive* point of reference) – a *permanent order* (as in Aristotle's *taxis physeos*). The *religere* entailed by the term 'religion' shows us that transcendence is no mere pie in the sky, but our original destiny, or proper end, 'defining' our everyday political life and indeed the whole sphere of ethics in terms

Dante's own agency shall consist in mediating the life and language of blessed intellects and that of sheep, thereby introducing a *third* stance – a poetic one, no doubt, but to be more precise, one which sheds light on the limitations of both angels and beasts, who are respectively hovering above and grazing below Dante. In the poet's own *heroic* agency we find an arena of convergence between (1) those abiding by the nature that in the opening lines of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is said to be fully rational, and (2) those lingering in a corrupt or beastly condition.

Aristotle's 'metaphysical' appeal to nature serves as a starting point for Dante's 'other' pursuit whose greatest literary testament is the *Comedy (Inferno 1.91)*. The Peripatetic emerges, if only with the indirectness of Socratic irony, as a poetic form in which we may recognise what is best in us, without being overtaken by the suspicion that what is best in us depends upon what is lowest in us, or that the loss of 'the good of the intellect' (2.18) is inevitable, as a metaphysical necessity. Whence Dante's appeal to *providence* as integral to a good understanding of the beginning of Aristotle's 'First Philosophy': 'all men naturally desire to know'. 'The reason for which' – Dante notes – 'can be and *is* that everything, driven immanently by the providence of *first* nature, is inclinable to its own perfection; so that, given that science is the final perfection of our soul, in which abides our final happiness, naturally are we all subject to a desire for it (*Convivio* 1.1.1). Clearly the 'nature' in question is the one considered by *Metaphysics*, or 'First Philosophy' – a *physis* in the noblest sense of 'generation' or 'birth'. Truly are we *born* for wisdom, even as the 'birth' in question has been obscured, just as 'the right way' (*diritta via*) of life has been marred in the opening verses of the *Inferno*. Yet, even in our vilest slumber (*Inferno* 2.1-4), our 'first birth' – our original mode of being – is by no

of a divine – both necessary and meaningful – mandate. To be sure, our *secular* upbringing makes it very difficult for us to assimilate Dante's lesson, especially given the Heideggerian nimbus looming over the prospect of welcoming philosophy as a guide in political affairs. It is encouraging, however, to consider that, by retaining a *Platonic* conception of Being, Dante is immune to the decisionism and voluntarism represented by Heidegger's appeal to 'resoluteness' (*Entschlossenheit*) in the context of a future-oriented reduction of politics to philosophy (whether or not Heidegger's late shift from an ethics of resoluteness to a *Gelassenheit* situated on the horizon of universal or global phenomenological anticipation, if not outright quietism, is to be understood as the German's way of projecting resoluteness into certain unpredictable 'gods' of the future, is a question that remains open; on Heidegger's pertinent 'transition' from the 1930's to the 1950's, see David McIlwain, "'The East within Us': Leo Strauss's Reinterpretation of Heidegger", *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 26 [2018]: 233-53), Dante's hero does not presuppose (or rise to overcome) the dereliction of Tradition (not to speak of the death of its God): Tradition is the very horizon through which the hero speaks and in speaking responds, or rather lets things themselves respond, to their 'otherworldly' source. As a Platonist, Dante's hero is a 'mender' (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1.1) immune to the *modernist* resolution, or rather the drive to wield a Nietzschean 'hammer' – to *overcome* the past (if only through imitation) by way of recovering its beginning and therein achieving self-determination as an essential political act. For a thoughtful exploration of this modern (if not ultimately Heideggerian) alternative to Dante, see pp. 432-40 of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Transcendence Ends in Politics' (translated by Peter Caws), *Social Research* 49.2 (Summer 1982): 405-40.

means alien to us. Its 'providence' is at work at the very heart of our wretched condition, 'turning' us *all* back to science or knowledge (*scienza*), and thereby calling all human beings to *philosophy*.

Thanks to our *first* nature, or in virtue of the lingering of that nature's first activity in us, we are all 'called' back to our beginning, as to our genuine perfection, which is simultaneously the knowledge in which our desire is ultimately fulfilled. Yet, 'some' appear to be living *as if* their 'first nature' were their only nature and motor, *and* as if that 'first nature' had manifested itself completely in them.

It is evident [*manifestamente*] to he who considers things well that few are those remaining who can attain to the spiritual condition [*abito*] desired by all, while innumerable, as it were, are the crippled who live always craving this food. / Oh, blessed are those few who sit at that banquet where upon the bread of angels doth one feast; and miserable are those who share with sheep their common food! (*Convivio* 1.1.6)

While Dante does not deny being capable of rising to the table of the blessed, he does readily profess not to be sitting at their table (1.1.10), even as he himself is not crippled, or *impedito*, as he will appear, however, in *Inferno* 1.62 (after 13 and 30). Indeed, in his *Convivio*, Dante presents himself as having already 'fled the pasture of the vulgar' (*fuggito della pastura del volgo* – 1.1.10) for the sake of educating an already *civilised* reader to interpret the wisdom of divine intellects (13). Dante's own educational banquet presupposes a prior education, which is the one provided by the *Vita Nuova*, the earlier work in which the Florentine moderated all that is 'fervid and passionate' in us, just as the *Convivio* will educate us to cultivate what is 'temperate and virile' in us (16; compare 10).

While apologising for any eventual lack of power (19), Dante professes to *want* to set the table (*apparecchiare* – 11) for those who, though having been taught to refrain from evil, at least one manifest in the guise of vice, are still susceptible to falling prey to it. Dante's banquet is a 'novel' one, that neither angels nor sheep are accustomed to, even as it is by no means unprecedented. Angelic intellects do not understand Dante – they have no taste for his poetic 'victuals' (*vivanda*), the *living food* that in *Inferno* 28 is condemned by the Prophet of Islam; for 'the blessed' (*beati*) have *forgotten* themselves, or the 'miserable life' that Dante has by no means forgotten (*Convivio* 1.1.10). Never would they willingly stoop to the lowlands of vulgar life; never would they want to produce a food for mortal souls, a *discourse* allowing ordinary civilised people to rise above death without fear of ever being overtaken by it. What 'sheep' can count upon is at best a distracted 'mercy' (*miser cordia*) from the 'blessed' hovering over them; a mercy manifested in the bread crumbs that Dante suggests may be falling from the ethereal heights of intellectual feasts; so that Dante may with justice be said to be acting with considerably greater mercy than the angels, when he sets out to prepare his 'general banquet' (*generale convivio*). His banquet is not for self-forgetful angelic intellects

as such, but for all men – as the wisdom that Aristotle tells us we somehow all desire – even though Dante’s speech is based ‘materially’ on terms derived from the *abstract* discourse of ‘the few’ sitting high above us.

The ‘material’ of Dante’s novel speech is ‘love and virtue’ ordered in ‘fourteen molds’ or ‘fourteen songs’ (14) requiring the bread of angels so as not to fall under the veil of obscurity, or to be obscured by shadows (*ibid.*). Dante’s terms both shed light upon and are illuminated by their resurfacing in *Inferno* 1, where we face an ‘obscure material wilderness’ or dark wood (*selva oscura*), a world obscured by the lack of angelic bread, or more precisely by the abandonment of a merciful, *wise* poetry (65, 89) giving shape or life to ‘love and virtue’ for the sake of all men. The world Dante intervenes in with merciful wisdom is a world in which human discourse has been cast into shadow or into dark uncertainty (...*d’alcuna oscuritade ombra*), by being deprived of firm anchorage.⁵ It is this lack of anchorage that Dante remedies by providing *poetic* certainty to human life, lest terms such as love and virtue be mistaken as merely beautiful, as opposed to being recognised as eminently *good* (*Convivio* 1.1.14). Whence Dante’s reference to ‘wisdom, love and virtue’ in *Inferno* 1.104–5; for, there, Dante’s prophesied hero feasts upon poetry and the ‘love and virtue’ that poetry draws out of obscurity, into poetry’s own light. From poetry we move to love and from love back to virtue, *terminus ad quem* of the hero’s journey.

Dante’s hero, or his own heroism requires, however, a preface, even a long introductory Odyssey, a journey of return, not so much to divinity as to the art and life of the protagonist of the *Convivio*. That life and its sustaining virtue has been stained (1.2.1, 15), as has been the lynx of *Inferno* 1, who has been covered with ‘stained hair’ (*pel macolato* – 33, anticipating 42). The return to virtue would then seem to proceed through the erasing of stains from the face of virtue, reminding us of the ‘P’s’ (standing for faults or *peccata*) that Dante will erase from his own forehead in *Purgatorio*. Does the return to virtue coincide with the exposition of virtue from beneath the shadow of suspicion cast upon virtue by its detractors? The matter is not that simple for the Dante of the *Comedy*, who sets out to co-opt shadows, not to speak of monsters, for his own good cause; and the first noteworthy ‘shadow’ (*ombra*) Dante recruits as he ‘sets the table’ for ‘war’ (*guerra*), is Virgil, the illustrious prophet of Christianity. Shadows are no longer a hindrance to Dante’s *ascent* to virtue, since he ascends by descending and thus by entering into the universe of shadows to see in them no mere temptation or stumbling block, but a window or mirror of opportunity to rise at the heart of at once the loftiest and deepest of problems.

What stains ‘label’ virtue, or more precisely Dante’s own virtue? What ‘faults’ or ‘P’s’ (*peccati*) is the poet to wipe from his forehead? *Convivio* 1.2 provides a decisive answer. The undeserved stains amount to prejudices, insinuations, if not outright calumnies that would have Dante appear both unjust and irrational: Dante

⁵ On the juxtaposition of *ombra* and *certo*, as of shadow/veil and certainty, see *Inferno* 1.66.

would be unjust insofar as he attributes literary independence (poetic vestige of authority) to himself, and he would be irrational insofar as he 'exposes' matters that are supposed to be 'too deep' (1-2). Dante is responding to both allegations, showing that reason is independent of authority (in the respect that Dante's freedom is naturally compatible with the highest demands of the highest law) *and* that reason has access to the *arcana* of authority – whereby authority must not be irrational.

It is the 'knife' (*coltello*) of Dante's own judgment that is to *purge* (*purgare*) the faults unfairly attached to him, thereby restoring Dante's dignity, his speech in this world. The task at hand is the civilising one of *mondare*, cleansing of false attributions. Dante defends his right to speak about himself and thus *de facto* to turn himself into an author, by decrying *ad hominem* assaults aimed at denying the poet his capacity to teach others how to be free of all fear. This Dante achieves by casting himself in the condition of his reader, thereby pretending to be moved by fear; thereupon, Dante will rise and raise his reader to the discovery of our true motor, namely virtue, both as a beautiful edifying vision and as an activity to cultivate (17).

In sum, Dante sets out to *justify* his poetic activity in itself *and* to show that it can succeed manifestly insofar as it constitutes the true motor of our common life and experience. What moves us is not, as the vulgar and its authorities would have it, our *passions*, but *virtue*, or more precisely the virtue of enlightened poets such as Dante.

We are now ready to tackle the question of just how far, how *deep*, Dante's speech can soar, 'ordered,' as it is, 'to lift the defect of [his] *canzoni*,' his sweet 'songs' (1.3.2), namely the defect of unwittingly producing more problems than the ones we set out to solve, to begin with (1). What is the problem that poetry sets out to solve? It is that of 'rigidity' (*durezza*, 2) – of inflexibility, of harshness, of hardship. Yet, harsh measures are sometimes deemed necessary to overcome harshness. A law might be harsher than the lawless life it was intended to order, though it ended up obduring it, as we begin to see in the opening verses of *Inferno* 1, where we read: 'In the middle of the path of our life / I found myself anew crossing an obscure wilderness, / for the upright way was marred. / Ah, so hard a thing [*cosa dura*] it is to qualify / this wild wilderness, such impervious fortress / that in thought, renews the fear!' (1-6). When read in the light of the opening verses of *Inferno* 3, the opening verses of *Inferno* 1 warn us against an eternal *law* imposed as 'rigid thing' (*cosa dura*) upon human society. That law is supposed to bridge the hiatus between a *quanto* and a *quale*, a quantity and a quality, and thus the physical and the moral.

What is supremely rigid or harsh is *law*, as in *Inferno* 3.8, where Dante reads of an impersonal, yet feminine 'I' claiming, in capital letters, to 'endure eternally': *IO ETTERNA DURO*, echoing Ulpian's *dura lex*, 'rigid law'. The law that was written to overcome harshness, risks becoming harsher than the harshness it first set out to alleviate. This 'defect' of law is none other than a defect of *speech*, or of

a certain kind of poetry, namely a poetry that has acquired the authoritative status of law. Can we prevent poetry from remaining frozen into ‘eternal’ legal forms? Dante’s tacit answer is negative. Poetry *naturally*, or even *fatefully* crystallises in legal forms that tend to be imposed as eternal certainties upon human life.⁶ Dante’s own response to the mistaking of poetic forms for what we might call, today, moral absolutes is Dante’s own poetry of poetry, or his poetic defence of the original or proper function and nature of human speech. Prior to being fossilised into eternal certainties, poetry lives off virtue, the strength of mind bridging quantity and quality, ‘matter’ and the good, the proper end of motion. At the heart or ‘middle’ of our life we stand lost in bewilderment, our path obscured, marred by by-products of fear finding their most formidable representation in laws assumed to constitute a mighty fortress impervious to thought.

Dante’s *Comedy* defies that fortress of fear, exposing it as a product of *thought*. The laws we adore out of fear and that thereby stand as manifest projections of our fears, are *in reality* products of thought, of a thought that redeems laws *ex principio*, a thought that is more primordial than fear and that allows us to interpret laws as providential gifts, rather than tyrannical impositions. Such is what the opening of the *Comedy* promises in continuity with the work’s early prototype, the *Convivio*. Upon projecting himself into his students’ common condition of perplexity, Dante testifies to the role of law as *petrified* moral agent that we can, however, approach as ‘infernal’ steppingstone for a return to the poetic infancy of law. In short, Dante co-opts fear in the interest of thought. Whence his, ‘in thought, renews the fear!’ Upon the poet’s finding himself anew (*mi ritrova*), he says) — after the manner of the *troubadours* — fear is ‘reframed’ (drawn back) in a poetic context, an environment allowing us to make use of fear against fear. Laws are good in themselves, but only as doors to poetry, rather than to fear. It is for the sake of the restoration of law to its originally poetic function that Dante dives into the infernal underworld (the world underpinning the superficial world of vulgar men). In doing so, Dante shows us that eternal forms belong to the mind or thought (the Latin *mens* renders both English terms) and that, as such, they are imposed upon human *bodies* in the guise of immutable laws *only so that thereupon* poetry may intervene to restore the ‘forms’ to their original setting, *interpreting* them as *forms of intelligibility*, rather than as ‘impervious fortresses’ against thought.

Now, one of the lessons Dante’s ‘plan’ offers us is that the *reason* ‘behind’ our ordinary ‘embodied’ experience is not a law, whether mechanically or otherwise applied to our bodies. Knowledge or *scienza* of bodies is necessarily *poetic* in the respect that it entails the gathering of bodies, not in or under laws, but in or under the guiding *virtue* of poetry: bodies are to be understood in the context of a poetic ‘turn’ to the Good and thus on a *moral* horizon, even as poetry is constantly engaged in opening that horizon to the unexpected ‘strangeness’ of its

⁶ We often see this in Botticelli’s so-called *Primavera*, where a wild girl metamorphoses into a poetic muse who, in turn, yields to a statuesque beauty, even as the circular dance of fates suggests that a return to the wild is underway in the very rise of law to the stature of eternal, divine glory.

abysmal light. Dante's poetry invites us to awaken not to 'natural laws' or hidden 'mechanisms' underpinning the empirical universal, but to an original, primordial awakening, an original thought that, with respect to our *thought-caught-in-fear* stands at the antipodes of our empirical universe. Accordingly, at the heart of Dante's *science* we will find the *providential* agency of thought, as opposed to the rule of machines, divine or otherwise. Countering all imposition of order from without the human, Dante rises, after Aristotle,⁷ as staunch defender of *entelechy*, calling us to recognise the inherence of providence in human nature, or the inalienable bond between the human and divine transcendence. Having been marred, 'the human' in question is, to be sure, ignorant of itself and so, needful of education – an education to its original, natural, or *pagan* bond with divinity. Dante's poetry achieves precisely this, namely a restoration of a *pagan* humanity perfectly compatible with the Christian universal proclamation of the dignity of human nature.⁸

Dante faces a formidable objection raised by authorities which conceive Christianity as smothering or overcoming pagan poetry. Dante's response to his enemies builds on his initial pledge, introduced in *Convivio* 1.2, to defend the right of poetry (in the person of the poet) to speak or reason about itself – to defend itself against calumny and promote itself as the most just and rewarding educator. That pledge is followed, in *Convivio* 1.3, by Dante's pledge to free poetry from an *immanent* vice, namely poetry's tendency to betray itself as unpoetic imposition. Authority, even laws, are good *in a poetic context*, falling short of which laws are unjust and authority is false (3-4; compare *Inferno* 1.69-72).

With Socratic humility, Dante offers us his own person as mirror for everyone, calling us to recognise the roots of the injustice poetry is subjected to. Echoing two pagan classics – Virgil's *Aeneid*, 4.174-175 (*fama crescit eundo*, openly referred to in *Convivio* 1.3.10) and Claudian's *De Bello Gildonico*, v. 387 (*minuit praesentia famam*),⁹ Dante remarks that 'fame beyond truth grows beyond measure [*si sciampia*],' while 'presence beyond truth shrinks'. Dante's own audience has failed to understand the importance of Dante's own work, his 'wood' or *legno* (*Convivio* 1.3.5), because on the one hand it has expected more than he could offer and on the other hand it has expected less, by failing to recognise what poetry can and does achieve within the boundaries of a *forgotten* humanity. While Dante's Florentine contemporaries may have hoped for a salvation that Dante could not offer, they did not appear to care for the salvation Dante did offer.

Whether good or ill, fame distorts truth, or 'the thing imagined in its true state' (11). Having highlighted the deceptiveness of fame in the minds of well-wishing people, Dante sets out to tackle the darker side of fame, namely its

⁷ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 2.1.5.

⁸ On Dante's Renaissance inheritance, see my 'Humanisme et mystère dans la philosophie de Pic de la Mirandole,' in *Dogma: revue de philosophie et de sciences humaines*, Vol. 14 (Winter 2021): 8-38.

⁹ Vico will revert to these two passages in his *Scienza Nuova* (1744), 'Of the Elements', 1.

susceptibility to being used by mean, envious people marred by ‘human impurity’ (*l’umana impuritate*, anticipating the ‘first envy’ that in *Inferno* is evil’s root) to diminish the natural dignity of man, that is to bind us inexorably to our body (1.4.2-4).

Since ‘the majority of men lives following the senses, rather than reason,’ most of us will approach fame *literally*, as justified by what is outward in man, rather than by what is hidden in man, our *interiority*, our *inner dimension* (2). This is a most pressing problem for poets, most notably vis-à-vis their Christian heralding. The circle of ‘honoured’ – almost ‘ornate’ – ‘famous’ (*onrata nominanza*) poets that Dante encounters in Limbo is a circle of poets who have been raised to divine heights by Christianity in the respect that Christianity has extracted Christian universal messages from the works of those pagan poets. Christianity has ‘translated’ the soul of ancient poetry in *outward* forms, or in terms of categories readily recognisable by the majority of men. The poets have thereby been extolled, yet only on their way to being exposed to stern condemnation, as public enemies, dire threats to the integrity of moral-political order. Thus, for instance, pagan poets, such as Virgil, who have been supposed to bespeak as unconscious vessels truths that only the divine could reveal in full consciousness, are thereupon exposed to the threat of divine excommunication (*Inferno* 1.122-31).

The light that was supposed to redeem the poet can all too easily serve to condemn poets to heresy. Dante himself was, after all, targeted as a heretic early in his career, on both political and theological grounds. In his own verses, all the more so in the unspoken interstices between them, Dante stands his ground, firing back at his denigrators by showing that, being neither god nor beast, man transcends the limits of both beasts and gods. Dante’s man is the being who, alone, can save himself, bridging the distance that separates bodily determinations and thought’s own indetermination (*Inferno* 2.1-6). Even prior to the *Comedy*, the *Convivio* shows us man as *mediator* between heaven and earth, a *poet* for whom the heavenly is the mirror of the ‘forgotten’ dignity of the earthly.

Are we to understand Dante as a Freemason *avant la lettre*, a proto-modernist for whom religious verities are but *symbols* of truths of the heart? Would Dante be reading Christianity along the lines of Nietzsche, as ‘Platonism for the plebs’? In order to best tackle such questions, we would need to first ask what is meant by ‘Platonism’. Are we speaking, here, of an esoteric *doctrine*, or of a mode of *interpretation* of any and all doctrines? Dante’s *Convivio* orients us towards the latter sense of Platonism: Christianity would not be Platonism, but the Hebrew Bible for the plebs – the Bible *interpreted* Platonically for all plebs, as *paradigm* for all necessary mirrors of truths hidden at the heart of *human nature*. What is key, here, is that Dante does not envision truth as hidden in a-social, or a-moral nature; the truth he seeks, if only on our behalf, is seated in our *moral-political* nature, a nature we would need to rediscover. Dante’s work is then not trying to reground man in an artificial ‘new society’ of enlightened intellectuals, but to awaken us to divinity – as original awakening – at the heart of ordinary political

life. The seat of awakening is sought not in a future society that would mark the glory of an enlightened will, but in poetry that opens our *present* society to its divine depths.¹⁰ In this respect, Dante achieves at once both more and less than modernity calls for. For while 'failing' to foster a new, universally 'enlightened' society, or the Age thereof, Dante succeeds in reviving poetry, (1) as primary creative/active constituent of any society *and* (2) as heroic 'turn' to the divine — a turn in the person of heroic speakers, to 'the life of the mind' as *end in itself*, a life of poetic 'turning', of turning as permanent *stance*: the circular at the heart of the upright. While our common path is 'straight' (*diritta*), Dante's poetry exposes the 'straight' to the circular, preemptively countering any progressive impulse to reduce the circular to the straight, the divine to a human poorly understood. The task of understanding the human is more urgent than that of understanding the divine (or of reading the divine in the light of the human), even and especially where the Hebrew Bible points to something somehow buried in or forgotten by pagans (who by and large ignore their origins), namely the moral fibre of ordinary bodily experience.

Understanding the human is, for Dante, a matter of understanding the human in terms of divinity, or in light of divinity, of the unknown. If Dante would agree with Aristotle's common sensical suggestion that we know the uncertain in the light of the certain (fleeing the latter in the name of the former is foolish), he would also and most importantly recognise with his classical predecessors that the uncertain hides originally in the certain *and* that the certain is best understood as a mirror of the uncertain or the undetermined, divine or otherwise. Thus it is that Dante's quest for humanity turns out to be a quest for divinity, or that which allows the human to transcend the beastly; thus does the circular emerge as key to the upright, the *diritto*, but also the *moral* right, *justice*, primarily understood as virtue. Yet, again, Dante warns against the misleading and misguided approach to the circular (divine indetermination) as *imposition* upon the upright, the rectilinear. The divine is not, originally, a law or will limiting man's liberty, even as the divine *appears* thus to those who live as if moved by fear of evil, rather than by desire for the good. For those fearless ones — enlightened poets, or Platonic philosophers — who are guided by genuine desire in their daily life, the divine is primarily 'the love that moves the sun and the *other* [fixed] stars' (*Paradiso* 33.145); not only the sun of poetry's 'sweet season' — the one that promises to reach up to the good — but also the stars moved by 'divine love' alone (*Inferno* 1.38–43). Dante's hero is

¹⁰ The absence of any universal 'triumph of the will' in Dante is tied to the poet's recognition of a fundamental incompatibility between his own will and the will of non-poets, or of those who live in and for 'surfaces'. Hence Dante's readiness to 'blame' his lack of knowledge and power, rather than his will, for his omitting to tell us things he has seen or heard. Compare *Inferno* 1.10, 30, 4.145 and *Convivio* 1.2.6. Dante's will, the determination of his own desire, or what he wants, is never discussed openly. We must wait for the final verses of *Paradiso* to learn that, thanks to poetic desire's conversion into divine love, Dante's will is both overcome and raised into God's own.

relentless in his quest to raise poetry to theological heights, not only lest the divine be divined as a despotic will alien to the human, but most importantly because poetry, as testified to by Dante, is originally open to that mysterious ‘something’ – that *mezzo* or middle term – distinguishing man from the beast: not fear, but a desire irreducible to any fear or any object thereof.¹¹

It is desire that draws the divine to the centre of our attention, in the *Comedy*. Accordingly, the ascent to the good is possibly only on condition of (re)descending to recover desire, a task that, as the *Convivio* already shows, will allow poetry to regain its credibility. What is at stake is the ‘x’ upon which our ordinary life experience hinges. If that ‘something’ is alien to our humanity, then we are condemned to fear; if, on the other hand, our everyday life experience hinges upon desire *and* the good, then we have nothing to fear, or rather we will be able to rise above all fear on the horizon of a transcendent end. Nevertheless, Dante takes a further step to recognise that desire distinguishes itself from mere animal thirst by being articulated in terms of *speech* – the *living word* that Dante’s infernal descent aims at reviving (*Purgatorio* 1.6–7). Whence Dante’s Christianity.

When Christianity regrounds (or invites a regrounding of) ordinary experience in the Absolute through the personification of logos/reason/speech, it invites the common realisation that speech is alive at the heart of human experience, as a bond between bodily determination and thought. Dante responds wholeheartedly to Christianity’s call by inviting us to recognise that in the absence of poetry, man is no longer himself, or deserving of a name (*Inferno*, 3.52–60). Christianity itself is no longer itself or worthy of its name to the extent that it betrays poetry. On the other hand, Christianity is fully commendable insofar as it allows for Dante’s *Comedy*, a poem that, to speak colloquially, is about – and *is* – the way to recover poetry.

To read the *Comedy* as *the education of poets* in the Christian tradition is to read Dante as converter of *unpoetic* self-professed Christians to poetry in the Platonic tradition. Far from rendering dispensable the virtue of poets (*virtus poetica*) of classical antiquity, Dante’s Christianity vouches for and blesses it, offering it its *nihil obstat* in the face of all barbaric objections to poetry as *way of life*. To be clear, poetry here offers no Romantic escape in the face of the meaninglessness of a life devoid of divine providence. Dante would not accept the modern mechanistic cosmology accepted, if only reluctantly, by Romanticism. Dante would abhor the Romantic retreat into sentiment before the onslaught of ‘the machine’. Dante’s answer to any and all *dei ex machina* is as bold and uncompromising as is the warrior taking his firm stance as ‘I alone and one’ (*e io sol uno*) in *Inferno* 2.3. There where modernity will capitalise *against* Christianity on Christianity’s *promise* of a synthesis of the human and the divine, by cultivating sentiment as fuel for *the machine of Progress*, Dante recovers, in the name of *poetry*, Christianity’s promise to restore a ‘pre-Christian’ covenant between Man and God. That poetic covenant

¹¹ See pp. 131–32 of Hilail Gildin, ‘Déjà Jew All Over Again: Dannhauser on Leo Strauss and Atheism,’ in *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 25.1 (Fall 1997): 125–33.

is not written in the language of sentiment, but of virtue, of man's emergence into divine intelligibility. That emergence is at once willful and *by grace* in the respect that poetry has found a way — *its* way, the *loving* way that it incarnates — to harmonise human and divine will. By the end of his *Comedy*, Dante has shown us a Christianity whose proper function is to confirm the perfect compatibility of the poet's (philosophical) desire and God's own will.

Thanks to Dante's Christianity, many will come to accept that there is no special providence (indeed, no humanity) without the poetic hero's drawing upon general providence; so, praise would be due to God *and* to Dante's 'living word', a word in which general providence manifests itself to us in the act of shaping our moral-political universe. Yet, many of Dante's contemporaries have ceased viewing the City as a mirror of divinity, or the human as *personal* image of a divine *mystery* beyond all personality. What has been lost, or more precisely 'abandoned,' is trust in the capacity of speech to 'imitate' reality. It is for the sake of recovering that trust, that *rational* confidence, that Dante sets out to expose the *poetic* nature of objections to poetry. Such is the prospect intimated by verses 8–9 of *Inferno* 1, where the poet promises: 'so as to treat of the good that I found therein [i.e. in the wild wilderness], / I'll speak of *other* things which I spotted therein'. The 'other' things are *scorte*, 'spotted' on the 'other journey' (*altra viaggio*) that in *Inferno* 1.91 entails the exploration of the hidden/infernal underworld or underpinnings of political life, guided by Virgilian poetry.

Dante makes it clear that he is following Virgil by way of transcending fear (88–90, after 15 and 19), most notably with respect to his capacity to ascend towards the good of poetry, the good that Dante's 'avatar' is to find. Classical poetry blessed by Christianity can guide us to its own virtue via a journey into the underworld or the *substance* of our ordinary lives. But this is possible only insofar as the foundations of politics are poetic, so that the poet is the true teacher of political things. It is thanks to poetry, after all, that Dante projects himself into his 'avatar' in the very first verses of the *Comedy*, where we read of his finding himself anew: *mi ritrovai*, he states, thereby tipping his poetic hat to his *troubadour* teachers.

Now, it is of course in the vehicle or means — *mezzo* — of poetry that Dante finds himself anew, or that he is, so to speak, 'reborn'. His 'second birth' (countering the 'second death' of *Inferno* 1.117) is, to be sure, set in an awful context, yet this context is to be understood as somehow already redeemed by the very fact that its nature or foundation is defined by poetry; whence the 'but' (*ma*) of verse 8 of *Inferno* 1. Yes, the world in which Dante lands *himself* is horrible; *yet*, in the name of poetry's goodness, he will speak of 'other things,' namely of those *same* horrible things, albeit in a *poetic* context, or in the context of an original *redemption*. The horrible things are 'other', then, in the same sense that Dante speaks of 'the other stars', which stand 'fixed' above poetic agency. As poetry's sun rises, it reaches up to the rigidity of 'fixed' things, as of eternal laws, exposing their own poetic nature or provenance.

It makes sense, now, to render the opening *mezzo* of the *Comedy* its *active* valence. Dante's *mezzo* is no mere temporal signpost, but a functional agent, a hinge, or rather a pivot. It is 'in the *pivot* of the path of our life' that Dante finds himself anew, for the sake of exposing the poetic context of all those horrible things that we ordinarily fear — so that we may finally rise above all fear in full recognition of the *providential* nature of our daily obstacles. These are *challenges* that kindle and nourish our *desire*, our tending from a 'now' (the *vũv* that Aristotle attests to as 'middle' or *μεσότης*)¹² lost in obscurity to the eternal 'now' of thought itself.

Dante's *Convivio* confirms that the poet's ascent is alien to the pursuits of 'sheep', these representing the vast majority of men (indeed 'almost all' — *quasi tutti*), lost as babies (*pargoli*) in mere *appearances*, while hating both virtuous poets and their reasonings (1.4.4-5). So, as Plato had anticipated, the genuine poet speaks before a wall of misanthropes and misologues who resent in Dante his capacity to rise in speech and strength of mind above mortality (7). Dante would sin in their eyes already for having exposed the immortal meaning or 'message' of words, instead of resting his will on literal, superficial readings.

The world Dante stands before is a world dominated by mediocrity envious of both good and evil, always on an amoral quest for power (8). It is in rejecting a quasi-universal 'lust for domination' (St. Augustine's *libido dominandi*) that Dante sets himself apart from the vast majority of men, these being always ready to project upon 'the good man' (*l'uomo buono*) the stains (*macule*) of his surroundings (9-11).¹³ More importantly, however, Dante attests to his rising *above* other men to lend his person the air of 'authority' (*autoridate*) without which vulgar judges could all too easily vilify Dante's poetry, thereby distracting potential earnest readers from the rewarding challenge of taking it seriously (12-13). How far above mortals Dante rises is not an easy matter to settle, primarily because the distance between human desire and divine heavens is no more measurable than is the distance between our mortal bodies and our poetic projections.¹⁴

¹² Aristotle, *Physics*, Book 8.1, 251b11-12: τὸ δὲ νῦν ἐστὶ μεσότης τις, καὶ ἀρχὴν καὶ τελευτὴν ἔχον ἅμα. On the *active* sense of Aristotle's (and Plato's) 'middle' (*μεσότης*), see Roberto Grasso, 'MEΣΟΤΗΣ in Plato and Aristotle' in *Dissertatio: Revista de Filosofia*, Vol. 48 (2018): 71-95.

¹³ Compare *Inferno* 1.33. *Convivio* awakens in the careful reader of *Inferno* the thought that at least some of its inhabitants might be innocent men tainted by their surroundings.

¹⁴ Compare *Inferno* 2.91-93 and *Paradiso* 33.40-41.