

Canto XXXIII

Beatrice's Prophecy, Matelda's Name, and the Pilgrim's Renewal

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Closely connected with the allegorical scene described at the end of Canto XXXII, and thus consequently also with Cantos XXX-XXXI, the Canto begins with the seven ladies' sad proclamation of the chariot's destruction (XXXIII, 1-6). It then continues with Beatrice's prediction of an ultimate redemption (XXXIII, 7-102), and it concludes with Dante the Pilgrim's total transformation and renewal through the waters of the second Edenic river, Eunoè (XXXIII, 103-45). Furthermore, in the last part of Canto XXXIII Beatrice instructs the lady whom Dante the Pilgrim encountered upon entering the Earthly Paradise to complete the role assigned to her and reveals her name, Matelda. Beatrice's proclamation of the future coming of a redeemer is prophetic and apocalyptic. By contrast, the Pilgrim's individual transformation takes place at a specific moment of his journey, shortly after Beatrice's prophecy. His renewal marks the conclusion of his purgatorial experience, linking it directly with his imminent ascent to Paradise. Beatrice's prophecy confirms, on the one hand, the evil forces' presence in human history and their constant attack on God's creation and work of Redemption, and, on the other, God's ultimate victory, as is shortly afterward evidenced by the Pilgrim's total transformation (XXXIII, 91-99).

Immediately after the seven ladies' proclamation at the canto's beginning,¹ Beatrice's prophecy of a future redemption brings to completion the sacred drama enacted for the sake of Dante the Pilgrim. Preceded by the appearance of Matelda, who describes the structure of the Earthly Paradise (*Purg.* XXVIII), the allegorical pageantry (*Purg.* XXIX) culminates in the manifestation of Beatrice, who calls Dante by name and rebukes him harshly (*Purg.* XXX). Becoming fully aware of his past transgressions and verbally acknowledging them, Dante the Pilgrim is purified of his past failings through the waters of the first Edenic river, Letè, which deletes even the memory of his past sins (*Purg.* XXXI). Thus purified, he witnesses the unraveling of the past and future history of humankind and the Church, represented, respectively, by the tree and the chariot (*Purg.*

¹ Appearing as part of the pageantry along the right and left sides of the chariot in two groups of three and four (*Purg.* XXIX, 121-32), the seven ladies represent the three theological (Faith, Hope, and Charity) and the four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance). All seven play a major role in the Pilgrim's transformation (*Purg.* XXXI, 103-16; 127-38; XXXII, 8-9) and remain with Beatrice even after the pageantry returns to heaven (XXXII, 37-39).

XXXII).² The conclusion of this personal and historical drama occurs in the last canto of the second *cantica* with Beatrice's prophecy and Dante's inner renewal.

Canto XXXIII dramatically opens with the alternate chanting of Psalm 78 by the two groups of the seven ladies (1-3), who thus comment on the sad vicissitudes of the Church symbolically reenacted in front of the Pilgrim (*Purg.* XXXII, 106-60).³ Applied to the Church's past history and present condition as it symbolically unfolded in front of Dante the Pilgrim, the Psalm proclaims the profanation of God's Temple, i.e., the Church, by the hands of God's enemies (vv. 1-5). The Psalm then invokes divine mercy on behalf of God's people (vv. 6-10a), concluding with an imprecation against their enemies (vv. 10b-12) and with a renewed statement of the people's steadfastness in praising God (v. 13). Tears accompany the seven ladies' psalmody (vv. 1-3), which is followed intently by Beatrice, who, in her outward countenance of sorrow, resembles Mary standing at the foot of the cross (vv. 4-6). The Church's destruction and Christ's death are, therefore, the backdrop against which the Canto's beginning is set.

After the ladies have concluded their song and become silent, Beatrice's outward aspect quickly changes into a fiery color, because of her rage caused by the Church's corruption but also her desire for its renewal.⁴ Consequently, Beatrice, appropriating the prophetic words Christ pronounced shortly before his death and resurrection (John 16:16) and addressing the seven ladies, announces her disappearance after a short while and her new appearance after another short while.⁵ Biblical commentators interpret these words of Christ from John's Gospel as a prophecy of his imminent death and resurrection. In the biblical story, Christ's words remained obscure to his apostles even after Christ, who understood their desire to question him, did not answer their questions directly but went on to encourage them to keep faith in him (John 16:16-33). In fact,

² On the transformations of the chariot at the end of *Purg.* XXXII, see Pertile.

³ The Canto's opening in Latin is a quotation of a biblical text, which constitutes the only biblical beginning in the second *cantica* and, indeed, in the whole *Comedy* (but see also *Inf.* XXXIV, 1 and *Par.* VII, 1-3). This Psalm is numbered 78 in the Septuagint and Vulgate and 79 in the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 78 was written at a time when Jerusalem was in ruins and the Temple was profaned. In the Church liturgy, this Psalm is recited at matins of Friday and during times of war; it also constitutes the prayer of the just, primarily martyrs (*La Sainte Bible* 321n, ed. Pirot).

⁴ In changing the color of her face, Beatrice anticipates the discoloring of St. Peter's face as he readies to proclaim his papal seat to be empty (*Par.* XXVII, 19-21).

⁵ Speaking though Christ's words, Beatrice most likely announces not a specific event — the papal seat's transfer to Avignon and its return to Rome shortly afterward, as some critics suggest — but rather the Church's moral decadence and the firm conviction of its renewal. Beatrice's words, therefore, are echoed in St. Peter's proclamation of his seat being empty (*Par.* XXVII, 19-27) and of an imminent divine intervention (*Par.* XXVII, 40-66, especially 61-63).

both biblical texts — Psalm 78 and John 16 — are rather indeterminate, while the Gospel passage, which is shrouded in mystery, is understood fully by the apostles only after Christ's death, resurrection, and the Holy Spirit's descent (John 16:13). Consequently, the critics' attempt to give a precise historical meaning to the two Dantean appropriations of the Bible (XXXIII, 1; 10-12) cannot but fail in seeking to uncover their inherent mysteriousness. Unquestionably, the two biblical texts are employed as a commentary on the sad vicissitudes of the Church, symbolically represented by the chariot in the last part of *Purg.* XXXII, and also as a statement of the Church's future transformation consequent upon a divine intervention.

The mysteriousness hovering over the beginning of the Canto is further emphasized by the ritualistic procession that Beatrice initiates immediately after she first speaks (XXXIII, 15-17). The pageantry's procession described in Cantos XXIX-XXXI moved first from east to west (XXIX, 10-12) and then from west to east (XXXII, 15-17). By contrast, here the text offers no clues as to the direction of Beatrice's brief ambling, the arguably symbolic meaning of her nine steps (XXXIII, 16-17), or the arrangement of the procession, in which Beatrice has the seven ladies precede her and Dante, while Matelda and Statius follow her.⁶ The nine-step procession, nevertheless, creates a ritualistic and formal backdrop to the following scene, during which Beatrice, addressing Dante standing in front of her, prophesies. The brief verbal exchange between Beatrice and the Pilgrim (XXXIII, 19-29) — she inviting her disciple to inquire, and he proclaiming her full knowledge of his needs — further enhances Beatrice's prophecy immediately afterward (XXXIII, 30-78).

After urging her disciple to free himself from all fear and shame and ask freely and clearly (XXXIII, 30-32), Beatrice makes an announcement preparatory to her prophecy:

“Sappi che 'l vaso che 'l serpente ruppe,
fu e non è; ma chi n'ha colpa, creda
che vendetta di Dio non teme suppe.”
 (“Know that the vessel which the serpent broke
was and is not; but he whose fault it is
may rest assured — God's vengeance fears no hindrance.”)
(XXXIII, 30-32)

Referring to the chariot, which symbolizes the Church, and which was first broken by the dragon, then transformed into a monster, and finally dragged into the forest by the giant (XXXII, 130-60), Beatrice forcefully states that the

⁶ Statius is the only soul in Purgatory who completes his purification (*Purg.* XX, 124-51) when Dante the Pilgrim ascends the sacred mountain. Statius also joins the Pilgrim in his purification by means of the two Edenic rivers.

Church was but no longer is. Thus, in a powerful condemnation of the present condition of the Church, she anticipates St. Peter's proclamation that his papal seat on earth is presently vacant (*Par.* XXVII, 22-30).⁷ Nevertheless, God's punitive justice — Beatrice adds — will prevail (XXXIII, 35-36), as St. Peter will also proclaim in heaven (*Par.* XXVII, 61-63). Continuing speaking authoritatively, she adds that, just as the Holy See will not remain vacant indefinitely, so the Empire (symbolically represented by the eagle) will not always be without an heir (XXXIII, 37-39):

“Non sarà tutto tempo senza reda
l'aquila che lasciò le penne al carro,
per che divenne mostro e poscia preda;”
 (“The eagle that has left its plumes within
the chariot, which then became a monster
and then a prey, will not forever be
without an heir;”)

(XXXIII, 37-39)

Thus, after condemning the corrupt condition of the Church and the vacancy at the Emperor's seat, Beatrice makes her prophecy:

“ch'io veggio certamente, e però il narro,
a darne tempo già stelle propinque,
secure d'ogn' intoppo e d'ogne sbarro,
nel quale un cinquecento diece e cinque,
messo di Dio, anciderà la fuia
con quel gigante che con lei delinque.”
 (“ for I can plainly see,
and thus I tell it: stars already close
at hand, which can't be blocked or checked, will bring
a time in which, dispatched by God, a Five
Hundred and Ten and Five will slay the whore
together with the giant who sins with her.”)

⁷ The Bible at times employs the image of a vase (in Latin, *vas*) to describe either the privileged or the fallen condition of a creature. Accordingly, Paul is called “*vas electionis*” (“a chosen vessel,” Acts 9:15), the derelict “*vas perditum*” (“a lost vase,” Psalm 30:13), and the fool's heart a “*vas confractum*” (“a broken vessel,” Ecclesiastes 21:17), a metaphoric expression echoed in Dante's line. (In *Purg.* XXXII, 129 the Church is called “*navicella*” ‘a little boat,’ that is, arguably, a vase.) The Dantean expression “*fu e non è*” is, according to virtually all commentators, patterned after Revelation 17:8: “*Bestia, quam vidisti, fuit et non est*” ‘The beast, which you saw, was but no longer is’ (cf. also Rev. 17:11).

(Purg. XXXIII, 40-45)

Like all the saints in heaven, who see the future in God, Beatrice is also empowered to know things to come with certainty. Thus she is now ready to announce the future with assured knowledge.⁸ Her prophecy is nevertheless shrouded in mystery, according to the visionary and apocalyptic style characteristic of the vicissitudes of the Church described at the end of the previous Canto.⁹

Countless readings have been proposed for Beatrice's enigma: the *cinque cento diece e cinque*, the Five Hundred and Ten and Five, in Roman numerals *DXV*, and thus, slightly anagrammatized, *DVX* or *dux*, leader, in Latin. Virtually all attempts to identify this divinely sent messenger can be grouped around three major readings: 1) The *DVX* is a religious leader (the so-called Guelph position): Christ, a Pope (*Domini Christi Vicarius*), another religious leader, or, for some, Dante himself (*Dante Christi Vertagus* [= *Veltro*, the hound of *Inf.* I, 101]); 2) the *DVX* is a secular leader (the Ghibelline position): Henry VII, Can Grande della Scala, Ugucione della Faggiola, or another secular leader, who will help the Church return to its original mission; 3) finally, the *cinquecento diece e cinque* does not symbolize a person but a year or an epoch: the year 1315, which marks the 515th anniversary of Charlemagne's crowning as emperor in Rome; or a

⁸ The etymological root of the Italian *narro* (< Lat. *narro*, -as) — **gno* (*The American Heritage Dictionary*) — entails knowledge, power (the English *can*), communication by the oral or written word, and implicitly the ability to call someone by name. Beatrice, in fact, is the one who names herself (*Inf.* II, 70; *Purg.* XXX, 73) and others (*Purg.* XXX, 55; XXXIII, 119, for which see below).

⁹ Dante's style imitates the enigmatic indication of a person through numbers as exemplified in a biblical passage often quoted: "Qui habet intellectum, computet numerum bestiae. Numerus enim hominis est: et numerus eius sexcenti sexaginta sex" 'Let any one who understands calculate the number of the beast. In fact the number of the man is six-hundred sixty-six' [variant: 616] (Revelation 13:18). In both Greek and Latin, according to gematry, each letter of the alphabet has a numeric value, which produces the following readings: 666 = Caesar-Nero (according to the letters' value in Hebrew); 616 = Caesar-Christ (according to the letters' value in Greek) (*La Sainte Bible* . . . *de Jérusalem* 1631n. a; also *La Sainte Bible*, ed. Pirot, vol. 12:635n).

renewed age, according to the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore;¹⁰ or another indeterminate epoch.¹¹

The impossibility of finding a clear solution of this *crux* does not thwart the understanding of the nucleus of Beatrice's prophecy, which is clear: Someone sent by God will slay the whore and the giant, who, as Dante saw at the end of *Purg.* XXXII, profaned and enslaved the chariot, that is, the Church. In brief, Beatrice predicts a time when the Church, through an intermediary sent by God, will be able to overcome all corrupting forces and thus return to its original purity. The vagueness of Beatrice's language not only fits its visionary and apocalyptic mode; it also protects the Dantean text from ever failing to hit its mark, whatever it might be, while still emphasizing its main aim; namely, the Church's regeneration through a divine intervention.

Although Beatrice is aware that her prophecy is obscure, and consequently Dante's intellect is unable to understand her words (XXXIII, 46-48), she predicts that future events will solve the "enigma forte" ("this obstinate enigma" [XXXIII, 50]). She then urges Dante to take note of what he hears and to make it known to all those "who live the life that is a race to death" (XXXII, 52-54): a proclamation of the mission earlier entrusted to Dante by Beatrice herself in *Purg.* XXXII, 103-05 and later reiterated by Cacciaguida in *Par.* XVII, 124-42.¹² Beatrice further enjoins Dante to bear in mind how the tree, which is holy to God and grows tall toward heaven in a manner inverse to that of earthly trees, was twice despoiled: an offense which she views like a blasphemy to God (XXXIII, 55-78). Finally, aware once again that her words exceed Dante's present capacity of understanding, Beatrice urges him to keep her speaking "se non scritto, almen dipinto" 'if not written, at least drawn' within himself (XXXIII, 64-78).

¹⁰ The Calabrese monk Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135-1202), a biblical commentator and a philosopher of history, was highly influential in the later Middle Ages. He argued that, after the age of the Father (Old Testament) and of the Son (New Testament until about 1260), a new age was to begin, that of the Holy Spirit, to be characterized by love, perfection, and freedom. Dante places Joachim in the heaven of the Sun, among the theologians, and has St. Bonaventure proclaim him to be endowed with prophetic spirit (*Par.*XII, 140-41).

¹¹ For a summary description of all these readings see *Enciclopedia dantesca*; further bibliography can be found in *La divina commedia*, ed. Mazzoni; for a reading of the *Cinque cento diece e cinque* as a figure of the cross, and thus of Christ, see Mastrobuono; on the *DVX* as Christ see Kaske. Further proposals, variations of previous readings, keep appearing (Dozon 593-95).

¹² Commentators point out the biblical echo in Beatrice's words: Revelation 1:11: "Quod vides, scribe in libro" ("What you see, write in the book"); also Rev. 1:19; 21:5. Dante's mission to recount what he hears and sees is reiterated also by St. Peter, who arguably announces a secular savior of the Church (*Par.* XXVII, 61-63).

Overwhelmed by the words he has just heard and desirous to please Beatrice, Dante immediately answers that her words are as firmly etched in his mind as a seal is impressed in the wax (XXXIII, 79-81). And yet, he cannot but express his dismay at her words' height, which leaves his understanding all the more behind as it struggles to comprehend them (XXXIII, 82-84). Beatrice's rejoinder further confounds her interlocutor: his failure to understand her words proves the insufficiency of the doctrine he has pursued and of the distance of the human ways from the divine ways (XXXIII, 85-90).¹³ Commenting on Dante's forgetfulness of having ever strayed away from her (XXXIII, 91-93), she adds smilingly (*Purg.* XXXIII, 94-99) that his oblivion is a further proof of having gone awry and a confirmation that he has just drunk from the waters of the river Letè (*Purg.* XXXIII, 91-96). She concludes by saying that from that moment onward her words will be as clear as it befits his limited understanding (XXXIII, 100-02).

The second part of *Purgatorio* XXXIII (vv. 103-45: less than one third of the Canto) leads up to the culmination of the whole purgatorial journey, that is, the Pilgrim's total transformation. Once again the reader sees at work some of the most salient elements and most important characters of *Purgatorio*: Beatrice, who once again appears in her function as a nomenclator and as such calls Matelda by name;¹⁴ Matelda, who fulfills her assigned role by taking the Pilgrim and Statius to the river Eunoè; Statius, who, a converted pagan and a redeemed Christian, holds the promise of salvation, purification, and final glorification for all believers; the river Eunoè, which brings about Dante's final renewal; and finally the arboreal metaphors, through which the Poet portrays the Pilgrim's new condition.

Lines 103-05 indicate the time of day — noon, with its fullness of light — around which Beatrice's prophecy has just taken place and Dante is about to

¹³ Some critics (in the past more so than recently) have taken such words as *scola* (XXXIII, 85) and *dottrina* (XXXIII, 86), which Beatrice disparages, to refer to the supremacy of the Pope over the Emperor, rather than to the Pilgrim's love for the *presenti cose* ("present things"), as we read in the Pilgrim's confession of guilt in *Purg.* XXXI, 34-36.

¹⁴ In the Bible God names Himself and also names the first creature, Adam. Named by God, Adam names all living creatures and Eve. In the *Comedy*, Beatrice names herself (*Purg.* XXX, 73), as she had previously done in front of Virgil (*Inf.* II, 70); she also names Dante, the first and only such occurrence in the entire poem (*Purg.* XXX, 55; Cervigni, "Beatrice's Act of Naming"), and finally also Matelda. Beatrice's analogy with Christ — an analogy she herself suggests by speaking through Christ's own words (XXXIII, 10-12) — authorizes her to perform here in the Earthly Paradise the task of universal nomenclator. These brief considerations may help us understand why Matelda cannot name herself when she first appears in *Purg.* XXVIII and why she is called by her name by Beatrice only after the latter has called Dante by name and in close conjunction with Matelda's function in the Earthly Paradise.

complete his inner transformation, thus becoming ready to ascend to heaven with Beatrice. The same time of day, with a reference to the sun's position, is once again indicated in *Paradise* I, 43-48, just before the heavenly ascent begins. The Pilgrim, therefore, who has begun the first phase of his journey, his descent into Hell, toward dusk (*Inf.* II, 1-3), now completes his purification and renewal, and will shortly ascend into heaven, when the sun shines at its brightest. In fact, according to what we read in the *Convivio*, "No object of sense in the whole universe is more worthy of becoming the symbol of God than the sun" (*CV* 3:12.7), which in the poem time and again symbolizes divine guidance (*Purg.* XIII, 16-21; 22:61). Accordingly, Dante the Pilgrim enters the Earthly Paradise early in the morning (XXVIII, 3), at about the same time when Adam was created in Eden (*Par.* XXVI, 139-42). The Pilgrim also completes his purification and readies to ascend toward heaven at the approximate time when Adam was expelled from Eden (*Par.* XXVI, 141-42). Thus the Pilgrim's ascent is patterned after that of Christ who, according to Dante, died at noon (*Inf.* XXI, 112-14; *Convivio* 4:23.10-11) and, according to some ancient beliefs (Guéranger, *Paschal Time*, vol. 3:152), also ascended into heaven at noon.

Shortly after Beatrice's words, the seven ladies stop at the edge of the forest, in front of a spring from which a stream issues forth that immediately afterward divides into two rivers (XXXIII, 106-14).¹⁵ Having finally learned how to inquire, Dante asks, addressing Beatrice as "light and glory of the human race," what water it is that flows from one source and soon afterward parts into two rivers (XXXIII, 115-17).¹⁶ Calling her by name, Beatrice defers the answer to Matelda, (XXXIII, 118-19), who is here called for the first and only time and who answers to have already instructed Dante about the Earthly Paradise and thus about the two rivers' function (XXXIII, 120-23). Excusing Dante's oblivion, Beatrice suggests that the Pilgrim's forgetfulness might have been caused by some greater care overwhelming his memory.

In calling almost nonchalantly the "fair lady" by name, Matelda, here for the first and only time, Beatrice has created an arguably insolvable crux. The critics' inability of identifying Matelda with any historical person and her name's mysteriousness, however, should not foil the reader's proper

¹⁵ Most Trecento and Quattrocento commentaries propose that the spring from which the two Dantean rivers of the Earthly Paradise originate, symbolize God or divine grace (Buti 2:822-23; Lana 284; Benvenuto 4:179; Landino; etc.), as the text itself suggests (*Purg.* XXVIII, 121-26).

¹⁶ The rivers of the Dantean Eden originate from one source, in full accord with the biblical text, which says: "One river sprang forth" (Gen. 2:10). The difference in the number of rivers (four in the Bible, and two in Dante) springing from that one source can be explained by a different exegesis of the biblical text; namely, that the division into four rivers took place outside the Earthly Paradise, as Lombardi, Andreoli, and then Nardi argued, in agreement with some Fathers and biblical exegetes (Cervigni, "The Eunoè" 61-63).

understanding of her function, which the Pilgrim has come to know and experience since he first caught a glimpse of her (*Purg.* XXVIII, 40). Matelda's function, in fact, becomes totally clear to Dante the Pilgrim and the reader when she finally carries out her last task aimed at purifying Dante and Statius, in accordance with Beatrice's urging:

“Ma vedi Eunoè che là diriva:
menalo ad esso, e come tu se' usa,
la tramortita sua virtù ravniva.”
 (“But see Eunoè as it flows from there:
lead him to it and, as you're used to doing,
revive the power that is faint in him.”)

(XXXIII, 127-29)

Matelda's usual and principal task, therefore, is to take the souls through the river Leté, as she does for the Pilgrim, but arguably also for Statius (*Purg.* XXXI, 91-96), and then to lead the souls to the river Eunoè, as she does for both wayfarers (*Purg.* XXXIII, 127-35). In addressing her, Beatrice states that Matelda performs this twofold but inseparable (*Purg.* XXVIII, 131-32) task not for a limited time but rather *habitually* (“as you're used to doing,” 33:128), and thus, arguably, for as long as Mount Purgatory has been accessible to the souls after Christ's Redemption. If one interprets Beatrice's words “come tu se' usa” (‘as you are used to doing’) according to this suggestion, any attempt to identify Matelda with such historical figures as Matilda of Canossa (1046-1115) or the German nuns Mathilde of Hackenborn or Mathilde of Magdeburg must be shelved.

If Matelda has been performing her twofold task since the time of Christ's Redemption, she is by necessity the soul who first ascended Mount Purgatory and first drank from the waters of the two Edenic rivers. Arguably, therefore, the first soul ever to be purified now carries out for Dante and Statius the task she was assigned to perform for all the souls who climb Mount Purgatory and reach the Earthly Paradise. According to this suggestion, therefore, Matelda has a name because Dante the Poet does not present her as a symbol but rather as a real person. Her historical identity remains nevertheless shrouded in mystery so as not to deflect the readers' attention from what she stands for in the poem's Earthly Paradise. In all she does and says since the Pilgrim first sees her (*Purg.* XXVIII), she evinces the essential characteristics of both active and contemplative life, which are necessary for the soul's salvation. She thus represents the virtues of Leah and Rachel, as well as Martha and Mary, according to the Fathers' interpretation of the two Old Testament and New Testament figures and Dante's reading (*Purg.* XXVII, 94-108; *Convivio* 4:17.10). Since Matelda has attained Mount Purgatory after Christ's Redemption, she cannot portray prelapsarian innocence, which was lost once

and for all by Adam and Eve (*Purg.* XXVIII, 94-96; 142; XXXII, 31-32; *Par.* XXVI, 139-42). Rather, she personifies regained innocence; namely, the innocence that, after being lost, can only be reacquired through Christ according to a measure that far exceeds the original innocence lost forever by humankind's primogenitors (Rom. 5:18-21).¹⁷

As the purgatorial drama quickly comes to a close, for the last time in this *cantica* Dante the poet addresses the reader:

S'io avessi, lettor, più lungo spazio
da scrivere, i' cantere' in parte
lo dolce ber che mai non m'avria sazio;
ma perché piene son tutte le carte
ordite a questa cantica seconda,
non mi lascia più lo fren de l'arte.

(If reader, I had ampler space in which
to write, I'd sing — though incompletely — that
sweet draught for which my thirst was limitless;
but since all the pages pre-disposed
for this, the second canticle, are full,
the curb of art will not let me continue.)

(XXXIII, 136-41)

In this *cantica* the reader is first addressed directly in *Purg.* VIII, 19-21, when Dante the Poet challenges him to comprehend the truth by piercing through the story's veil. Here, through the rhetorical figure of *praeteritio* (or passing over), Dante the Poet emphasizes the transforming power of the river's water by avowing the impossibility of describing its sweetness, namely, the river's supernatural and transforming effects.¹⁸ At the same time, by attributing his

¹⁷ The countless readings of the figure of Matelda are well documented in the entry by Fiorenzo Forti in the *Enciclopedia dantesca*. Accordingly, Matelda has been seen as an historical figure: 1) Matilda of Canossa; 2) the German nun Mathilde of Hackenborn or Mathilde of Magdeburg; 3) Mathilde, wife of Henry I; 4) Dante's wife Gemma Donati; 5) Dante's mother. Matelda has also been viewed as a literary figure: 1) one of the young ladies of the *Vita nova*; 2) the *domna gentile* of the *Vita nova* and/or the *Convivio*; 3) Monna Vanna from the *Vita nova*; 4) Leah of the Old Testament; 5) Mary Magdalene; etc. Matelda has also been seen as a symbol of the original justice, human happiness before the fall, sanctifying grace, active life, contemplative life, active and contemplative life, the Wisdom of the Old Testament, the New Eve, divine knowledge, the Church, etc. Matelda has also been seen as a guide and teacher, following Virgil and leading to Beatrice.

¹⁸ The semantic area representing the notion of sweetness is amply exemplified in the *Comedy*, Dante's works, and *dolce stil nuovo* poetry. In the hymn devoted to the name of Jesus on this feast in the liturgy of the Church, his name, and the

failure to a material and artistic cause (space limitation and art's constraint, respectively), Dante the Poet implicitly proclaims having fully discharged the mission Beatrice had entrusted to the Pilgrim; namely, of announcing Beatrice's words to the living (XXXIII, 52-54; 76-78).

Having thus carried out through his poetry — no matter how limited — his mission as a prophet, Dante the Poet can finally describe the newly achieved transformation of the Pilgrim:

Io ritornai da la santissima onda
rifatto sì come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire a le stelle.
(From that most holy wave I now returned
to Beatrice; remade, as new trees are
renewed when they bring forth new boughs, I was
pure and prepared to climb unto the stars.)
(XXXIII, 142-45)

A wholly Dantean creation, the river Eunoè completes the transformation of the first Edenic river, Letè, just as Matelda has explained (XXVIII, 127-29). Accordingly, after the Lithian waters have deleted the memory of all past sins, Eunoè fulfills the soul's renewal by bringing back to memory all good deeds, reviving the soul's faint *virtù* (XXXIII, 129), and thus recreating the creature anew. Thus remade, the Pilgrim's soul is likened to new trees being renewed after a harsh winter with the coming of spring (XXXIII, 142-45).

The two rivers' function can be best understood through some theological considerations. Theology attributes to the sacrament of Penance simultaneous effects enacted upon the penitent's soul: namely, the destruction of sin, the infusion of grace, and the revival of the soul's virtues and merits. Dante's poetry renders the sacrament's concomitant effects by means of two poetically distinct but closely interrelated moments: the first river deletes the soul's sinfulness, while the second brings back to life the good that the soul previously owned and later lost because of sin. The two rivers' effects upon the soul are ultimately likened to a new creation; namely, the death of the old creature consequent upon the birth of the new creature.

Since Eunoè returns to the soul the memory of the lost good, the text implies that the soul has previously lost that good: namely, all the good deeds and virtues previously practiced before turning away from God. The Bible describes such a loss by means of a metaphor. When the creatures forget God by

memory and love of it are said to cause sweetness. Sweetness also characterizes mystical experiences, as the writings of Angela of Foligno, Dante's contemporary, demonstrate ("Indice," *dulce, dulcedo, dulcor*).

sinning, God forgets them and their past good deeds and virtues, which thus become, as it were, dead (Ezek. 33:13). Furthermore, by forgetting God, the creatures are also condemned not only to oblivion but also to death (Ezek. 18:24). By contrast, when the creatures repent and do penance for their sins, God will forget the sinners' past injustices (Ezek. 18:21-23). Dante renders poetically this biblical and theological notion by means of the ritual enacted by the souls through the river Letè, which causes them to forget their sinfulness, just as God forgets their injustices when they repent. When the souls repent, however, what happens to the past good deeds and virtues that became dead when they sinned? Because of God's mercy, all the good deeds and virtues lost through sin are brought back to life when the soul drinks from the waters of the second Edenic river, Eunoè. In brief, what scholastic theology attributes to the sacrament of Penance — the simultaneous destruction of sin, infusion of grace, and revival of the soul's virtues and merits — Dante's *Purgatorio* renders in two poetically distinct but closely interrelated moments: Letè deletes the soul's sinfulness, while Eunoè gives back to the soul the good the soul had previously owned and then lost because of sin. Consequently, Dante the Pilgrim, after reenacting the twofold ritual of drinking from the two Edenic rivers, is made anew and becomes, as it were, a new creature.¹⁹

Dante's Earthly Paradise, therefore, not only restates poetically the presence of evil in the history of humankind, as evidenced in the apocalyptic scene described in the second half of *Purgatorio* XXXII and Beatrice's prophecy in Canto XXXIII. It also, and more importantly, proclaims that salvation, by overcoming evil, re-enacts an even greater form of creation (Rom. 5:18-21; Ricoeur, 227). Accordingly, the outcome of the battle that God, the just one, will carry out against evil at the end of time is already announced and guaranteed in the act of salvation, purification, and re-creation of Dante and Statius. Thus the meaning of the silent presence of Statius in the Earthly Paradise becomes clear. A mysteriously converted and saved pagan who has now completed his purgatorial journey and is ready to ascend to heaven, Statius is the silent guarantor that God's privilege bestowed upon the Pilgrim will remain efficacious (as far as God is concerned) in bringing about Dante's and humankind's eternal salvation.

Thus, on the mountaintop, after drinking the water of the river Letè, first (*Purg.* XXXI, 91-96), and of the river Eunoè, second, the Pilgrim is made anew, with a clear reference to God's creation of humankind. Dante's renewal constitutes a spiritual creation. He has in fact reacquired not just the original innocence, which Adam and Eve lost forever for themselves and all their descendants, but a renewed condition of grace, which exceeds humankind's original state, since he, like all Christians, attains it through Christ's Redemption

¹⁹ For an ample analysis of these themes from a biblical and theological perspective, see my essay entitled "The Eunoè or the Recovery of the Lost Good," especially 63-72.

(Rom. 5:12-21). Dante the Pilgrim has thus totally overcome the condition of neither death nor life into which he plunged in Hell's nethermost pit when he saw Lucifer (*Inf.* XXXIV, 22-27).²⁰

Dante the Poet renders the Pilgrim's transformation and re-creation through arboreal metaphors of springtime renewal. Thus, at the end of the *cantica* the employment of arboreal metaphors (vv. 143-44) fully explains and brings to closure the function of the reed with which the Pilgrim was girt at the beginning of his purgatorial journey (I, 94-95; 100-05; 133-36). As the symbol of humility, penance, and renewal, the reed, which is reborn as it is cut and girds the Pilgrim throughout the purgatorial ascent, fully discloses its spiritual meaning when his transformation is described through the metaphor of the renewed tree.²¹

Unquestionably, the character's sloughing off the old man and consequent renewal mark a true ending and signal a true beginning in the story, respectively. Thus, the last four lines of *Purgatorio* XXXIII constitute a closure, since the old man of *Inferno* I, 1-3 no longer exists and has been totally transformed and renewed. At the same time *Purgatorio*'s ending marks also a new commencement, since the Pilgrim, thus renewed and remade, is now ready to begin another journey. To narrate such a voyage of the character's renewed existence and extraordinary experience in the *Comedy*'s final *cantica*, *Paradise*, the poet is once again challenged to mold an equally transformed and renewed poetry (*Par.* I, 1-36).

²⁰ On the condition of the Pilgrim in front of Lucifer and on Lucifer's silence see my two essays on *Inferno* XXXIV.

²¹ The reed, which has a specific function in the Pilgrim's purgatorial journey (*Purg.* I, 94-105; 130-36) and then assumes a purely spiritual role at the end of the *cantica*, contrasts with the cord, which (unbeknownst to the reader) girds the Pilgrim throughout his descent of Upper and Middle Hell and then ambiguously disappears in the abyss of Malebolge (*Inf.* XVI, 106-36).

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