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DANTE'S *INFERNO* AS POETIC REVELATION OF PROPHETIC TRUTH

I

Dante's *Inferno* demands to be understood as the culmination of a series of visits to the underworld in ancient epic tradition. Dante's most direct precedent is Aeneas's journey to meet his father in Hades, as told by Virgil in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas's voyage is modeled in turn on Odysseus's encounter with shades of Hades in Book XI of the *Odyssey*. The epic quest in each of these models pivots, in various ways, on a visit to the world of the dead, a *discensus ad inferas*, as a climactic episode at its center. However, Dante makes this episode the general framework of the whole poem: from beginning to end, Dante's poem represents a voyage through the world beyond the grave. In this respect, Dante's *Inferno*, and indeed the whole *Divine Comedy*, is conceived primarily as an expansion of the ancient epic motif of the *katabasis* or "going down" of the protagonist to the underworld for a revelation of his destiny from beyond the threshold of death. Like Virgil, Dante interprets history prophetically, finding in it the essential pattern of things to come. But this projection now reaches to an eschatological future beyond history altogether—to an uncannily dynamic realization of eternity.

The other world that is visited by Dante asserts itself unequivocally as ultimate reality. It is not just some shadowy world of bloodless phantasms like the shades that approach Odysseus, nor is it vacuous and inane, as are Virgil's "houses void and empty realms of Dis" ("domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna," *Aeneid* VI.269). This "other" world shows up as even more vivid than the world of ordinary sense-perception by virtue of a strikingly realistic, indeed surrealistic imagery. Dante heightens the

Philosophy and Literature, © 2009, 33: 252–266

mythological topos of the visit to the underworld that he inherited from Virgil and Homer to a level where it represents the true essence of life on this earth transposed into a transcendent dimension. The world of the dead is not just one in a series of episodes befalling the protagonist but rather the final and definitive experience that reveals the true meaning of all possible experiences and thereby the meaning of the world as a whole. This is perhaps implicit and incipient in Homer and Virgil, since the journey to the underworld in each case encloses a revelation that illuminates the meaning of everything else and orients the protagonist's subsequent life in the world up to his death. But Dante's other world is more than the place for a miraculous glimpse into the true meaning of life: it is itself the *vera vita*, the "true life."

Of course, Virgil had interpreted the whole of Roman history through the optics of prophecy, but his prophetic history was directly disclosed only in privileged moments within his poem. Dante's entire poetic narrative transpires in an eschatological dimension of existence; it thereby aspires to reveal beyond the limits of history a full-blown vision of eternity—that is, history as projected into the eternal worlds that it prefigures. While at the level of content Dante expands the theme of a visit to the underworld into an entire poem of epic proportions, more deeply, at the level of genre and in terms of its mode, Dante's whole poem is prophetic in character. History and narrative become in themselves prophetic rather than only forming a background for prophecy and framing it.

The descent to the world of the dead—a symbol for the place of revelation of the meaning of life—is a thematic issue that runs as a thread through each of the epic works that have been mentioned so far. But in Dante it becomes the central axis of a poem that emerges in its entirety as religious revelation, and Dante greatly intensifies the self-conscious grasp of this function of poetry. His work represents an unprecedentedly powerful reflection on poetry as revelation in the mode of prophecy, for the customary literary means of poetic expression are now revealed in their intrinsically prophetic potency. From the *Aeneid* Dante could learn that prophecy reveals not so much fated facts as an order of significance that opens within and activates a dimension of human freedom. We can observe an allegorical dimension in the *Aeneid* in which the heroic actions of the past are spoken into the present—the moment of decision for Virgil's contemporaries in Augustan Rome. The poem challenges the Romans to realize a future prefigured by their heroic past, particularly in its hero, Aeneas.[1] This sort of implicit

interpellation mutates to an explicit form of address in Dante's poem, specifically in its addresses to its readers.

II

In general, prophetic discourse is never merely descriptive or predictive; it is always also *prescriptive*, and as such it is addressed to a public. The hearers or readers of prophecy are involved in a future that is revealed, yes, but revealed as *to be achieved* by their own efforts. Virgil's contemporaries, Augustus Caesar among them, who see along with Aeneas the revelation of the glory that is in store for Rome, are indirectly called upon to act worthily of their noble ancestors. Moving even beyond this, Dante writes the reader right into the text consciously and explicitly through his use of direct addresses.[2] The poem calls the reader to conversion as a consequence of its eschatological revelations. There is even—in marked contrast to his epic models—a hidden form of address to the audience from the very first line: "Nel mezzo del camin di *nostra* vita" ("In the middle of the way of *our* life").[3] The reader accompanies Dante on his journey through the afterlife, and in a certain sense everything that happens to him is to be realized by his readers in its pertinence to their *own* lives and in the *now* of their act of reading. It is their acts of interpretation of themselves, as they confront the interpretive challenges presented by the poem, that will be decisive for the readers' lives and even for their afterlives. Sin and salvation in Dante's afterlife stem from how one interprets oneself, and the reading of the poem can be crucial to determining the outcome of this drama and is in any case symptomatic of it.

Dante's prophetic discourse is different from Virgil's and from his other models, which are principally biblical, in crucial ways: he personalizes prophetic address, dramatizing his own role as first-person prophet-poet addressing himself directly to his reader. Dante's whole personal experience and history are now vehicles of the divine Word. This is not the direct speech of God as delivered through the biblical prophets, who function merely as his mouthpieces by intoning "Thus saith the Lord . . . ." Dante offers rather a personally mediated experience in which poetry, language, culture, and reflection all contribute and become overt mediators of a revelation of the divine. The first-person protagonist is the fulcrum for realizing the poem's truth in the present of each individual reader's personal experience. The address to the reader, with its injunction to interpret, extends the exercise in

self-reflection from the protagonist to the reader: both are engaged in a realization of textual meaning and religious or revealed truth by personal appropriation in terms of their own life and experience. This self-reflective, subjective locus of revelation owes perhaps as much to Augustine's unprecedentedly personal story in the *Confessions* as to the invention of history as revelation in Virgilian epic. Augustine had fore-grounded *reading* as the means and medium of divine revelation as an inner illumination within individual lives: Dante now addresses himself directly to the reader in a dramatic actualization of his poem's prophetic intentions.

III

Augustine forms a vital link from the ancient epic, as well as from the Bible, to Dante. The *Confessions*, too, situate themselves symbolically on the trajectory of a descent into the world of the dead. This happens expressly when Saint Augustine writes "ibam iam ad inferos" ("I was going to hell," V.9) to describe a spiritual death, a distancing and a "dying from" God. The *Confessions* adumbrate an existential descent into the depths of Augustine's own sinful self and into the abysmal heart of a fallen humanity as the necessary path to—and precondition for—his conversion. This existential descent into the self and its hell is dramatized by Dante on an epic scale.

Dante is combining classical tradition with Christianity, and Augustine is a major precedent, even though Augustine, for his part, rejected pagan literature and specifically the *Aeneid*. Contrary to Augustine, Dante places his emphasis on synthesis rather than disjunction between classical literary tradition and Christian revelation. Augustine saw Virgil's fictions as a temptation. Pagan literature distracted him from the serious challenges of his own life. The classics and the rhetorical institutions within which they are studied are of this world and, at least at first, an impediment to gaining the next.[4] Given this imposing precedent, it is striking that Dante, in a bold symbolic gesture, makes the pagan author Virgil his guide to salvation specifically in a religious sense. More broadly, he brings biblical and pagan traditions together in his unique creation of a poetic-prophetic vision. He thereby reverses the prejudices expressed by Augustine and other Church fathers that inhibited full appreciation of pagan literature, the *auctores*, in the course of a Christian education. Building on revivals of classical literature in humanistic schools such as that of Chartres from the twelfth century on,[5] Dante envisages a full

integration of all human learning in a Christian-prophetic perspective. And yet, despite this radical revaluation of pagan letters, Dante remains profoundly Augustinian.

An Augustinian itinerary is mapped out from the opening of the *Inferno* in the "prologue scene." This scene stages Dante's failed attempt to scale the mountain mantled by the light of the sun, a natural symbol of divinity, as Dante explains elsewhere (*Convivio* III.xii.7). This hill can be associated, at least symbolically, with the mountain of Purgatory, at the summit of which lies the Earthly Paradise, the original place of human happiness on earth. But Dante's attempt to directly ascend the slope proves abortive, and he is constrained to take a detour that leads him all the way to the bottom of the *Inferno*. This recalls Augustine's descriptions of his experience of *intellectual* conversion, spurred by his reading of certain books of Platonist philosophy, to the certainty of the Truth and of his attempt to ascend directly to the Light in Book VII of the *Confessions*, even while his will remained unable to follow suit and conform itself to the Good until his complete *moral* conversion described at the climax of Book VIII.

Augustine's account is itself modeled on Paul's drama of the divided will in Romans 7. At the literal level of the narrative, Dante is in fact impeded in his ascent by the three beasts that emerge to deter him from making progress. The leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf can perhaps be decoded as allegories of envy, pride, and greed (see *Inferno* VI.74), or lust, pride, and avarice, the devastating threesome rehearsed again in XV.68: it is such moral corruptions inhering in Dante's will that prevent him from reaching happiness, even after his intellect has been able clearly to see the way to it. These figures exemplify some of the more traditional, didactic features of Dante's poem, even as it distinguishes itself from the medieval context of didactic, allegorical literature by the power of its new idiom of realistic representation.

Dante, like Augustine, then, seems first to have experienced a conversion of the intellect on a Neo-Platonic model. This would correspond to the period of his philosophical work, the *Convivio*, abandoned unfinished, perhaps in view of the new Christian-moral perspective inaugurated by the *Commedia*. Dante's flirtation with philosophy as a substitute for authentic Christian salvation would be allegorically encoded into his attempt at the beginning of the *Inferno* to ascend the hill cloaked in the light of the sun, the planet that "leads men straight along every road" ("pianeta / che mena dritto altrui per ogne calle," I.17–18). In fact, Virgil, for whom, as a pagan, direct philosophical ascent to enlight-

enment would be possible and indeed the right way to go, asks Dante why he is returning to so much suffering rather than simply ascending the delightful mountain ("dilettoso monte") that is the source of all joy (I.76–78). He proposes an alternative route only after he sees Dante weeping ("poi che lagrimar mi vide," I.92) and evidently understands something about his moral condition. We learn that Dante had been climbing in a spiral because his "left foot was always the lower" ("'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso," I.30). This line has been ingeniously elucidated as meaning that the protagonist's will drags along behind his intellect in the process of conversion. John Freccero shows this by drawing on exegetical literature by the church fathers, including Ambrose (from whom Augustine learned to interpret Scripture spiritually), concerning the two feet—and wings—of the soul.[6]

The Platonic dialogues are predicated on the principle that virtue is knowledge, but Dante discovers, like Augustine and Paul before him, that knowing the truth, seeing the light, is not enough. Indeed in the biblical view, virtue and moral reform are not matters purely of mind. As Paul avowed, "The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I practice" (Romans 7:19). Likewise for Augustine, intellectual illumination by Platonic metaphysics may give certainty about God and his sovereignty, but it does not give him the power to realize the good that he now *would* do. Dante similarly finds in *Inferno* I that he is unable to ascend the mountain, even though he sees the light. He is forced to take "another way" ("altro viaggio," I.91), through all the hazards of Hell, that is, through excruciating moral self-examination—a facing up to sin always also in himself—as he views his own woefully fallen humanity mirrored in others at each step of his way through the *Inferno*. Read in this perspective, the prologue to Dante's great poem is about the necessity, beyond merely intellectual illumination, of a more thorough-going moral and existential conversion, such as Augustine undergoes finally in Book VIII of the *Confessions*.

IV

Dante lived from 1265 to 1321 and wrote at the height of the Middle Ages, just after the high-water mark of the Scholastic synthesis, in which the metaphysics of Aristotle were wedded to Christian theology by philosopher-theologians like Albert the Great (1206–1280) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in the doctrine of God as Being (*esse*). It was, moreover, a great age of encyclopedias. Somewhat in the image of Aquinas's

Summa Theologiae, Dante's *Commedia* represents a grand synthesis of the knowledge available to his age of culture. From early antiquity, starting with Homer, poetry generally served and was often considered as the original and comprehensive form of knowledge in general, and Dante revives this humanistic ideal and the claim it makes for poetry. Virgil and Beatrice, his guides, are also his teachers on a journey that is always fundamentally a gnoseological journey traversing the whole known world, past, present, and future as it could be conceived in Dante's times. The encyclopedic aims of the poem become conspicuous early on in Limbo (*Inferno* IV), with its extensive, immensely learned catalogue of philosophers and poets, among other great and famous personages.

Homer was the *summa* of Greek culture and the encyclopedia of all important knowledge in his world. He was imitated by Virgil, with his more self-consciously "epic" ambitions. Saint Augustine, too, turned his *Confessions* into a kind of encyclopedia from Book X on. At this point in the aftermath of his conversion story, he begins interrogating Memory as the place where all knowledge is stored. He turns from a personal story of individual redemption to the interpretation of universal philosophical truths and to exegesis of the story of Creation. The Bible, of course, for Dante and his Christian medieval culture, is the book of books and the book of the universe. It contains all that can be known and all that can be learned from any other book preeminently as divinely revealed knowledge. Dante's work, in its encyclopedic scope, is an imitation and "dissemination" of the Bible.

This means also that the *Divine Comedy* is a didactic poem in the broadest and deepest sense. Its lesson is the most important one humanly conceivable. "Mark well my words," it insists, like the bard in Blake's *Milton*, for "they are of your eternal salvation." Indeed, the literal subject of the poem is the afterlife, which consists of souls in Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven that are all revealed in their eternal destinies. The knowledge in question is not just a knowledge of facts and culture but, much more vitally, a knowledge by revelation of the ultimate ends of life and history. In this regard, the poem fits into and in fact brings to culmination the tradition of poetry as religious revelation that can be traced from Homer and the Bible.

V

The basic interpretive technique used by Dante to perform this revelation of ultimate, saving truth is a species of allegory known as "figural-

ism."[7] This is the key to the poem's working as a prophetic revelation. Dante represents the souls in the form of bodies and as performing actions that epitomize the sort of action they freely chose to engage in on earth. Their earthly lives in this way serve as "figures" of what each soul has become in eternity. The souls represented as already in the state in which they will remain for eternity are the "fulfillment" of the condition that their earthly lives have prefigured. By this device, the eternal state of souls after death is made poetically palpable and graphic through realistic representation of the fateful moment and decisive act of their mortal existence: this moment figuratively represents their eternal destiny.

In its figural dimension, Dante's poem is modeled on the Exodus. If this were not already evident from the text itself (especially in *Purgatory* II.43, which cites Psalm 113: *In exitu Isräel de Aegypto*), we would know it from Dante's discussions of theological allegory in his theoretical writings, particularly his treatise *Convivio* II.i, along with the Letter to Can Grande (*Epistle* XIII.7–8). I have elsewhere dealt with Exodus as a model for the prophetic interpretation of history in the Bible.[8] In Dante's prophetic poem, the Exodus becomes a general paradigm of escape from the enslavement of sin followed by an arduous, quasi-Ulyssean (Latin for "Odyssean") journey to the promised land of Christian salvation.

This itinerary to hard-won freedom starts from a key passage in the prologue, in which Dante begins his ascent of the Mountain. He has just figured himself as a survivor narrowly escaped from shipwreck:

> poi ch'èi posato un poco il corpo lasso,
> ripresi via per la piaggia diserta,
> sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso.
>
> (*Inferno* I.28–30)

> (When I had rested a little my tired body,
> I began again the way along the deserted slope
> so that my left foot was always the lower one.)

As Charles Singleton pointed out, the immediately preceding verses referred to Dante's mind ("animo") as looking back like a shipwreck over the perilous pass that he has managed to survive (I.22–27), but it is Dante's *body* that rises up out of the simile of the shipwreck in order to embark on the journey to the other world.[9] By bringing the body of the protagonist that is going to make the journey out of a poetic simile in this way, Dante's poem produces, out of its power of poetic figuration, an

incarnate revelation. In this bodily resurrection of the poem's protagonist from a symbolic shipwreck, poetic language and metaphor themselves produce an embodiment that is destined to become the bearer of the revelation of the poem.

Redemption, like revelation, is emphatically incarnate in the perspective developed by the poem, and this is one of the deeply distinguishing features of the whole Christian understanding of revelation. That is one reason why poetic representation has such a prominent place, along with the plastic arts, in transmitting and achieving revelation throughout Christian cultural history. Poetry, with its figurative, pictorial powers and its sensuous sounds, is peculiarly apt to give an incarnate rendition of the intellectual contents of language. The language of poetry can even be defined as "sense made sensuous."[10] Following Dante, often poetry in Western tradition, from Metaphysicals to Romantics, has exhibited a propensity to interpret itself as, in effect, incarnation of the divine Word in the form of some higher Truth or Meaning. Of course, the very strength of this proclivity inherent in poetic language generates many attempts precisely to interrupt and counter it, especially among modern poets starting, for example, from Baudelaire and Rimbaud.

VI

Poetic prophecy, as a superior sort of vision, as inspired insight of the kind to which poets since Homer have continually laid claim, is deliberately raised by Dante to a new level of seriousness and self-consciousness. Beyond the conventional gesture of the invocation of the Muses, Dante, assuming an authoritative attitude and prophetic tone, directly addresses himself to a reader in the name of Truth. A distinctive new accent in Dante's recreation of the office of prophecy within the parameters of poetry and specifically of epic narrative is the literal truth claim he makes. I have already suggested the extent to which prophecy can be interlocked with history, so that in the case of the Bible we are able to define prophecy as the interpretation of history from the point of view of divine revelation. Even Homer purported to relate the true history of the Trojan War and its aftermath. He claimed to do so assisted by the Muses, to whom all history was present. But Dante claims to have been there historically himself and to have seen with his own eyes all that he relates of the eternal worlds. At the outset of his journey, he invokes the Muses *together with* his own mind or memory, to the end that all he has experienced be made manifest:

O muse, o alto ingegno or m'aiutate;
o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.

(II.4–6)

(O muses, o high genius help me now;
o memory that wrote what I saw,
here your nobility will show itself.)

The basis for prophecy here is direct personal witness—"what I saw" ("ciò ch'io vidi," II.8)—which regrounds the conventional appeal to the Muses for help in representing what is beyond normal, mortal vision. This appeal takes an especially telling turn when Dante invokes his own "memory" to show its nobility by manifesting what it *wrote*. Writing is thereby recognized not only as an external medium but rather as intrinsically constitutive of the experience. To the extent that the experience as recorded in memory is already "written," the literary medium by which Dante poetically conveys his vision is brought into—and becomes constitutive of—the making of the visionary experience itself.

Such reflective concentration on his poetic art and its capability of modulating into prophecy, in order thereby to reveal a higher reality, characterizes Dante's work throughout its whole extent. The theoretical reflection on writing, poetry, and prophecy as all co-implicated in his act of literary creation and religious vision marks Dante's poem with a distinctive character that earns it its preeminent place in the history of prophetic poetry, as well as of literature generally. In Dante, the question of poetry as prophecy becomes a central and conscious preoccupation. Poetry is not simply assumed as the necessary vehicle for a message of purportedly divine import. Nor are prophetic strains and utterances occasionally interjected into what otherwise would remain merely an artful display of human talents in poetic composition. In Dante, poetry becomes programmatically prophetic. It is prophetic *as* poetry—not as if something extra were being added to it—but rather the poetic act itself is discovered in all its intrinsically prophetic potential.

VII

In this respect—as a peculiarly intense and self-conscious instance of the communication of poetic tradition as prophetic or as religious revelation—Dante's *Divine Comedy* marks the culmination of these developments that we have been tracing through Western humanities

tradition. Poetry becomes prophecy in Dante's *chef d'oeuvre* more programmatically and explicitly than ever before. Poetry as prophecy, and finally as apocalyptic, coincides with the injunction to remake one's history through interpretation in the present: it issues in an urgent call to conversion. This is a call to conversion of religious faith, of course, but first and foremost of interpretive outlook. Interpretation is the decisive locus of revelation of the meaning of all life, of individual as well as collective life as deposited in tradition. The origination of tradition and its truth, and so also of history and its meanings, in the act of interpretation is realized by Dante more intensely and deliberately than by any of his predecessors. Although he is for the most part only bringing out the far-reaching implications of their works, he also engages in original explorations of what prophecy as interpretation in poetic form (epic, dramatic, and lyric) ultimately means.

Dante, moreover, represents the terminus, or at least the high-water mark, of Western tradition in its development toward a unified vision of reality—the total vision of apocalypse, wherein all things are revealed in their final truth. Such unity of vision has presumably become impossible in the modern world. It can be held to have been realized as never before or since by Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. The modern Italian poet Eugenio Montale remarks that this unity was still possible in Dante's age, after which the historical conditions for such a total synthesis of reality never existed again.[11] Dante is an icon of this total, unitary outlook, and the visionary mode of his poem expresses its claim of access to ultimate truth. Yet he also shows how even apocalyptic revelation relies on the dynamics of interpretation—the interested appropriation of meaning by individuals in historically specific circumstances. To this extent, individual interpretation and even imaginative appropriation are recognized as key to unlocking the secret truth and the whole truth of human life. This truth, as it is revealed in Holy Scripture and in texts, including Dante's own, which mediate and renew Scriptural vision, is always in need of further interpretation in order to remain actual and operative in the lives and hearts of human individuals.

Prophecy in the narrower sense of foretelling the future is also wrought to a new height of intensity by Dante. Virgil had placed a grand vision of the Roman future—that is, future to Aeneas but past to Virgil himself—at the center of his epic. Dante, grasping the centrality of historical prophecy to the epic enterprise, makes the expectation of immanent redemption of the historical world the guiding motif of his whole poem. According to his prophecy, the *veltro* ("greyhound") will

come not devouring land and wealth, but nourished by wisdom, love, and virtue ("sapienza, amore e virtute," II.104) from a land "between Feltro and Feltro." The *felt* suggests, among other overtones, medieval writing implements, specifically a felt blotter, and thereby hints possibly that the poem itself, as a prophetic revelation, may play the messianic role in the anticipated event of salvation.[12] This cryptic code for identifying (or rather failing to unambiguously identify) the Redeemer belongs to the allegorical nature of Dante's prophecy. It is not explicit but rather disguised in figures whose true meaning calls for interpretation, perhaps unending interpretation. Indeed scholarship on the *veltro* prophecy has never been able to satisfactorily resolve the question of the identity of the expected savior.

This anticipation of an apparently historical savior modulates frequently into an apocalyptic expectation of the renewal of the world, for which Dante mobilizes the classical myth of the return of the Golden Age. The poem lays claim to being nothing short of an eschatological vision.[13] That this prophetic revelation of a final End should be realized in and through the experience of reading poetry expresses, and in crucial ways inaugurates, the sense of self-reflexiveness as an ultimate revelation characteristic of modern consciousness. I have elsewhere sounded its premises being laid down, in fateful ways, by Augustine.[14] With Augustine, however, writerly self-consciousness still understood itself as a reflex of Transcendence, of the infinite consciousness of God. And Dante likewise writes before the modern severing of consciousness from its ground in the Divine Mind—although with a new, startlingly modern sense of discovery of the human as participating in divine revelation concretely in the historical sphere. Traditional apocalyptic signs serve as conspicuous marks of this awakening to new consciousness: Dante's passage into Hell occurs between his swooning at the end of Canto III with terror in the face of an earthquake, with a flash of vermillion light (130–36), and his being re-awakened from "deep sleep" by the sound of thunder at the beginning of Canto IV ("Ruppemi l'alto sonno ne la testa / un greve truono . . .").

The work's prophetic, eschatological meaning is closely bound up also with a political vision grounded in the contemporary political scene. The two great powers, Emperor and Pope, are potentially rivals for hegemony in medieval Europe. Dante's own city, Florence, is riven asunder by two parties, the Guelfs, supporting the Papacy, and the Ghibbelines, allied with the Emperor. Dante himself is exiled as a result of internecine party politics, leaving the city in 1301, never to return. He

writes his poem in exile and in relentless protest against the injustice that reigns in his own city and in the world at large. At the same time, he prophetically envisages an apocalyptic event that will restore justice upon earth.

The political vicissitudes of Dante's life and times are brought to focus first in cantos VI and X of the *Inferno* in relation to fellow Florentines, Ciacco and Farinata degli Uberti, with their prophecies of Dante's exile. The events alluded to are in fact important background for reading Dante's poem. In 1260, the Emperor's party, the Ghibbelines, had gained control of Florence through their victory at Montaperti near Siena. But in 1266, a year after Dante's birth, the defeat of imperial forces at Benevento, near Naples, by Charles of Anjou, brother of the French King, Louis IX, encouraged by pope Clement IV, ushered in an era of Guelf power in Florence in which Dante himself participated.

Dante was a Guelf, even though his ideology was to develop along imperialist lines. Indeed with the demise of the Ghibbelines, the Guelfs split into white and black guelfs, reproducing the ideological divide between supporters of empire and papacy. The death of the imperial heir-apparent, Manfredi, at Benevento, together with the demise finally in 1268 of the grandson of Frederick the Great, Conradino, captured at Tagliacozzo and beheaded at Naples, sealed the fate of this imperial dynasty and therewith of the Holy Roman Empire, condemned to be ineffectual in Italy throughout Dante's lifetime. The defunct status of the Empire was proved again by the unsuccessful, indeed fatal descent into Italy in 1310 of Henry VII of Luxembourg. This claimant to the imperial throne was enthusiastically welcomed by the poet with an impassioned call to arms (*Epistola* VII), but in vain; by 1313, he was dead.

Considered politically, Dante's visionary apocalypses projecting a restoration of unified rule to the world under the aegis of the Holy Roman Empire appear thus in hindsight to have been unrealistic. As apocalyptic vision, however, they represent an ideal of world government as the only effective guarantor of peace and justice on earth among inevitably fractious human beings. And as such, Dante's vision remains compelling as a possible ideal for all ages, not least our own age of globalization in the midst of fragmentation into often warring separatist ethnic and religious identities.[15]

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1. I work this interpretation out in some detail in "Virgil, History, and Prophecy," *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (2005): 73–88.

2. The significance of this is sifted in chap. 1: "The Address to the Reader" of my book, *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), as well as in my article, "Dante's Address to the Reader and its Ontological Significance," *Modern Language Notes* 109 (1994): 117–27.

3. Dante's Italian text is quoted from *La Divina Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. G. Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67) with my own translations. Any informed interpretation of Dante cannot help but be influenced in more ways than it knows by the vast commentary tradition assembled, for example, in the Dartmouth Dante Project (http://dante.dartmouth.edu). The present treatment largely bypasses the philological archeology determining exactly where what idea may first have come from in order to refract certain aspects of Dante's vision into a philosophical outlook that belongs to our own time. Commentaries referring to current scholarship on each canto of the *Inferno* can be consulted in *Lectura Dantis. Inferno: A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*, eds. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, Charles Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

4. For a more nuanced assessment, see Peter S. Hawkins, "Divide and Conquer: Augustine in the *Comedia*," *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

5. See, for example, Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La théologie dans le douzième siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1957) and René Querido, *The Golden Age of Chartres: The Teachings of a Mystery School and the Eternal Feminine* (New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1987).

6. John Freccero, "The Firm Foot on a Journey Without a Guide," collected as chap. 2 of his *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), ed. Rachel Jacoff. For Freccero's Augustinian framing of the poem, see further "The Prologue Scene," chap. 1 in the same volume.

7. See especially Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Neue Dante-studien* (Istanbul, 1944), trans. R. Manheim in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, Six Essays* (New York: Meridian, 1959). For a concise elucidation of figural representation, see my entry "Figuralism" in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (New York-London: Garland, 2000), pp. 376–79.

8. "The Exodus Epic: Universalization of History Through Ritual," in *Universality and History: The Foundations of Core*, ed. Don Thompson, Darrel Colson, and J. Scott Lee (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2002), pp. 59–70.

9. Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies I: Elements of Structure* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

10. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics: Closing Statement," in *Style in Language,* ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).

11. See Eugenio Montale, "Discorso su Dante" (1965) in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi danteschi*, vol. 2 (Florence: Sansoni, 1966).

12. Cf. Claudia Rattazzi Papka, "'Tra feltro e feltro': Dante's Cartaceous Apocalypse," *Dante Studies* CVII (1999): 35–44.

13. The most comprehensive treatment remains Nicolò Mineo, *Profetismo e apocalittica in Dante: Strutture e temi proefetico-apocalittici in Dante dalla* Vita Nuova *alla* Divina Commedia (Catania: University of Catania [Facoltà di lettere e filosofia], 1968).

14. William Franke, "Augustine's *Confessions* and the Transcendental Ground of Consciousness: or How Literary Narrative Becomes Prophetic Revelation" (forthcoming).

15. Such proposals are argued for on the basis of a different background, that of medieval Islamic philosophy, by Gregory Stone, *Dante's Pluralism and the Islamic Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).