

Fame and Glory in Dante's *Commedia*: Problematizing Purgatorio XI

JULIA CATERINA HARTLEY, CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD

He was buried, but the entire funerary night, in the lit up shop windows, his books, placed in groups of three, kept watch like open-winged angels and seemed, for the one who no longer was, the symbol of his resurrection.

(Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière*)¹

Anyone who has read the Divine Comedy will find it hard to disagree with Erich Auerbach's observation that Dante 'pits himself against his time in anticipation of earthly fame and beatitude in the hereafter'.² Dante's self-representation as a wronged poet, suffering in life while he awaits the highest of deferred gratifications – celebrity and salvation – continues to provoke emotional responses in his readers. But this assessment ignores the problematic fact that lust for fame is a worldly, and therefore un-Christian, desire. While the current status of Dante's soul may lie outside the remit of this discussion, we do know for certain that his bid for fame was a successful one. Dante circulated the Divine Comedy (hereafter referred to with its original title of *Commedia*) as it was being written, in installments of six to eight cantos. The poem was instantly popular, and the fact that it was written in the vernacular also made it accessible to those who did not read Latin and to non-reading oral audiences.³ Readers' admiration for the poem is even encapsulated in the title as we know it today: the adjective 'Divina' was only added in 1555. Dante's work is on the syllabus of all modern Italian secondary schools and the visual image of the bitter, hook-nosed poet has long entered Italian popular culture. The very fact that we refer to Dante by the diminutive form of his first name, rather than 'Durante Alighieri', indicates that we think of the author as the character presented in his works. As Peter S. Hawkins observes, 'Dante has made it impossible for us not to look at him or read his work as autobiographical.'⁴ Dante's entire literary career can be considered from the

¹ *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-89), 4 vols, III (1988), p. 693. My translation.

² *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. by Ralph Manheim, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001 (1929), p. 99.

³ For a succinct description of the early circulation of the *Commedia* see Peter S. Hawkins's *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 23-26.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 1.

point of view of the elaborate construction of his public image, as demonstrated most recently by Albert Russell Ascoli in his exhaustive account.⁵

A decade before Ascoli's study, Teodolinda Barolini's seminal work, *The Undivine Comedy*, had already questioned our tendency to read Dante on his own terms.⁶ Her opening chapter makes a case for a 'detheologized' reading of the *Commedia*, that is, 'a way of reading that attempts to break out of the hermeneutic guidelines that Dante has structured into his poem'.⁷ Instead of accepting everything the author says as true, as one would do when reading Holy Scripture, Barolini suggests it can be productive to examine the 'gap' between what Dante preaches and what he practices.⁸ The present article aims to advance this line of enquiry by examining the noticeably wide gap between the proclaimed Christian message of Dante's poem and the profound concern with fame and posterity that the poet expresses throughout the narrative, in order to posit that, rather than wanting to be both famous and saved, Dante wants to be famous *despite* wanting to be saved. The *Commedia's* unobscured yearning for worldly recognition creates an irresolvable tension, which is brought into sharp focus by the episode of the encounter with the soul of the illuminator Oderisi da Gubbio in *Purgatorio* XI. Through Oderisi's monologue, the text of

91 Oh vana gloria de l'umane posse!
com' poco verde in su la cima dura,
se non è giunta da l'etati grosse!
94 Credette Cimabue ne la pittura
tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido,
sì che la fama di colui è scura.
97 Così ha tolto l'uno a l'altro Guido
la gloria de la lingua; e forse è nato
chi l'uno e l'altro caccerà del nido.
100 Non è il mondan romore altro ch'un fiato
di vento, ch'or vien quinci e or vien quindi,
e muta nome perché muta lato.
103 Che voce avrai tu più, se vecchia scindi
da te la carne, che se fossi morto
anzi che tu lasciassi il 'pappo' e 'l 'dindi',
106 pria che passin mill'anni? ch'è più corto
spazio a l'eterno, ch'un muover di ciglia
al cerchio che più tardi in cielo è torto.
[...]
115 La vostra nominanza è color d'erba,
che viene e va, e quei la discolora
per cui ella esce de la terra acerba".

91 Oh, what vainglory in human powers!
How short a time the green lasts on the height
unless some cruder, darker age succeeds.
94 Once, as a painter, Cimabue thought
he took the prize. Now "Giotto" 's on all lips
and Cimabue's fame is quite eclipsed.
97 In verse, as well, a second Guido steals
all glory from the first. And someone's born
who'll thrust, perhaps, both Guidos from the nest.
100 The roar of earthly fame is just a breath
of wind, blowing from here and then from there,
that changes name in changing origin.
103 What more renown will you have if you strip
your flesh in age away than if you died
before you'd left off lispng "Din-dins!", "Penth!"
106 when once a thousand years have passed, a space
that falls far short of all eternity --
an eye blink to the slowest turning sphere.
[...]
115 All your renown is coloured like the grass,
which comes then goes. And He discolours it
who made it first appear from bitter earth.'
(*Purg.* XI, 91-117)

⁵ *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008).

⁶ *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 19.

the *Commedia* denounces the very sin of which its narrator is guilty.⁹

Oderisi's indictment of vainglory follows an Augustinian model. It implies a depreciation of the earthly, which is perishable and thus necessarily inferior to the divine, which is eternal. The problems raised by the above monologue with regards to artistic *hubris* have been best examined by Barolini in her chapter 'Re-Presenting What God Presented: the Arachnean Art of the Terrace of Pride'.¹⁰ She reads *Purgatorio* X and XI through an Ovidian intertext and draws parallels between the encounters with the proud and other episodes of the *Commedia*. This allows her to demonstrate the metatextual centrality of Purgatory's terrace of pride and to establish that the poet 'knows that Oderisi's words on the vanity of earthly fame apply to no one as little as to himself'.¹¹ With regards to lines 103-06, Barolini observes that Oderisi's metonymic reference to young age with his mention of baby talk, and his metaphorical reference to fame through the term 'voice', in fact encourage us to contradict Oderisi's suggestion that Dante's literary efforts are in vain: 'with respect to a divinely inspired poet, one invested with a divinely sanctioned poetic mission, it is important that he live beyond the ability to say "pappo" and "dindi," and it will be important in a thousand years.'¹² This article expands upon this interpretation in two regards: firstly, with regard to Oderisi's references to language, and secondly, with regard to the authority of Oderisi's words.

Oderisi's verbal framing is capital, for it echoes the addresses to the reader in which Dante describes the enterprise of writing the *Commedia*. When reading Oderisi's reference to baby talk, we already know that describing the bottom of Hell is 'no task for tongues still whimpering 'Mum!' and 'Dad!' (*Inf.* XXXII, 9).¹³ Though Oderisi uses the term 'voce' to mean fame, the word is usually used in the *Commedia* in its literal sense.¹⁴ As a result, Dante's potential fame is associated with his literary voice. And in the opening lines of *Paradiso* XXV, a canto to which we shall return, we are told that penning the *Commedia* has altered Dante's voice (*Par.* XXV, 7). If the *Commedia* is to bring Dante glory (albeit temporarily), it will therefore not be by chance, as the wind blows, but by merit of his

⁹ All quotations in Italian are from *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1966-67). English translations of full verses are taken from *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012).

¹⁰ *Undivine Comedy*, pp. 122-42.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 134.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Despite statements made in *Inferno* and Dante's treatises, baby talk also has positive connotations in Dante. See Robert Hollander's 'Babytalk in Dante's *Commedia*' *Studies in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1980), pp. 115-29, and, especially, Gary Cestaro, *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Cf "voce" in Umberto Bosco's *Enciclopedia dantesca* (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1970-8), 6 vol.

poetic talent; the ‘voce’ with which he speaks and writes. We may therefore wonder why Barolini in this context stresses the ‘divinely sanctioned’ aspect of Dante’s poem, when what seems at stake here is his linguistic prowess; Dante not as *scriba Dei* but as ‘fabbro del parlar materno’ [‘craftsman of the the mother tongue’] (*Purg.* XXVI, 117).

This suggestion of lasting a thousand years draws out another central theme with regards to language: that of the vernacular.¹⁵ Dante’s position with regard to the fame of vernacular poets is extremely complex, as is best brought to light in the encounters with Guido Guinizzelli in *Purgatorio* XXVI and with Adam in *Paradiso* XXVI. Both these characters, moreover, are named in *Purgatorio* XI (respectively, in lines 97 and 44). *Purgatorio* XXVI is a celebration of vernacular lyric poetry: Dante calls the older Italian poet Guido Guinizzelli his poetic father (97-99) and Guinizzelli in turn praises the troubadour Arnaut Daniel (115-120). While Oderisi’s monologue, through the image of the wind, suggests a complete disjunction between fame and merit, Guinizzelli draws a distinction between those who attained celebrity without deserving it and the well-earned glory of gifted poets. The former are dismissed through the same binary structure that Oderisi uses to express the replacing of one thing with another (‘l’uno’ / ‘l’altro’ [97]; ‘or vien quinci’ / ‘or vien quindi’ [101]): ‘di grido in grido pur lui dando pregio’ [‘proclaiming, on and on, his proven worth’] (*Purg.* XXVI, 125). The latter are praised in terms of their technical skill: Arnaut is a ‘fabbro’ [‘craftsman’] (117). Yet vernacular poetry, even if it is written by a talented poet who deserves to be famous, remains perishable. The fickleness of human language is suggested by the Pilgrim’s double-edged compliment to Guinizzelli: ‘Li dolci detti vostri, | che, quanto durerà l’uso moderno, | faranno cari ancora i loro incostri’ [‘That smooth, sweet verse you wrote | will make its very ink most dearly prized | as long as present usage still endures.’] (112-14). Guinizzelli’s poetry will be loved, until language changes. By writing in a perishable language one limits one’s long-term success, as will be made explicit by Adam in *Paradiso* XXVI, lines 137-38: ‘ché l’uso d’i mortali è come fronda | in ramo, che sen va e altra vene’ [‘With mortal usages, like leaves along | a branch, one goes and then another comes.’]. Adam’s words can also be linked to Oderisi’s through the use of natural imagery (his expression ‘come fronda in ramo’ echoes lines 92 and 115-17 of *Purgatorio* XI). The vanity of poetic success is thus inextricably linked to the central issue of the mutability of language, which gives us two reasons why Dante’s vernacular poem should be forgotten.

¹⁵ On this see also Herbert Marks, ‘Hollowed Names: Vox and Vanitas in the *Purgatorio*’, *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, No. 110 (1992), 135-78 (pp. 144-45).

Secondly, the very construction of Oderisi's rhetorical question in lines 103-06 seeks to create a certain resistance towards his sermon on behalf of the reader of the *Commedia*. While the tercet formed by lines 106-08 reasonably suggests that human temporality pales before eternity, this context is provided after the question. Dante separates the temporal specification 'pria che passin mill'anni' [before a thousand years have passed] (106) from the initial query 'che voce avrai tu più' [what more renown will you have] (103), both syntactically and through his lineation. The thousand year yardstick is delayed (with an enjambement) until the following tercet, which, in a manuscript that would not have contained punctuation, creates the following question: 'Che voce avrai tu più, se vecchio scindi da te la carne, che se fossi morto anzi che tu lasciassi il 'pappo' e 'l 'dindi'?' [Would you have any more renown if you stripped your flesh in old age than if you died before you'd left off baby talk ?] On the evidence of the tercet comprising 103-05, then, Oderisi is undermined by his own phrasing (as well as his own framing): the difference between dying as an infant and dying as a poet is rendered as both a linguistic and a textual issue. The very existence of the poem containing Oderisi's question undermines his rhetorical preaching, even as it is uttered.

The *Inferno* offers us the best example of the sin denounced by Oderisi in Brunetto Latini, who is encountered among the sodomites.¹⁶ The nature of Brunetto's sin has been the cause of much scholarly debate.¹⁷ Diana Cuthbertson's instructive analysis usefully returns to the text of Genesis and Dante's Medieval context to argue that the sins of the cities of the plain did not consist in homosexuality but in a form of idolatry.¹⁸ With this in mind, she argues that 'Dante's sodomites were worshippers of themselves, preferring their own human immortality and fame to eternal and heavenly life'.¹⁹

Brunetto may well have indulged in both 'sins', but what makes his character uncomfortably close to Dante's own is his particular concern with his literary afterlife. The Pilgrim says that Brunetto taught him 'come l'uom s'eterna' [how man makes himself eternal] (85) and Brunetto's parting words are: 'Sieti raccomandato il mio Tesoro, | nel qual io vivo ancora, e più non chaggio' ['My Treasury – may that commend itself. | In that, I still live on. I ask no more.'](119-20). The 'Tesoro' is *Li livres dou Tresor*, which was Brunetto Latini's major work. Eugene Vance points out that in Dante's time there was

¹⁶ The parallel between these episodes is encouraged from a narrative perspective as well as a thematic one: in both Dante must lean down to speak with the sinner, while Virgil remains in the background. For Barolini's reading of Oderisi-Brunetto, see *Undivine Comedy* pp. 136-37.

¹⁷ For a useful review see Deborah Contrada, 'Brunetto's Sin: Ten Years of Criticism (1977-1986)', *Dante: Summa Medioevalis*, 1995, 192-207.

¹⁸ 'Dante, the Yahwist, and the Sins of Sodom', *Italian Culture* 4 (1983), 11-23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 12.

nothing inherently sinful about wanting to be read, and moreover, the text was considered as a ‘supplement to the vocal word’. He proves this by quoting Thomas Aquinas: ‘the use of writing was necessary so that [man] might manifest his conceptions to those who are distant according to place and to those who will come in future time.’²⁰ In other words, the very point of writing is to make one’s thoughts available to readers distant in space and time. Thus, according to Aquinas’s definition, every writer – vainglorious or humble – is concerned with posterity. The *Commedia* follows this logic by presenting itself as written for some future audience, as made explicit in the final canto of the *Commedia*: ‘e fa la lingua mia tanto possente, | ch’una favilla sol de la tua gloria | possa lasciare a la futura gente’ [‘and make my tongue sufficient in its powers | that it may leave at least one telling spark | of all your glory to a future race.’] (70-72). It is giving one’s earthly afterlife priority over the salvation of one’s soul that is sinful.

Critical readings of the encounter with Brunetto are split as to whether the episode is ironic, or filled with pathos and sincere admiration for the old master.²¹ It is important therefore to recall the vision of him presented at the end of *Inferno* XV:

Poi si rivolse, e parve di coloro
che corrono a Verona il drappo verde
per la campagna; e parve di costoro
quelli che vince, non colui che perde.

Around he swung. To me he seemed like one
who, in the fields around Verona, runs
for that fine prize, a length of green festoon.
He seemed to be the one that wins, not loses.
(121-24)

Brunetto is in Hell, and he looks like a winner. This is the ambiguity that is present in all those infernal characters who embody ideas that are attractive to the Poet. As John Freccero has observed, when interpreting a character of the *Inferno* one can constantly swing back and forth between a sympathetic reading, if one focuses on the character’s words, and a censorious reading, if one focuses on the sinner’s collocation.²² Furthermore,

[b]y the time that the descent is concluded, virtually every purely human value that one would care to affirm has been undermined. The master negation, however, is of Dante himself. Many of his encounters are with his own most cherished opinions [...].²³

²⁰ ‘The Differing Seed: Dante’s Brunetto Latini’ in *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 230-55 (pp. 234-35).

²¹ See for instance Massimo Verdicchio, ‘Re-Reading Brunetto Latini and *Inferno* XV’, *Quaderni d’italianistica* 21, 1 (2000), 61-81 (p. 67), and Antonio Carrannante, ‘Implicazioni dantesche: Brunetto Latini (*Inf.* XV), *L’Alighieri* 36, 5 (1995), 79-102 (p. 97).

²² Barolini associates the latter with theologized readings and calls it ‘the collocation fallacy’, *Undivine Comedy*, p. 15.

²³ *The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 107.

And one of Dante's 'cherished opinions' is that poetic glory remains of crucial importance even after death, even when one is barred from Heaven. This is the belief that lies behind *Inferno* IV.

Perhaps Oderisi's most direct reference to fame is in his dismissal of 'nominanza', which he says will fade like discoloured grass.²⁴ The same word appears only once more in the *Commedia*. It is used in *Inferno* IV, when Virgil explains to the Pilgrim the privileged position of the illustrious pagans, who live together in a castle in Limbo: 'L'onrata nominanza | che di lor suona sù ne la tua vita, | grazia acquista in ciel che s'li avanza' ['The honour of their name | rings clear for those, like you, who live above, | and here gains favour out of Heaven's grace.'] (76-78). The fate of the 'bella scola' (the 'fair school', as these pagan thinkers are collectively classified) contradicts the extract of Ecclesiastes, which, as is well established, constitutes a Biblical intertext for Oderisi's monologue. According to Ecclesiastes II, 16, 'there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.' The classical authors in the *Commedia*, however, do not die as fools; their great works have a direct impact on their eschatological fate. The fact that they are still read, and thus remembered, earns them favourable treatment. Unlike the other inhabitants of Dante's Limbo, the illustrious pagans have a source of light and they are given an amenable abode: a castle, surrounded by protective walls, a stream and vegetation.²⁵ Dante's *Inferno* therefore flouts both the Bible and Oderisi's statements.

As Barolini has noted, Brunetto's belief in a literary afterlife is eventually validated through the encounter with Cacciaguida (the Pilgrim's ancestor) in *Paradiso* through the coinage 'infuturarsi' ['to infuture oneself'] in which he echoes Brunetto's 'etternarsi' ['to eternalize oneself']. The *Paradiso* therefore ignores the Christian model of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, according to which believing in literary afterlife is merely a form of vanity.²⁶ Moreover, the Pilgrim himself recasts Brunetto's words when he tells Cacciaguida that while, on the one hand, he fears persecution from those he will criticise in his poem, on the other hand, if he chooses to flatter rather than tell the truth, he will not be read in the future: 's'io al vero son timido amico, | temo di perder viver tra coloro | che questo tempo chiameranno antico' ['if I prove a timid friend to truth | I shall, I fear, forego my life among | those souls who'll count as ancient our own time.'] (*Par.* XVII, 118-20). Dante's

²⁴ Cf "nominanza" in *Enciclopedia dantesca*.

²⁵ On the uniqueness of Dante's depiction of Limbo, see Amicalcare A. Iannucci's 'Dante's Limbo : At the Margins of Orthodoxy', in *Dante and the Unorthodox : The Aesthetics of Transgression* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), pp. 63-82.

²⁶ *Undivine Comedy*, p.140.

substantive use of the verb ‘viver’ [living] echoes Brunetto’s ‘nel qual io vivo ancora’ [in which I still live]. This parallel with the vainglorious sinner would have been avoided if the emphasis had been placed on the poem: ‘I fear that my work will not be read’. ‘Temo di perder viver’, however, clearly tells us that Dante, like Brunetto, believes that his work, provided it is worthy, will allow him to live on.

Cacciaguida’s response to the Pilgrim is, like Guinizelli and Adam’s words, in dialogue with Oderisi through semantic echoes:

tutta tua vision fa manifesta;
e lascia pur grattar dov’è la rognà.
Ché se la voce tua sarà molesta
nel primo gusto, vital nodrimento
lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta.
Questo tuo grido farà come vento,
che le più alte cime percuote;
e ciò non fa d’onor poco argomento.

make plain what in your vision you have seen,
and let them scratch wherever they may itch.
For if at first your voice tastes odious,
still it will offer, as digestion works,
life-giving nutriment to those who eat.
The words you shout will be like blasts of wind
that strike the very summit of the trees;
And this will bring no small degree of fame.
(*Par.* XVII, 128-35)

Cacciaguida repeats Oderisi’s three key nouns ‘voce’, ‘grido’ and ‘vento’, but gives them the opposite meaning.²⁷ Dante’s ‘voce’ [voice] will not be forgotten in time, on the contrary, in time it will turn into nourishment. The ‘grido’ [cry] is not a synonym for transient fame but for Dante’s powerful literary voice, and the ‘vento’ [wind], finally, does not wander randomly as the wind of Ecclesiastes I, 6, but is produced and directed by Dante.²⁸ In the *Commedia*, moreover, the word ‘onor’ [honour] is a semantic tag for the virtuous pagans of Limbo.

Cacciaguida’s instructions are part of an overall strategy that consists of having blessed souls tell the poet to write the *Commedia*, thus suggesting that Dante is not pursuing fame but only fulfilling his duty. He is not writing for himself, but ‘in pro del mondo che mal vive’ [‘to aid the world that lives all wrong’] (*Purg.* XXXII, 103). In such a context, not writing would have been the greater sin.²⁹ By defining himself a ‘scribe’ rather than a creator (*Purg.* XXIV, 52-54), Dante puts himself in the humble position of one serving God. The *Commedia* in this respect posits David ‘the humble psalmist’ (*Purg.* X, 65) as a model for Dante, as observed by Barolini in her 1984 work *Dante’s Poets* and recently further explored by Giuseppe Ledda.³⁰ Suggesting that he is divinely sanctioned

²⁷ ‘Cime’ also echoes Oderisi’s ‘cima’.

²⁸ Herbert Marks has also remarked that Cacciaguida ‘transfigures’ Oderisi’s speech. ‘Vox and Vanitas’, pp. 167-68.

²⁹ As has been suggested by Bruno Nardi in ‘Dante profeta’, *Dante e la cultura medievale* (Bari: Laterza, 1949), pp. 336-416 (p. 337).

³⁰ *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 275-77; ‘La danza e il canto dell’ “umile salmista”’: David nella *Commedia* di Dante’ in *La figure de David entre*

allows Dante to eschew charges of *hubris*. Indeed, the *contrapasso* of the terrace of pride (the penitent souls have to carry boulders on their backs) will eventually be turned on its head in *Paradiso* through the metaphor that Dante uses to describe the effort involved in composing his poem: ‘Ma chi pensasse il ponderoso tema | e l’omero mortal che se ne carca, | nol biasmerebbe se sott’esso trema’ [‘Yet no one if they’ve gauged that weighty theme – | and seen what mortal shoulders bear the load – | would criticize such trembling backing-out.’] (*Par.* XXIII, 64-66). This tour de force breaks the mould established in *Purgatorio* of a proud life followed by the punishment of bearing a weight and looking down humbly in the afterlife. Dante, by describing his work of art as a humbling burden rather than a source of pride, implies that the act of writing a Christian poem is a form of penitence, which therefore ultimately allows him to look upwards, to God.

This virtuous picture of Dante, progressing from being a poet with earthly concerns to being a divinely sanctioned composer of a new ‘tëodia’ [God song] (*Par.* XXV, 73), is however not entirely convincing. Such a ‘theologized’ reading is too easily contradicted: Dante is no ‘humble psalmist’. Firstly, because he is an extremely proud character – indeed pride is the only sin to which the Pilgrim explicitly confesses (*Purg.* XIII, 136-38). Secondly, the *Commedia* is biographical in a way that the Psalms are not. The presence of Cacciaguida and Beatrice speaks volumes with regards to the extreme subjectivity of Dante’s depiction of Heaven. Dante is not only singing God, he is also singing his city, his ancestry and the woman he loved. No other penitent could adopt Dante’s verses as his or her own because they are passionately personal.³¹ Finally, the two occasions on which the Poet openly yearns for the laurel wreath are found in the *Paradiso*, which is in itself controversial. If Dante at this stage of his journey had truly converted himself into a *scriba Dei*, he would not express such worldly desires. Let us therefore conclude with a consideration of the occasions in which Dante invokes the crown of poetic glory.

The first reference is found in the opening canto of *Paradiso*: ‘l’amato alloro’ [the beloved laurel] (I, 15). This formulation is extremely powerful thanks to its internal rhyming, its position at the end of the line, and its rarity within the text: ‘alloro’ is only used here and ‘amato’ is not a frequent adjective.³² But it is the context of the second reference that is most striking. It lies at the heart of Dante’s final theological examination,

profane et sacré dans l’Europe des siècles XIVe-XVIe, ed. by E. Boillet and S. Cavicchioli (Geneva: Droz, 2013) (forthcoming).

³¹ Dante had already begun to make the poetic ‘I’ biographical in his *stilnovo* phase as has been noted by Carlo Giunta in *Versi a un destinatario: saggio sulla poesia italiana del Medioevo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), p. 390.

³² The only other use of ‘amato’ in the *Commedia* is in *Inferno* V, 103. The feminine form is used once in Virgil’s exposition of love (*Purg.* XVIII, 33) and the plural feminine form is used once in *Par.* XXIII, 1.

which will earn him the right to access the Empyrean. The devout Pilgrim has successfully defined faith, when the Narrator announces:

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 battesimo prenderò 'l cappello;

If ever it should happen that this sacred work,
to which both Earth and Heaven have set their hands,
(making me over many years grow gaunt)
might overcome the cruelty that locks me out
from where I slept, a lamb in that fine fold,
the enemy of wolves that war on it,
with altered fleece, with altered voice, I shall
return as poet, taking, at my fount
of baptism, the laurel for my crown.
(XXV, 1-9)

While the phrase 'Heaven and Earth' suggests that Dante is a *scriba Dei* by recognising a dual authorship, it is still Dante who is the poet; he is the one who has grown gaunt from the great effort of writing. Moreover, as Daniele Mattalia observes, Dante is audacious enough to say 'prenderò': 'he will "take" (he does not say receive), just as in *Par.*, I, 25-26, he will "crown himself" with the sacred laurel leaves!'³³

These opening verses are often cited because they are the only occasion in which Dante claims for himself the title of 'poeta'. It is however useful to read further in *Paradiso* XXV to the Pilgrim's definition of hope: "'Spene", diss'io, "è uno attender certo | de la gloria futura" ["Hope is sure expectation," I declared | "of glory that will come.]" (67-68). 'Gloria' is the first word of the *Paradiso*: 'La gloria di colui che tutto move' [Glory, from Him who moves all things that are'], and is here intended as the technical term for blessedness. But by opening the canto with a reference to literary recognition, Dante is also allowing the verses to resonate with the earthly meaning of the word 'gloria', as used in the phrase 'la gloria de la lingua' [poetic glory]. The phrase 'attender certo de la gloria futura' ['expectation of glory that will come'] can therefore be read both in its religious sense, that is, the awaiting of beatitude in Heaven, and in its literary sense, that is, the poet's conviction of his future success. The dual significance of the word 'gloria' here encapsulates the double-sided – and conflicted – nature of Dante's endeavor.³⁴

As we have seen in this article, Dante knows that vernacular language is perishable and that the Bible tells us that worldly renown is vain. But he still hopes to enjoy two kinds of glory and two kinds of immortality. The tension created by the character of Brunetto is

³³ 1960 commentary from Dartmouth Dante Project <<http://dante.dartmouth.edu>> [accessed 12/6/2013]. My translation.

³⁴ Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati find it useful to consider Wittgenstein's image of the 'Duck-Rabbit' when addressing the multi-stable nature of language in *Paradiso*. See 'Dante After Wittgenstein: "Aspetto", Language, and Subjectivity from *Convivio* to *Paradiso*', in *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by Sara Fortuna; Manuele Gragnolati; Jürgen Trabant, (London: Legenda, 2010), pp. 223-47 (p. 228).

the same as that created by the reckless Ulysses, who yearns to ‘divenir del mondo esperto | e de li vizi umani e del valore’ [‘understand how this world works, | and know of human vices, worth and valour’] (*Inf.* XXVI, 98-99). Both infernal characters share with the Poet a humanist desire at odds with Christian doctrine: Ulysses has a hubristic lust for knowledge and Brunetto is more concerned with his literary afterlife on earth than with the Christian hereafter.³⁵ To use a mathematical term, writing in praise of God and writing for personal recognition are asymptotes: these aims have the same shape (‘un attender certo de la gloria futura’), but they cannot converge. The desire for salvation and the desire for celebrity should not be considered complimentary: they exist in contradiction. It is therefore astounding that Dante chose to make this worldly desire so manifest in his great Christian poem.

Oderisi’s words come at the heart of the *Commedia* and sound an important warning to all those who believe that they can achieve eternal fame through their artistic talent. The *Commedia*, however, continuously defies this warning, from its opening cantos in which Virgil is presented as one ‘di cui la fama ancora nel mondo dura | e durerà quanto ‘l mondo lontana’ [‘whose fame endures undimmed throughout the world, | and shall endure as still that world moves onwards’] (*Inf.* II, 59-60), all the way to the *Paradiso*’s references to ‘coloro | che questo tempo chiameranno antico’ [‘those souls who’ll count as ancient our own time’] (*Par.* XVII, 119-20). This tension evades theologized readings, which would require a virtuous Dante, as much as it does secular readings such as our opening statement by Auerbach, which does not see anything problematic about writing in anticipation of earthly fame and beatitude in the hereafter. Dante’s double inclination is irresolvable. It shows us how aware he was, despite his Christian frame of reference, of the rich potential offered by literary afterlife. This awareness might account, too, for modern readers’ affinity with the Medieval poet: in our secular age, it is easier to believe in the afterlife pursued by Brunetto.

³⁵ For a reading of Ulysses and Brunetto as challenging heteronormativity, see Gary Cestaro’s ‘Is Ulysses Queer? The Subject of Greek Love in *Inferno* XV and XXVI’ in *Dante’s Plurilingualism*, pp. 179-92.