2002

*Tra Feltro e Feltro*: Whence Dante's Greyhound?

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**Recommended Citation**

One of the most persistent enigmas in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is the identity of the Greyhound or *veltro* who, according to Virgil’s prophecy in the opening canto, will become the savior of humbled Italy.¹ When it comes, the Greyhound will hunt the she-wolf, the “*bestia senza pace,*” that is the chief obstacle to Dante’s progress out of the dark wood:

She mates with many living souls and shall
Yet mate with many more, until the Greyhound
Arrives, inflicting painful death on her.
   That hound will never feed on land or pewter,
But find his fare in wisdom, love, and virtue;
   His place of birth shall be between two felts.
   He will restore low-lying Italy
For which the maid Camilla died of wounds,
And Nisus and Turnus, and Euryalus.
   And he will hunt that beast through every city
Until he thrusts her back again to Hell,
From which she was first sent above by envy.²

The passage holds a number of riddles for interpreters of Dante’s poem, not the least perplexing of which is Virgil’s assertion of the Greyhound’s origin at line 105: “*E sua nazion sarà tra feltro e feltro.*” As the longtime dean of American Dante scholars, Charles S. Singleton, observed, Dante “rendered Delphic obscurity doubly obscure” when he added the mysterious words “*tra feltro e feltro.*”³

To propose yet another interpretation of the *veltro’s nazion* may appear rash in light of the humbling admission of no less a student of Dante’s poem than Boccaccio, who openly confessed that he did not understand what the line meant and confined himself to reporting what others thought it might signify.⁴ If there are any good reasons for proposing a new interpretation, the most evident may be the
simple fact that no other reading of the passage has succeeded in winning universal or even broad support among Dante’s readers.

It will be useful to begin by reviewing the most prominent readings of *Inferno* 1.105. These fall into three broad categories, each of which has an ancient pedigree in Dante’s earliest commentators and has been the object of renewed attention in our own time.

The first sees “feltro e feltro” as a reference to geographical locations, names of places within Italy. Consequently, the Greyhound is seen as a historical personage. This reading has held such force as to be adopted in the 1921 edition of the *Comedy* published for the sixth centenary of Dante’s death, where the two initial F’s are printed in capitalized form. Dante’s son, Jacopo, is the first to report that the two places to which his father refers are Feltre and Montefeltro, located in Lombardy and the Romagna, respectively. A number of figures who were born between these two cities have been identified as the possible Greyhound, the most prominent being Congrande della Scala, Dante’s host and patron, whose birthplace was Verona. A variation of this geographical reading takes the two feltro’s to refer to one and the same place and the Greyhound’s rule to encompass the entire world, with its terminus identical to its starting point. In this case *nazion* is not the Greyhound’s place of birth, but the people or nation under his universal dominion.

A second category of readings takes *feltro* in its more literal reference to a fabric. These readings commonly insist on the modest character of felt as opposed to the finer cloths such as wool or silk and so take the Greyhound to be a figure of lowly birth or humble origins. This could be a man from the peasant classes or perhaps a member of a religious order professing poverty such as the Franciscans or Dominicans, or possibly a spiritual pope such as Benedict XI, the successor of Boniface VIII. Conversely, however, felt’s use in the making of precious covers, cushions, and carpets has led to the conjecture that the Greyhound issues from a noble lineage and fine place. Boccaccio records an interpretation, based on accounts of the Mongol custom of burying khans in a felt shroud, that sees the reign of the Greyhound extending from the death of his predecessor to his own death, that is, between one felt shroud and another. A more recent variation looks to the medieval process of electing communal magistrates by casting secret ballots placed in urns lined with felt. By transposing this local procedure to imperial elections, Dante would mean the Greyhound to be an emperor whose rule originates between the felts which line the urns used in the process of electing him.

A final category of readings takes the passage as meaning “*tra cielo e cielo,*” between heaven and heaven. This is the prevalent reading among ancient commentators, from Dante’s sons Jacopo and Pietro through Cristoforo Landino, Dante’s foremost Renaissance commentator. The reading is accounted for by felt’s being, like heaven, a solid substance all of one piece, and the Greyhound’s birth taking place under the influence of heavenly bodies. For one commentator, Benvenuto da Imola, the passage refers to the second coming of Christ. The most recent interpretation of the passage revives this early reading in developing the connection...
between felt and heaven to refer to the constellation Gemini, named for the Roman twins Castor and Pollux, who were frequently depicted wearing felt caps that symbolize liberty. Leonardo Olschki sees the Greyhound as a champion of liberty in Italy, and possibly Dante himself, who was born on May 25 under the sign of Gemini. Olschki is confident that the early commentators, particularly Dante’s sons, “would not have thought of explaining” the passage “as an allusion to heaven without a suggestion from the poet himself,” but he wishes Dante had been more explicit in satisfying the curiosity of his contemporaries as to the meaning of “tra feltro e feltro.”

My own proposal is rooted in Ernest L. Fortin’s suggestion, which I first heard him make in his course on Dante in the spring of 1979, that the Greyhound is a book and, more precisely, Dante’s Comedy itself. Fortin’s unprecedented interpretation is directly related to his identification of the object of the Greyhound’s hunt, the restless she-wolf, as an allegory of the papacy. The she-wolf is the traditional symbol of Rome, the city whose founder, Romulus, was nursed by a she-wolf and whose current rulers are the Roman pontiffs, several of whom Dante indeed hunts down in the Inferno, including his nemesis, Boniface VIII. The two other beasts in Dante’s way, the lion and the leopard, stand respectively for allies of the papacy: the French king, whose banner was adorned with the figure of the lion; and Dante’s native Florence, divided between Black and White Guelphs.

Fortin’s political reading of these allegories of the beasts is of a piece with his broader considerations of Dante’s larger achievement, the rediscovery of political philosophy and its adaptation to meet the needs of medieval “Christendom,” a theological-political phenomenon that had profoundly changed the circumstances of Dante’s forebears, be they philosophers such as Aristotle or poets such as Virgil. In several of his writings Fortin explicates Dante’s poem as a work of political philosophy rather than of Christian theology, the teaching of which is much more consonant with Dante’s contemporaneous treatise Monarchia than has ordinarily been assumed among scholars. The decided advantage of the Comedy is to set this teaching to poetry, which has ever been a more powerful means than treatises for moving men’s souls. Therein also lies the greater challenge for the thoughtful reader to understand Dante’s mode of writing.

In light of these broader considerations, how is one to understand the Greyhound as a book in view of its origin “tra feltro e feltro”? Fortin’s suggestion is eminently plausible when one considers the place of felt in the process of making books in the Middle Ages, a process which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been cited in previous interpretations of the Greyhound’s origin until very recently. For several centuries, beginning in the late thirteenth and into the early nineteenth, felt was employed in the manufacture of paper throughout Europe. A brief account of the development of papermaking in medieval Italy will reveal its relevance to the larger question of the origin of Dante’s Greyhound.

Paper was introduced into Europe through the Arab world from the Orient, where the Chinese had invented it early in the first millennium. At first paper was
made in Spain and imported into Italy, but gradually, beginning around 1210 in Genoa, an Italian papermaking industry developed. The first paper mills in central Italy were established at Fabriano in the latter half of the thirteenth century. Soon this city in the Marches of Ancona became a prominent center of a growing industry that provided paper for a variety of purposes in Italy and beyond in lands to the north. Although at first disparaged and even proscribed for use in official documents, paper gradually revolutionized the production of books by replacing parchment made from animal skins and prepared the way for the invention of printing in the fifteenth century.\(^\text{10}\)

The Italian manufacture of paper generally followed the process already used in Spain and derived from the Arabs and the Orient. Rags were gathered and boiled in vats to be reduced to a pasty substance, then placed in moulds to be shaped into sheets, and finally allowed to dry so that the sheets of paper could be written on. In some respects, however, the papermakers of Fabriano introduced innovations in the process previously observed elsewhere in Europe.\(^\text{11}\)

One innovation, of particular interest to our present consideration and never before employed even in the Orient, was a new way of removing the heavy water content from the newly molded sheets. The sheets were placed between pieces of felt, with sheets of paper and pieces of felt alternating until a stack had accumulated. Then, the sheets and felts were pressed so that the felts could absorb the greater part of the water content in the sheets. This part of the process was assigned to a workman called a coucheur, who then separated the partially dried sheets of paper from the pieces of felt and placed the sheets on racks for a final stage of drying.\(^\text{12}\)

Exactly when felt began to be used for the couching of paper remains unknown to us. According to Dard Hunter, the author of a classic account of handmade paper over the centuries, “it is probable that some sort of woven material was in use for the purpose as early as the thirteenth century.”\(^\text{13}\) Thus it is probable that the paper produced in the early Italian mills had its origin between sheets of felt, that is, “tra feltro e feltro.”

The import of this procedure for Virgil’s prophecy of the Greyhound’s coming begins to emerge when one considers the consequences of the rapid development of paper manufacturing in Italy from the late thirteenth century onward for the production and dissemination of books in the following century, when Dante was writing his *Comedy*. The Greyhound who will save Italy has its origin in the making of the paper on which a text is inscribed. More to the point, Italy’s savior might be the very book itself that Dante has composed rather than any historical individual who is yet to come, including Dante himself.

Such an origin and identity of the Greyhound is in accord with the vision of a book whose pages are bound together and which Dante beholds in the final canto of the entire poem, at *Paradiso* 33.85-90:
In its profundity I saw—ingathered
and bound by love into one single volume—
what, in the universe, seems separated, scattered:
substances, accidents, and dispositions
as if conjoined—in such a way that what
I tell is only rudimentary.

Dante’s vision is generally taken to be a vision of the triune God himself in
whom all the universe is contained. But a recent reading of the passage supports
an alternative interpretation by observing that the terms Dante employs in recounting
his vision to the reader reflect the precise technical vocabulary of the bookbinding
process of his time. Accordingly, what Dante beholds is also a vision of his
own book, the *Comedy*, its leaves or pages bound together in a volume.

More precisely, besides the bookbinding terms “s’*interna*” ("ingathered") and
“legato” ("bound"), the phrase “*si squaderna*,” used here of the division or
scattering of the book’s pages throughout the universe, also means to leaf through,
as a reader would a book he received *quaderno* by *quaderno*, notebook by note-
book. Likewise, the phrase “*quasi conflati insieme*” ("as if conjoined"), the
ostensible meaning of which here refers to divine inspiration as a wind blowing
together the disparate leaves of the book, is also a term used in the art of the
bookbinder, who makes the book by combining together its sections or *quaderni*.

Beyond the more readily understood levels of the vision—its reference to
God’s binding of the elements of the universe into a book and to Dante the pil-
grim’s comprehensive view of these elements after experiencing them singly in the
course of his journey—the passage holds additional references to the binding
together of the disparate *quaderni* of Dante’s poem into a single volume and to the
reader of Dante’s poem binding together the *quaderni* which he has received and
read one at a time. In the end the reader can at last grasp the unity of the poem
which would have escaped him until its very last page.¹⁴

This reading, proposed by John Ahern, develops to a further degree the self-
referential character of Dante’s poem previously noted by Philippe Sollers, who
observes that the *Comedy* is a text in the process of being written, and moreover the
first great book thought through and thoroughly fashioned by its author as a book.¹⁵
Ahern observes Dante’s innovation in this regard, since “none of Dante’s contempo-
raries or predecessors attributed symbolic and hermeneutical significance to the
physical activities that produced books.”¹⁶ We may now consider that the volume
Dante beholds in the poem’s final canto fittingly has its origin in the papermaking
process alluded to in the poem’s opening canto and how Dante’s book refers to
itself to an even greater degree than has hitherto been observed.

While the interpretation of Virgil’s prophecy I am proposing is consistent with
these references to medieval bookmaking elsewhere in the poem, it adds the further
note of seeing Dante’s book as the Greyhound itself which Virgil said would come
to save humbled Italy. Commentators have often considered, as Singleton put it,
that “as the prediction was still unfulfilled at the time of writing, Dante naturally
made it vague." Vagueness of this sort would be dispelled if the Greyhound’s origin is the first stage in the process of making Dante’s book. The Greyhound has indeed arrived and lies right beneath the reader’s eyes.

One cannot understand Dante’s book in this way without some difficulty, however. A problem arises when one considers the only passage in the poem, apart from Virgil’s prophecy, where the she-wolf is cursed and its conqueror anticipated. At *Purgatorio* 20.10-15 the poet himself exclaims:

May you be damned, o ancient wolf, whose power
can claim more prey than all the other beasts—
your hungering is deep and never-ending!
O heavens, through whose revolutions many
think things on earth are changed. when will he come—
the one whose works will drive that wolf away?

Without naming the Greyhound, Dante anxiously asks of heaven when he will come. His plea will be answered in the next canticle, in *Paradiso*, where Dante’s book first appears as a bound volume. According to Virgil’s prophecy, however, the Greyhound is to hunt the she-wolf through all the cities of Italy and back down into hell. Should not the Greyhound have already accomplished this deed in the first canticle, in *Inferno*?

Dante himself seems to provide a way to deal with this difficulty through his use of the word *volume* in the *Comedy*. It is significant that *volume* appears eight times in *Paradiso*, but only once in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. Its lone occurrence outside and prior to *Paradiso* is in the opening canto of the poem, at *Inferno* 1.82-84, in Dante’s praise of his master and author, Virgil, and his *volume*, the *Aeneid*, which has been the object of Dante’s devoted study:

O light and honor of all other poets,
may my long study and the intense love
that made me search your volume serve me now.

Thereafter the word *volume* disappears from the *Comedy*, to reappear only when Virgil himself has departed from the text and Dante has entered paradise. Virgil’s *volume* has given way to Dante’s *volume* as Dante’s book comes into being in the course of the poem. Our consideration of the word *volume* in *Paradiso* might most profitably begin with the eagle’s account of the volume which, when it is opened for all to read, will reveal the wicked deeds of unjust rulers. The eagle’s account begins at *Paradiso* 19.112-114 with a rhetorical question aimed at shaming the unjust rulers of Christendom before the non-Christian world, typified here by the Persians.
The reader, of course, was already aware of these injustices from his prior reading of Sordello’s invective about these same princes as they awaited entrance into Purgatory. The eagle’s catalogue, however, heightens the tenor of the justice that is being meted within and by the poem itself and confirms the status of Dante’s book as a volume in the manner of the biblical Book of Life. Only at this point in the poem do the significance and status of Dante’s book become somewhat clearer, well beyond Ante-Purgatorio and just fourteen cantos before the climactic vision of the fully bound volume.

We may find some guidance in understanding why Dante reserved these and other occurrences of the word volume to the last canticle of the poem when we consider that the figure of the eagle that discloses the contents of the open book is a reconfiguration of the heavenly lights one finds in the previous canto. In Paradiso 18 these heavenly lights inscribe across the sky, for Dante to behold and record, the opening words of the biblical book of Wisdom summoning the rulers of the earth to love justice: “Diligite justitiam qui judicatis terram.” Since the letters of this message were formed one a time, Dante was unable to make sense of the individual letters as they were appearing singly until the final letter M was written and the full sequence of the 35 letters was visible to him.

Dante’s experience as reader of the celestial writing is the same as the experience of the readers of his book, to whom the meaning of the poem is gradually disclosed as they read its words, lines, tercets, cantos, and canticles in sequence. Not until the act of reading has progressed far enough along does some
clarity regarding the book’s meaning begin to emerge and only at the end is it possible for the full meaning to be made manifest.\(^{20}\)

The same holds true for the process of writing, wherein the writer cannot convey his meaning all at once but is bound by the temporal sequence of the many signs he inscribes. This is more than a matter for authors alone, however. The acts of writing and reading were much more intimately linked for Dante’s medieval reader than for modern readers of printed books inasmuch as the acts of copying and reading were, as E.R. Curtius observes, so closely linked in the dissemination of books as to be identical acts for the addressees of Dante’s *Comedy*.\(^{21}\)

That the full import of the *Comedy* is not made clear until *Paradiso* may hold the key to another of the poem’s great enigmas that is often seen in tandem with that of the Greyhound. The prophecy of the coming “DXV,” as it is commonly but rather inaccurately referred to, comes late in *Purgatorio*, when Beatrice tells Dante in 33.42-44 that

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{I can plainly see,} \\
&\text{and thus I tell it; stars already close} \\
&\text{at hand, which can’t be blocked or checked, will bring} \\
&\text{a time in which, dispatched by God, a Five} \\
&\text{Hundred and Ten and Five will slay the whore} \\
&\text{Together with that giant who sins with her.}
\end{align*}
\]

The poet himself seems to hasten the coming of those stars by bringing the canto to a somewhat abrupt end when, at *Purgatorio* 33.139-141, he tells the reader that he would go on singing if he had ampler space in which to write,

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{but since all of the pages pre-disposed} \\
&\text{for this, the second canticle, are full,} \\
&\text{the curb of art will not let me continue.}
\end{align*}
\]

Could the DXV, like the Greyhound, also appear in *Paradiso*? That possibility is encouraged by Beatrice’s speaking of it precisely as “*un cinquecento diece e cinque*.” A similar enumeration is cited by Cacciaguida in his convoluted disclosure of the date of his birth at *Paradiso* 16.34-39 as taking place from the time of the Annunciation to when Mars had returned 580 times, “*cinquecento cinquanta e trenta*,” to the constellation of Leo, that is, in A.D. 1091. Cacciaguida’s articulation of that date in terms of the revolutions of heavenly bodies links his statement to the alternate meaning of the word *volume*, which can refer either to a bound book or to the movement of heavenly bodies, as is the case in *Paradiso* 26.119-120, where Adam tells Dante he was in Limbo during “four thousand three hundred and two re-turnings of the sun, *quattromilia trecento e due volumi di sol*.” The proper calculations would have to be done to arrive at a precise identification of the DXV, but it may not come as a surprise that it too is related to the *volume* that is Dante’s
own book and which, like the Greyhound, comes to redeem the troubled political life of humanity.²²

Such considerations lie beyond the scope of this essay. Perhaps it is enough to have begun to understand what it means for the Greyhound to originate “tra felto e felto” in accord with the process of making a book, the “sacra poema,” as Dante called his book at Paradiso 25.1-9, for which he entertained such high hopes.

If it should happen . . . If this sacred poem—
this work so shared by heaven and by earth
that it has made me lean through these long years—
can ever overcome the cruelty
that bars me from the fair fold where I slept,
a lamb opposed to wolves that war on it,
by then with other voice, with other fleece,
I shall return as poet and put on,
at my baptismal font, the laurel crown.

Dante himself never saw his book, save in the culminating vision of his Comedy. It was left to his sons to bind the disparate quaderni of his poem into one volume after their father’s death. Dante’s hope proved to be well founded, however, as we know from the busy traffic among fourteenth century Florentine copyists who produced manuscripts of the Comedy for the growing number of Dante’s readers who were our predecessors in the art of reading his volume.²³

So far as we know, the earliest copies of the Comedy were made on parchment according to the traditional practice. However, Dante’s awareness of the emerging paper industry and the novel use it made of felt in the papermaking process may have enabled him to look ahead to a time when the use of paper in the production of books would permit an even wider dissemination of his book and so increase the prospects for his poem’s salutary effects on his Italian readers, thereby fulfilling the prophecy regarding the Greyhound’s origin and mission voiced by Virgil in the poem’s opening canto.

Notes

1. Inferno 1.100-111.
2. All passages in this essay cited from Dante’s Comedy are from the verse translation by Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982-1986). The essay is a more developed form of a paper presented at the Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance International Congress at Villanova University in October of 1995.


7. See in particular Fortin’s reading of the Geryon at the beginning of canto 17 of Inferno as an allegory of Boniface VIII in “Dante and the Structure of Philosophical Allegory,” CE 1: 272-73.

8. For Fortin’s most complete treatment of Dante, see his Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Dante and His Precursors, trans. Marc A. LePain (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2001). The book was originally published in French as Dissidence et philosophie au moyen-age: Dante et ses antecedents (Paris-Montreal: Vrin, 1981). It is interesting to note that Harold Bloom shares with Fortin the same concern in understanding Dante aright, albeit for the different end of recovering “our sense of literary individuality and political autonomy” (The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994], 98). Bloom contends that Dante can help us do this, “provided we can evade the sirens that sing to us the allegory of the theologians” (Ibid.).

9. See Claudia Rattazzi Papka, “‘Feltro’ e ‘felto’: Dante’s Cartaceous Apocalypse,” in Dante Studies 117 (1999): 35-44. The author also sees the Greyhound as Dante’s book, based on the use of felt in papermaking. The circumstances of the essay’s publication are explained in an asterisked note on page 42.


11. “Très rapidement, la concurrence du papier espagnol, moins beau que le papier arabe authentique, mais probablement meilleur marché et n’exigeant pas un transport aussi long, se fait sentir, aussi bien à Gênes que dans le reste de l’Italie; le papier arabe cède la place à son concurrent. En raison du succès obtenu par cette nouvelle matière, les Italiens ne tardent pas à s’efforcer de la produire sur leur territoire. Les premières tentatives se situent dans la région de Gênes, vers 1210; elles aboutissent, et l’industrie papetière se développe sur la côte ligure; l’imitation du papier espagnol y est patente. Vingt ou trente ans plus tard, un nouvel essai est entrepris à Fabriano, dans la Marche d’Ancône, probablement sous l’influence indirecte de la production ligure, mais selon une technique différente, d’origine orientale, qu’il faut peut-être mettre en relation avec la 4e croisade et ses suites. La fabrication fait des progrès rapides et le papier de Fabriano réussit à surclasser ses concurrents avant la fin du XIIe siècle, grâce à trois innovations: l’emploi de maillets cloutés, au lieu des pilons de bois; le collage à la gélatine, substitué au collage à l’amidon peu après 1270; l’invention du filigrane, marque de fabrique visible en transparence, dont les premiers exemples sont légèremen posteérieurs à 1280” (Jean Irigoin, “Les origines de la fabrication du papier en Italie,” Papiergeschichte 13 [1963]: 65-66).
12. “At the introduction of papermaking into Europe, felt of some kind was in all probability used as a material for the couching of paper. It is not likely that the old craftsmen employed woven wool cloth such as the makers of handmade paper use at present, but a more compact, matted substance of hair or wool. The woven material that is used by modern papermakers is called felt, but the name is a misnomer, as felt is a compressed mass and does not necessarily consist of warp and weft. . . . Both the Greeks and the Romans made use of matted felt for caps, blankets, and the lining of helmets. . . . The Scythians, who from the most remote time roamed the lands of northern Asia, as did the Tatars, their successors, used felt for both clothing and material for making tents. It is therefore quite evident that had the early papermakers, even the original Chinese, desired felt for the couching of their paper, it could have been readily produced” (Dard Hunter, Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967], 179 and 180).


15. “La Divine Comédie . . . va donc être pour nous un texte en train de s’écrire et plus encore le premier grand livre pensé et agi intégralement comme livre par son auteur” (Philippe Sollers, “Dante et la traversée de l’écriture,” Tel Quel 23 [1965]: 13).


17. La Divina Commedia, rev. ed. Singleton, 10.

18. The word volume (or its plural volumi) appears at Paradiso 2.78, 12.122, 15.50, 19.113, 23.112, 26.119, 28.14, and 33.86.

19. For Fortin’s most incisive reading of the Paradiso in particular, see “Dante’s Comedy as Utopia,” in CE I: 277-97.

20. For penetrating insights into Dante’s art of writing, from which I draw in this section of my paper, see John Ahern, “Dante’s Last Word: the Comedy as a liber coelestia,” Dante Studies 102 (1984): 1-14. Although my own reading of the Comedy parts company with Ahern’s renewed challenge that the poem be read as a heavenly book written under divine inspiration, I am nonetheless greatly indebted to his work, which I believe corroborates my interpretation of the Greyhound’s place of origin and other considerations relevant to Dante’s conception of his book.


22. For proper calculations regarding Adam’s time spent in Limbo, see Ernest L. Fortin, “Dante and the Structure of Philosophical Allegory,” in CE I: 273-74.