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Dante Is from Mars

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Dante, the pilgrim of the poet's *Comedy*, enters the heaven of Mars in Canto 14 of *Paradiso* and remains there until he ascends to the heaven of Jupiter midway through Canto 18. In these central cantos of *Paradiso*, the pilgrim meets his ancestor Cacciaguida, who reveals to him his fortune and his mission as poet. Dante's time in Mars is thus the most explicitly self-reflexive portion of his *Comedy*. Just what do these cantos teach us about who Dante is and who we are as readers of his *Comedy*?

As Dante enters the heaven of Mars, he hears a hymn sung by the warriors who first appear as lights streaming from the cross and whose singing holds him rapt. Dante states that, although he "could not tell what hymn it was, I knew it sang high praise since I heard " 'Rise' and 'Conquer,' but I was as one who hears but cannot seize the sense" (*Par.* 14.123-126). [Sanza intender inno./ Ben m'accors' io ch'elli era d'alte lode/ però ch'a me venia 'Resurgi' e 'Vinci'/ come a colui che non intende e ode]. The hymn is, as most commentators hold, a hymn to Christ celebrating his resurrection from the dead and his victory over sin. A mortal man still in the flesh would be incapable of grasping the rest of such a heavenly song.

There is, however, no known hymn to Christ that includes these two words. Moreover, the words can be understood either in the imperative or in the indicative second person singular. Without a context, either form is possible. The difference may matter little, however, for, just as the angel that Dante hears sing a beatitude on the terrace of Envy in *Purgatorio* 15, "Beati misericordes"; he adds in Italian the words, "Rejoice, you who conquer" (*Purg.* 15.39), [Godi, tu que vinci!], so the warriors in *Paradiso* may be singing to Dante himself and not to Christ, either urging him to "rise and conquer" or acclaiming him as you who "rise and conquer." The earlier beatitude's confirmation in the heaven of Mars would be, as Dante says he knew, "high praise" for Dante himself.

In light of what Dante states elsewhere about the art of speaking and writing, it is entirely possible and even plausible that the hymn might be addressed both to Christ and to Dante. That the same passage would hold two different and quite divergent meanings is in keeping with what in the *Convivio* Dante speaks of as *dissimulatio*, "a rhetorical figure [that is] highly praiseworthy and even necessary, namely when the words are addressed to one person and the meaning to another" (III.10.6).¹ As we shall see, Dante's account in the *Convivio* has a bearing on how one understands not only his present encounter with Cacciaguida but as well his *Comedy* as a whole.

As Dante advances in the heaven of Mars, he beholds in the canto that follows a fire like a star come forward from the cross to greet him in words more solemn because they are exclusively in Latin and they echo Virgil's account of Anchises' words to his son Aeneas in Elysium as well as St. Paul's brief account of an experience of rapture:

O sanguis meus, o superinfusa
gratia Dei, sicut tibi cui
bis unquam celi ianua recluse?² (Par. 15.28-30)

Dante reports that the light added to his first words “things that were too deep to meet my understanding” (*Par.* 15.38-39). [cose, ch’io non lo ‘ntesi, sì parlò profondo]. Yet soon enough he is able to hear what the light is saying once it descends to the level of his capacity to understand.

The first words he can grasp are a blessing to “you, three and one, that shows such favor to [my] seed” (*Par.* 15.47-48). The voice then declares that the one he calls his “son” has “at last appeased” his “long and happy hungering [he] drew from reading the great volume where both black and white are never changed” (*Par.* 15.49-52):

“Benedetto sia tu,” fu, “trino e uno,
che nel mio seme se’ tanto cortese!”
E segui: “Grato e lontano digiuno,
tratto leggendo del magno volume,
du’ non si muta mai bianco ne bruno”

The ancestor’s blessing is quite patently addressed to the Blessed Trinity, God in three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who has shown favor to Dante. It is likewise manifest that the “great volume” he has been reading is a metaphor for the immutable decrees of Divine Providence, a metaphor based on the Book of Life spoken of in Revelation 12.1.

As with the voices singing “ ‘resurgi’ e ‘vinci’ ” upon Dante’s entering Mars, his ancestor’s first intelligible words may hold another meaning. After Dante reports hearing things too deep for him to understand, the “three and one” his ancestor blesses and the “great volume” he has read may refer not only to the Trinity and to God’s Book of Life but also to Dante’s *Comedy* itself. Dante’s poem, one work divided into three canticles, is indeed “three and one,” and it shows favor to Dante in bringing him from the dark wood thus far to the heaven of Mars. The “great volume” his ancestor has been reading is the book that traces the journey up to this point, the book wherein the author has ordered everything aright, where “black and white are never changed.”

Dante’s as yet unnamed ancestor is thus a character within the very book he has been reading who plays his own part in his descendant’s “great volume . . . three and one.” Who is this person, and what does he have to tell Dante? At his ancestor’s invitation to Dante to “proclaim his will and longing” that he desires to satisfy, Dante makes three requests, each one briefly formulated and in turn answered at some length.

Dante first wishes to know the name of his ancestor. The answer occupies the remaining 61 lines of Canto 15, lines 88 to 148. The reply opens with a further greeting in which there are echoes of biblical passages associating Dante with no less a figure than Christ himself: “O you, my branch, in whom I took delight even awaiting you, I am your root” (*Par.* 15.88-89). [“O fronda mia in che io compiacemmi pur aspettando, io fui la tua radice”]. The greeting incorporates words first found in Isaiah 42.1 and spoken by the heavenly voice at the Baptism of Christ. Only much later, at line 135, does he answer Dante’s question. He is, he says, Dante’s great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida.

Why Dante chose to meet this particular ancestor of his, about whom so little is otherwise

known, may become clear from Dante's second request: to learn of his family's history and of Florence in earlier times. Cacciaguida's reply, which he gives "not in modern speech," occupies the greater part of Canto 16, from lines 34 to 154, and is delivered without interruption. After a convoluted account of the date of his birth couched in astronomical calculations (assumed to be A.D. 1091), Cacciaguida goes on to speak of his life as a warrior in the Crusades and to give a glowing account of the good old days of Florence by contrast with the bad days of Dante's own time. There is just enough time elapsed between the two kin to make the contrast stand out to good effect for Dante's purpose.

At the beginning of Canto 17, Beatrice encourages Dante to make known "the flame of [your] desire" (*Par.* 17.7-8). [la vampa/ del tuo disio]. Dante thereupon voices his third request: to know of his fortune in days to come. Cacciaguida, "hidden yet revealed" (*Par.* 17.36) [chiuso e parvente] replies "in clear and precise words" (*Par.* 17.34) [per chiare parole e con preciso] what Dante will undergo in the course of his exile from Florence, urging him to be "a party unto himself." Before Cacciaguida has finished telling of Dante's fortune, Dante interrupts his discourse to tell the reader of his *Comedy* that Cacciaguida "told things beyond belief even for those who will yet see them" (*Par.* 17.93-94). [e disse cose/ incredibili a quei che fier presente].

Dante then tells his forebear of his fear that, if he loses Florence, "the place most dear" [se loco m'è tolto più caro], he may "also lose the rest through what [my] poems say" (*Par.* 17.110-111). [io non perdessi li altri per miei carmi"]. Dante adds that he fears that "if [he] is a timid friend of truth," he may "lose [his] life among those who will call this present, ancient times" (*Par.* 17.118-120). [e s'io al vero son timido amico,/ temo de perder viver tra coloro/ che questtempo chiameranno antico].

In the remaining lines of Canto 17, Cacciaguida answers Dante's fear with precise instructions on what Dante ought to do in his poem and what effect it will have (*Par.* 17.130-135). In part, he tells him,

For if, at the first taste, your words molest,
they will, when they have been digested, end
as living nourishment. As does the wind,
so shall your outcry do – the wind that sends its roughest blows
against the highest peaks;
that is no little cause for claiming honor.³

Given what Cacciaguida has told Dante to do and what Dante does in his *Comedy*, the ancestor Dante chose to reveal his offspring's destiny is not only well chosen but is indeed rightly named, for he is literally the "guide of the hunt."

As I have argued elsewhere, the Greyhound that will come to hunt the she-wolf back into hell, according to Virgil's prophecy in *Inferno* 1.100-111, may be Dante's poem itself.⁴ Cacciaguida, who reveals to Dante his poetic mission at the heart of *Paradiso*, is the guide to that hunt that is accomplished within and by Dante's poem. He is as well a reader of the volume that is hunting down the she-wolf and thereby saving low-lying Italy.

In this poetic achievement may lie the true cause for Dante himself being hailed in the two words of the hymn he heard upon entering Mars, "'Resurgi' e 'Vinci'." Perhaps this is one of the "things beyond belief even for those who will yet see them" that Dante heard Cacciaguida

tell of.

Such a conception of himself and of his poem makes Dante appear bold. He himself hints at his boldness when he says, just after telling of the words he heard the warriors sing, “My words may seem presumptuous” (Par. 14.130). [Forse la mia parola par troppo osà] because, he says, he dared to hold the words he heard more dear than the smile of Beatrice. But, as we have seen, Dante’s true boldness goes further than the explanation he gives here.

I end by noting that the Italian addition to the beatitude the pilgrim hears in *Purgatorio* 15.39 – “Godi, tu que vinci!” – is an abridgement in the singular of what Jesus states in the Sermon on the Mount as the confirmation of all the beatitudes: “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great” (Matthew 5.11-12).

Christ’s blessing of the persecuted is absent from the beatitudes Dante hears on the terraces of *Purgatorio*. Though he will suffer exile from Florence, the poet of the *Comedy* will escape persecution of another, more profound kind. No one will speak ill of him, persecute him, or lie about him on account of Christ. Rather, Dante’s position as supreme Christian poet is recognized by many among his readers, “never perhaps . . . as it is today.”⁵

Notes

- 1 “E questa cotale figura in rettorica è molto laudabile, e anco necessaria, cioè quando le parole sono a una persona e la ’ntenzione è a un’altra” (184).
- 2 “O blood of mine – o the celestial grace/ bestowed beyond all measure – unto whom/ as unto you was Heaven’s gate twice opened?”
- 3 “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 più percuote;
e ciò non fa d’onor poco argomento.”
- 4 See Marc A. LePain, “ ‘Tra feltro e feltro’: Whence Dante’s Greyhound?”
- 5 Pope Benedict XV, *In Praeclara Summorum*, par. 1.

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