

Dante's Falcons: Metaphor as Theology in the *Commedia*

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Describing the medieval world, twentieth-century critic Thomas Howard writes, "The myth sovereign in the old age was that everything meant everything."¹ And everything meant God; the natural world had been created both as a sign of itself and of the supernatural. Hobbes's declaration that metaphors "openly profess deceit" would have bewildered a medieval poet like Dante, for whom metaphor was not a deceitful trope, nor simply an observation about the similarities between a beautiful woman and a rose; rather, it was a philosophical statement concerning the ontological correspondence between things, especially between the natural and the divine.² In light of this richer understanding of metaphor, Dante's choice between the related but distinct tropes of simile and metaphor within a single field of imagery—that of falconry—has an ontological dimension. Though the poet Dante relies on falcon similes to describe monsters, the pilgrim Dante, and the Jovial eagle, he depends on metaphors of falconry to describe God. Dante's deliberate and distinct use of this rhetorical trope reveals essential truths about divine kingliness and active, efficacious love while pointing to the metaphysical connection between the Creator and his creation.

Both simile and metaphor are important parts of poetry, but they have different rhetorical effects and ontological status. Similes tend to compare attributes, metaphors substances. Similes claim that two things are alike in some accidental way, while metaphors claim that one substance is another. The falcon similes analyzed below compare action, quality, and position; the falcon metaphors equate persons (or constructs, as is the case with the falconer) and objects (such as the lure). A simile, while noting similarities of accidents, maintains the discreteness of substances while metaphor conflates them. For a medieval thinker like Dante, this

¹ Howard, *Chance or the Dance*, 12.

² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 39.

conflation signifies the ontological correspondence between substances, especially natural and divine. Metaphors are not merely concessions to the inability of language to describe God directly; they also indicate that God intentionally created the world to resemble, signify, and share in his nature. Comparisons between God and a king, father, lover, or even a falconer are appropriate because the natural order in its very essence participates in and points to the spiritual. As Joseph Mazzeo explains, "The analogical and symbolic potentiality of a thing is therefore not exterior or accidental to the thing but is derived from the very nature of creatures themselves and, indeed, is the law by which creatures were created."³ Though the exact ontological correspondence between God and his creation remains mysterious, this law of symbolic potentiality is extremely important for Dante's poetry. Because of this rich understanding of metaphor, Dante's choice of metaphor over simile has theological implications. While the four falcon similes within the *Commedia* help establish the atmosphere of their respective cantos, the metaphors of falconry more properly alert the reader to the ultimate correspondence between God and his creation.

The first falcon simile appears in canto 17 of the *Inferno* when Dante compares the fraudulent Geryon to a disgruntled falcon:

Come 'l falcon ch'è stato assai su l'ali,
che senza veder logoro o uccello
fa dire al falconiere "Omè, tu cali!"

discende lasso onde si move isnello,
per cento rote, e da lunge si pone
dal suo maestro, disdegnoso e fello;

così ne puose al fondo Gerione.

(As the falcon that has long been on the wing
and, without sight of lure or bird
makes the falconer cry out: 'Oh, you're coming down!'

descends, weary, with many a wheeling,
to where it set out swiftly, and alights,
angry and sullen, far from its master

so Geryon set us down at the bottom.)⁴

³ Mazzeo, *Medieval Cultural Tradition*, 138.

⁴ *Inferno* 17.127–33, hereafter cited in text; all quotations of the *Commedia* from Robert and Jean Hollander's translations.

With this simile, introduced by the Italian *come* (like, as) and further announced by *così* (so, thus), the point of comparison is an accidental element: primarily that of attitude or, in Aristotelian terms, of quality. Both Geryon and the falcon bitterly resent their tasks, but only the Infernal monster fully carries out his orders. The similarity rests in their resentful attitudes, not in their actions. Several adjectives—"lasso" (weary), "disdegnoso" (angry), and "fello" (sullen)—indicate that Geryon, like the falcon, does not joyfully obey commands. But the disgruntled falcon fails to accomplish his mission and, as Robert Hollander observes, "does not even land on his master's arm, but far afield"; whereas the Infernal monster, "while equally rebellious, does complete his flight as his master (Virgil) had ordered."⁵ Why he completes the flight is something of a mystery. Virgil simply tells Dante, "mentre che torni, parlerò con questa, / che ne conceda i suoi omeri forti" (While you are gone, I'll ask the beast / to lend us its strong shoulders) (*Inferno* 17.41–42). Since the request for aerial transportation occurs offstage, the reader does not know how Virgil persuades the beast; but Geryon's sullenness suggests that he—though less recalcitrant than the demons who refuse to open the gates of Dis, requiring a celestial messenger to do so—was also forced against his will. Unlike the falcon, Geryon, however unwilling, must obey Virgil, the guide provided by heaven. Through the similarity in quality and dissimilarity in action between Geryon and falcon, Dante illustrates the subservience (though grudgingly given) of hell to heaven.

The next falcon simile, which appears in canto 19 of the *Purgatorio*, focuses on action, direction, and desire. To comfort a Dante disturbed by the siren, Virgil, through a metaphor, urges him to direct his attention to the "rote magne" (majestic spheres) (19.63). Dante describes his response to Virgil's exhortation with a simile:

Quale 'l falcon, che prima a' piè si mira,
 indi si volge al grido e si protende
 per lo disio del pasto che là il tira,
 tal mi fec' io; e tal, quanto si fende.

(Like the falcon that at first looks at its feet,
 and only then turns to the call and stretches up
 in its desire for the food that draws it,

such I became and, so impelled, I went.) (19.64–67)

5 In Alighieri, *Inferno*, 326n20.

Dante, like Geryon, resembles the falcon, though the emphasis in this simile (introduced by *quale* and *tal*) is not on quality but on the proper direction and motivation for action. The distracted falcon, gazing “a’ piè” (at its feet), looks up and moves toward the food it desires. Likewise, Dante, distracted by the repulsive siren, raises his eyes to the heavens and, drawn by longing, moves towards them. For both bird and pilgrim, properly directed desire inspires motion. The word *disio* (desire) deserves special attention; it appears ten times in the *Inferno*, fourteen times in the *Purgatorio*, and twenty-five times in the *Paradiso*.⁶ The inclusion of *disio* in the falcon simile indicates that the heavenly spheres—the “pastro” (food) offered to falcon-Dante—are not just to be known and observed; they are to be desired. This simile about a preoccupied falcon lured by desirable food works beautifully in the second canticle because, while the souls in paradise already perfectly desire the highest good, the souls in purgatory—like the distracted falcon—are learning to look away from their sins, to direct their attention to God, and, out of desire, to move towards him.

Dante uses falcon imagery to describe beautiful, even celestial moments. There are two falcon similes in the *Paradiso*; the first, which occurs in canto 18, compares the pilgrim Dante not to the falcon or even the falconer, but simply to an attentive birdwatcher: “Così per Carlo Magno e per Orlando / due ne seguì lo mio attento sguardo, / com’ occhio segue suo falcon volando” (My watchful gaze was fastened / on Charlemagne and Roland there, as well / just as the eye pursues the falcon in its flight) (18.43–45). *Così* and *come* introduce this short simile, which stresses the intensity and upward direction of Dante’s gaze at two of the souls forming the cross in the planet Mars. The association of the imperial Charlemagne and the chivalrous Roland with the noble sport of falconry is atmospherically appropriate in the sphere of Mars, the planet that governs chivalry, nobility, and war. As Tom Cade observes, “Above all falcons were a part of the retinue of armies.”⁷ Dante’s attentive motionlessness in this simile distinguishes him from God as he is revealed in the falcon metaphors analyzed below. Dante is simply a common observer, while God is an active falconer who participates in a sport reserved for nobility and royalty. According to Cade, “in the medieval feudal societies of European Christendom . . . falcons . . . were among the most valued possessions of the aristocracy, and there were strict rules and laws about ownership.”⁸ Acutely aware of such restrictions and the

6 Princeton Dante Project.

7 Cade, *Falcons of the World*, 51.

8 *Ibid.*

rich symbolism surrounding falconry, Dante does not describe himself as a royal participant in the sport. In the instances of falconry throughout the *Commedia*, only God is substantially compared to the falconer himself.

In the second Paradisal simile, which compares the eagle of Jupiter to a falcon, Dante describes the enthusiastic obedience of the souls in paradise. Once again the falcon becomes the focus of the simile:

Quasi falcone ch' esce del cappello,
 move la testa e con l' ali si laude,
 voglia mostrando e facendosi bello,
 vid' io farsi quell segno, che di laude
 de la divina grazia era contesto,
 con canti quai si sa chi là sù gaude.

(As the falcon, freed from its encumbering hood,
 raises its head, and flapping, as in winged applause,
 displays its beauty and its eagerness,

just so I witnessed that emblem, made with strands
 of praise for God's own grace, surge into songs
 known but to those who live above in bliss.) (*Paradiso* 19.34–39)

This simile (introduced by the Italian *quasi*) compares both the action and the attitude—or quality—of the falcon to the Eagle shape formed by the arrangement of souls in the planet Jupiter. Just as the falcon displays his eager desire to begin hunting—the task for which he has been trained—the Eagle also shows his willingness to embark on his divinely appointed task to sing heavenly songs. Like all the individual souls with whom Dante converses in the *Paradiso*, the Eagle delights in his place and role in heaven. Both the Paradisal Eagle and the Infernal Geryon resemble falcons, but their attitudes differ. While falcon-Geryon is bitter and resentful, the falcon-Eagle is eager and willing. Such differences within a single field of imagery reveal important differences between the two canticles in which these similes appear. In hell obedience is given resentfully; in heaven it is given delightedly. Hell obeys only in action, heaven in both action and will.

The four falcon similes help establish the “peculiar and deliberated atmosphere or quality; . . . [the] pervasive and purposed integral tone” of specific cantos and the three canticles as a whole.⁹ The Infernal similes convey the unavoidable but often resentful obedience that characterizes hell; the Purgatorial simile conveys the desire-in-training that character-

⁹ Ward, *Planet Narnia*, 75.

izes the “secondo regno” (second kingdom); while the Paradisal similes enhance the noble atmosphere of Mars and reveal the joyful obedience that characterizes heaven (*Purgatorio* 1.4). Of course these similes are only one way in which Dante masterfully establishes the atmospheres of his canticles—atmospheres that trouble, challenge, and delight.

The falcon similes, though important, do not express truths as essential to the *Commedia* as the falcon metaphors. These metaphors reveal Dante's conception of a cosmos pervaded by a gracious God who through his loving motion invites men to commune with him. Not only does the content of each metaphor reveal such a cosmos; the selection of metaphor over simile does the same. Dorothy Sayers's discussion of natural symbol is helpful in understanding Dante's treatment of metaphor; she explains, “[Natural symbol] is itself an instance of what it symbolizes: and therefore, by simply being what it is, it tells us something about the true nature of that greater thing for which it stands.”¹⁰ Likewise, metaphors are natural when they compare God to his creation because that creation was intentionally formed to participate in and reveal his nature. A falconer “by simply being what [he] is” discloses something essential about the kingly and loving nature of God. This is not to say that metaphors comparing natural substances are always arbitrary or that only accidental similes should be used to compare them; Sayers, for example, describes the arch that, “maintaining itself as it does by the mutual thrust and pressure of all its parts, is at once an instance and a natural symbol of that great dynamic principle of stability in tension by which the physical universe is sustained.”¹¹ Perhaps all metaphors (though not all symbols) are in some way natural, especially if all creation derives its being from one source. Dante does not use only similes to compare substances in the created world and only metaphors to compare the natural and divine. Even in the falcon metaphors, Dante compares two natural substances: lures and the heavens.

He does, however, consistently employ metaphors rather than similes for divine themes. David Gibbons, who distinguishes between simile and metaphor because “the rhetoricians with whom Dante was most likely to have been familiar did so,” observes that “the density of metaphor” in the *Paradiso* exceeds that of the earlier canticles.¹² He explains that “the more strictly religious subject of the *Paradiso* is the most important reason for the greater incidence of metaphor” in that canticle.¹³ Gibbons's

10 Sayers, “Dante's Imagery,” 8.

11 Ibid.

12 Gibbons, *Metaphor in Dante*, 16, 41.

13 Ibid., 52.

study of Dante's use of metaphor, far more exhaustive than that presented here, also acknowledges a relationship between religion and metaphor. Based on Gibbons's observation, it seems fair to claim that (despite the limitations of the present analysis) Dante's use of metaphor to describe the divine forms a consistent and yet surprising pattern. Such figurative language, as Gibbons notes, is of course necessary because of the inability of human language to describe God: "Spiritual and intellectual realities . . . can only be conveyed . . . by means of physical, sensible exemplification."¹⁴ But the use of similes, with their linguistic markers (*like, so, just as*), would be the more appropriate choice if Dante wished both to describe the divine in human terms and to maintain the distinctness between the two. Instead, he employs metaphors, which conflate substances by pointing to an ontological correspondence between God and nature. Dante is certainly not a pantheist, and the *Commedia* is replete with reminders of God's transcendence over and distinctness from his creation. But in his metaphors, Dante makes use of what Allen Tate calls "the objective analogical method . . . in which what looks to us today like metaphor was actually a generally accepted relation between the physical world and the invisible."¹⁵ Thus, the metaphors of falconry are more than concessions to the limits of language; they are statements of the actual relation between God and his creation.

Falcon metaphors appear twice in the *Purgatorio*; the first focuses on the heavens as lures. After Dante and Virgil hear the frightening words of Cain and Aglauros in the terrace of envy, Virgil tells Dante that for distracted mortals, "poco val freno o richiamo" (of little use is curb or lure); he continues, "Chiamavi 'l cielo e 'ntorno vi si gira, / mostrandovi le sue bellezze etterne, / e l'occhio vostro pur a terra mira" (The heavens call to you and wheel about you, / revealing their eternal splendors / but your eyes are fixed upon the earth) (*Purgatorio* 14.147–50). "[R]ichiamo" (lure) in line 147 and "gira" (wheel) in line 148 establish this image as a submerged metaphor. Hollander explains, "God's 'lure' (*richiamo*), a technical term from falconry, is part of this magnificent final image, which turns our human expectations upside down. God is seen as a falconer in the Empyrean spinning his lures."¹⁶ For the first time in the *Commedia*, the lure—"an apparatus used by falconers, to recall their hawks, constructed of a bunch of feathers, to which is attached a long cord or thong, and from the interstices of which, during its training, the hawk is fed"—becomes

14 *Ibid.*, 43.

15 Davidson and Tate, *Literary Correspondence*, 369.

16 In Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 318n.

the essential element of comparison.¹⁷ Because this is a metaphor (note the absence of linguistic markers like *come, così, quale, or tal quasi*) the heavens are not *like* lures in attitude or behavior; they *are* lures. They have real potential to attract distracted men who have turned their gaze to earth. Alison Cornish argues that for Dante “the stars . . . are perfect and unchanging yet also visible and, indeed, supremely beautiful. They have a physical influence on the body, but more important, they suggest to the mind an invisible and far superior reality.”¹⁸ The heavens are visible lures that attract human beings to an invisible God. Because God is the falconer, the heavens become symbols of his genuine interest in and desire for the focus and obedience of humanity, just as a falconer desires his falcon to turn its attention to the whirling lure.

The second falcon metaphor, while also describing the heavens as lures, places greater emphasis on God as an active, regal falconer. In an attempt to comfort a Dante disturbed by the dream of the siren, Virgil exhorts, “li occhi rivolgi al logoro che gira / lo rege eterno con le rote magne” (Raise your eyes to the lure / the eternal King whirls with His majestic spheres) (*Purgatorio* 19.62–63). Here, the submerged metaphor from the fourteenth canto becomes explicit. Just as a falconer spins his lures to call back the soaring falcon, so God whirls the heavenly spheres to attract pilgrim-Dante. This metaphor does not merely compare quality, action, or direction as the similes do. Instead, it points to a substantial correspondence between God and a falconer. Unlike Dante, who simply gazes at Charlemagne and Roland, God is an active falconer whirling his lures. Unlike Dante, God does not remain a common observer; “the eternal King” reveals his kingliness by participating in a sport of the nobility, a sport fitting for the divine ruler whose kingdom knows no end. In the *Commedia*, only God is directly depicted as a falconer; Geryon, pilgrim-Dante, and the Eagle in Jupiter are depicted either as falcons or observers. This striking metaphor thereby reveals the unique kingliness of God.

As king, God is active, in motion. The idea of motion—a motif that occurs throughout the *Commedia*—within the falcon metaphor reveals the love of the Creator for his creation. In both *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, Virgil repeatedly exhorts Dante to keep moving. The blessed souls in *Paradiso* sing, dance, form eagles, and climb ladders. The *Commedia* even ends with an image of motion: “ma già volgeva il mio disio e ’l velle, / sì come rota ch’igualmente è *mossa*, / l’amor che *move* il sole e l’altre stelle” (But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving / with an even *motion*,

¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “lure.”

¹⁸ Cornish, *Reading Dante's Stars*, 11.

were turning with / the Love that *moves* the sun and all the other stars) (*Paradiso* 33.143–45, emphasis added). Beatrice explains the importance of motion when she encourages Dante, “Mira quel cerchio che più li è congiunto; / e sappi che ’l suo *muovere* è sì tosto / per l’affocato amore ond’ elli è punto” (Observe the circle nearest it [the point that is God] / and understand its *motion* is so swift / because it is spurred on by flaming love) (*Paradiso* 28.43–45, emphasis added). Dante learns that the more love an object has, the more swiftly it moves. In light of this relationship between motion and love, the image of God as falconer whirling his lures indicates not the love of creation for the Creator, but the Creator’s love for his own creation. The ontological relationship recognized by this metaphor is particularly important since it emphasizes the actuality of the comparison, not just the similarity. Dante believes that God, inspired by love, is actually luring mankind to himself through the splendid heavens.

And God’s whirling lures, unlike Satan’s fruitless flappings, are purposeful and effectual as Dante-falcon, gazing up at the spheres—the lures of the divine falconer—is filled with a desire that inspires movement toward the heavens. Indeed, the pilgrim Dante eventually ascends to the whirling heavens in *Paradiso* and ultimately to God himself. Dante’s entire journey is the literal enactment and the culmination of the falcon metaphors; the distracted pilgrim responds to the various lures sent from heaven and turns his gaze to the divine falconer. As Dante confesses in the beginning of the *Paradiso*, “la rota che tu sempiterni / desiderato, a sé mi fece atteso / con l’armonia che temperi e discerni” (the heavens you made eternal, / wheeling in desire, caught my attention / with the harmony you temper and attune) (1.76–78). Within the poem, the figurative becomes the literal. God’s actions as divine falconer transform the life of one distracted (but poetically gifted) falcon.

Though the falcon metaphors reveal essential characteristics of divine nature, point to the close ontological relationship between natural and divine substances, and literally culminate in the poem, they are ultimately insufficient. Despite his intensely cataphatic theology (evidenced in part by metaphors about the divine and more broadly by his divine epic), Dante, towards the end of the *Commedia*, confesses that all language, literal or figurative, cannot express the fullness of God: “Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio / che ’l parlar mostra, ch’a tal vista cede” (From that time on my power of sight exceeded / that of speech, which fails at such a vision) (*Paradiso* 33.55–56). Nevertheless, the poem continues for some eighty-nine more lines. Though he acknowledges the limitations

of language, Dante also relentlessly explores its possibilities. He is both devout Christian and linguistic adventurer.

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