

# Reason and Revelation in Dante's *Divine Comedy*

BAINARD COWAN

One's reigning impression on encountering Dante's vision of hell, the first part of his grand *Commedia*, is that sin is essentially connected with the misuse of intellect and will. Virgil introduces the traveler to the entirety of hell by remarking, in a signal comment that will be unraveled throughout the *Inferno*: "you will see the wretched people who have lost the good of intellect" (3.17–18).<sup>1</sup>

An extended stay in Dante's hell makes nothing clearer than that the proper use of reason and will would have been quite sufficient to keep one out of there. The damned whom he interviews—Francesca, Farinata, Pier delle Vigne, Ulysses, Ugolino, and so many more—retain an autonomy and a glorious style in their speech, yet none of them ever question whether they did wrong. These eloquent souls—lovers, potentates, administrators—have not lost their reason; but they have turned away from the *truth* and *good* of reason, as Aquinas has it. None of

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BAINARD COWAN holds the Cowan Chair as Professor of Literature at the University of Dallas. His chief interest at present is the image of human knowing in epic from antiquity to Dante and in the novel from *The Journey to the West* to magical realism. He is the author of *Exiled Waters: "Moby-Dick" and the Crisis of Allegory* and the editor, most recently, of *Gained Horizons: Regensburg and the Enlargement of Reason* and *The Prospect of Lyric*. He received his B.A. from the University of Dallas, did graduate study at the University of Munich, and finished his Ph.D. in comparative literature at Yale.

<sup>1</sup> All references to the *Commedia* are from Charles Singleton's translation.

them ever faced the simple question of whether an action was right or wrong! Dante's damned, of course, had generally come to such a point that their choice was to turn away from the good definitively. Never does the poem describe them as though they are disloyal or breaking the law; they demonstrate in each case a fundamental unwillingness to face the moral nature of the world and of themselves, a flaw made agonizingly clear in the elegant but unconscious self-disclosure of their language. When Francesca hangs her good wishes on the condition "[i]f the king of the universe were friendly" (*Inferno* 5.91) and misleads us on who kissed whom, we know we are being led astray.

However, hell is no place to conduct a discourse on the ends of man. It is there only vestigially, as a *via negativa*. The most elaborate discussion of human nature and destiny from the point of view of reason occurs during Dante's long walking tour of Purgatory as a general topic to which he, Virgil, and the rescued souls on the Mountain—Buonconte da Montefeltro, Statius, Marco Lombardo, Guido Guinizzelli—return repeatedly from many angles.

In giving an extended portrait of the world beyond earthly existence, Dante is asserting his poetry as a kind of revelation in itself, presenting to us rational readers what reason cannot know of itself—and yet what reason was created to bring us to. Comparatist William Franke goes so far as to say that Dante's *Commedia* "is prophetic as poetry—not as if something extra were being added to it—rather the poetic act itself is discovered in all its intrinsically prophetic potential."<sup>2</sup> To Dante, poetic imagination operates as a smaller instance of revelation, a human way of knowing, subject not to the classifiable laws of reason but rather to a higher law.

Indeed, most historians, whether of literature, philosophy, or theology, consider the *Divine Comedy* as dramatizing fully the Medieval sense of the relatedness of reason and revelation and the demonstration that reason must be completed by revelation. The key moment in this journey, often considered to reveal the *Commedia* as an allegory about the relation of reason to revelation, occurs at the end of the *Purgatorio* in the shift from Virgil to Beatrice as the pilgrim's guide. But Dante asks us to pay close attention to how he leads us up to that moment as well.

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<sup>2</sup> William Franke, "Dante's *Inferno* as Poetic Revelation of Prophetic Truth," 261.

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Earlier, at the very center of the *Purgatorio*—which is of course the center of the entire *Commedia* and hence a moment that calls for our closest attention—Marco Lombardo gives a ringing defense of human free will, an unmistakable affirmation of the innate human capacity for reason and its determining role in charting one's course toward the good. The human will is given the capacity to work in conjunction with reason, so that "if it is well nurtured, it conquers completely" (*Purgatorio* 16.78). Marco goes on to split the shaping influences on the will into two: the just government (a guide or whip) and a disciplinary framework (a curb or rein) (*Purgatorio* 16.93).

Charles Singleton, in his note to this passage, observes that, unlike Augustine when considering the human constitution, Dante "does not bring the matter of original sin and the Fall into the argument here."<sup>3</sup> Dante, whose *poema sacro* probably contains more references to God than any other poem, chooses here to remove all reference to matters knowable only through revelation and religious tradition, and instead relies on the innate capacity of reason to know the good. Indeed, this point is repeatedly made in the *Purgatorio*: reason, if nurtured and kept strong, is sufficient equipment to keep everyone out of hell.

But is reason enough? What follows this discussion is Marco's unforgettable and beautiful origin myth of the human person as a little soul, *anima semplicetta*, who "from His hands...comes forth," that is, from God, who, because He is "a glad Maker," creates a being who "turns willingly to what delights it" (*Purgatorio* 16.85, 88–90). In this portrait the primary element in human nature is desire. Of course the embodied soul is free—just try to control one! Desire, the quest for love, is the root expression of the soul's freedom. Because that freedom is easily lost, reason is meant to stand as its sentinel. But perhaps it takes more than syllogisms and rhetoric to get the attention of this simple soul seeking delight.

As if in answer to that concern, the following canto (17) begins with a new experience of the pilgrim's instruction. Thus far in purgatory, Dante has been instructed in a panoply of ways, all of them employing artistic techniques not humanly envisioned (moving pictures, unembodied sounds, visions—ways for Dante the poet to exercise his

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<sup>3</sup> In Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 365n21.

inventiveness), each one suited to the particular pairing of vice and virtue that organizes that particular terrace of the Mountain. Here, for the first time, images come to him internally as if they are his own. In this brief passage, he speaks of imagination in a way very much like divine inspiration but in terms of images, and only the “trace” (*orma*, literally “footprint,” *Purgatorio* 17.21) of it is able to haunt us; it is fleeting, but it wholly occupies our attention. It comes as an image, not as language; we receive it passively but then work to explicate it. As medieval theorists posited, and as Paul Ricoeur titled one of his essays, *Le symbole donne à penser*, the symbol gives one to think—so the image planted in the mind invites our endless inquiry.

Shortly thereafter on the journey comes a fuller product of the imagination, Dante’s dream of the Siren (Canto 19), who lures him until an upright woman (no doubt a figure of Beatrice, but unidentified) suddenly appears and chastises him. This episode would reward our attentive study, but I only mention it here as another step toward our destination—Dante’s momentous personal meeting with Beatrice at the top of the Mountain. The dream anticipates this meeting, since it already associates the arrival of Beatrice with an intensely personal experience that calls Dante to account for himself and what it is he really desires, what he finally loves.

In this climactic meeting (in canto 30) and afterward as they sojourn together in the Earthly Paradise, Beatrice is indelibly associated with the personal dimension of good in the allegorical procession as she coalesces with Christ. Hence, she is both the final understanding of meaning and the moving of his will. For the first and only time in the poem, Dante hears his own name called (by Beatrice), and he is asked to remember not just general principles, as Virgil has tirelessly done for him, but who he is, what he has done, and who he was called to be.

Commentators have long seen Beatrice as an allegorical figure of the advent of revelation and the guidance of revelation for the pilgrim soul. What one ought to notice about her completely apart from any allegorical designation is that she calls Dante personally, adding a new dimension to his understanding and to his journey. That personal meaning was accorded only to epic heroes in the classical world. This moment, then, is charged with the potential to end his tutelage and lead him toward his own *aristeia*—a heroic chain of deeds of whose accomplishment we have proof, because it is the writing of the *Commedia*.

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My contention is that the dimension of the personal calling is the dimension added by revelation over reason in Dante's poem. As personal calling it is also the dimension of time and destiny. In Christianity this theme expands beyond the personal to encompass the final destiny of the entire created world. As the pageant in the Earthly Paradise will show, and as will be demonstrated several times in the *Paradiso*, Dante interprets history prophetically, finding in it the essential pattern of things to come, reaching toward an eschatological end of time. Both the personal and the temporal are dimensions in which reason can operate but which it cannot discover for itself, since it is concerned primarily with the most general truths that always are. To relate to something as a person, with one's personhood—in short, to be called—and especially to be called to be part of a sacred project in history, is to take part in something that reason alone does not offer and in which it has no intrinsic interest. Such a project is not counter to reason but is, from reason's point of view, rather a contingent development.

But is it merely a contingent development that I am a person? To say so is to a certain extent a contradiction in terms. My me-ness is inescapable, even though only to me. The complication here is easy to see: personal meaning *is* rational but opens out in another dimension from reason (which states its propositions in general terms). Personal meaning gives rise to temporal meaning, insofar as the latter is not wholly contingent, and gives rise to the emergence of a collective personhood, a people who is called to fulfill a destiny, of which the individual is a part. What I am implying is that the meeting with Beatrice is not only a completion of Dante that initiates his heroic quest; it is the completion to which all human beings are called in the very situation of having an identity.

Dante indicated his understanding of the relation of revelation to reason in his earlier treatise *On Monarchy* (*De Monarchia*), where he instructed: "There are some judgments of God to which human reason, even if it cannot arrive at them by its own unaided efforts, can nonetheless be raised with the help of faith in those things which are said to us in the Scriptures" (2.7.4). We should see in this comment something fundamental in Dante's orientation toward revelation. He conceives of it not as a truth or a command to be received passively but as an active

engaging of the subject, lifting up the heart for a fuller participation in the truth.

Dante has fleshed out an intricate relationship in his poem, for as much as reason and revelation are joined in the making of Dante's heroic identity, they remain disjoined in the separate but cooperating personae of Virgil and Beatrice. Consider Virgil's own disclaimer: "As far as reason sees here I can tell you; beyond that wait only for Beatrice, for it is a matter of faith (*opra di fede*)" (*Purgatorio* 18.46–48). And yet Virgil would never have crossed paths with Dante in the dark wood if he had not been engaged by Beatrice to come to that lost soul's aid. From these considerations it is clear that reason and revelation, while each remains distinct, are indispensable in the project of making human life.

What truly guides us on earth? How can we be brought back to the original starting place—primal, innocent nature—so that from there we can make our way into the realm of grace? And *how do we find our calling*? Is Beatrice necessary? From the structure of the moral virtues given in the *Purgatorio*, are we not to surmise that one can simply be guided by reason to make the right choices? What remains in question after Virgil "crowns and miters" Dante over himself is *caritas*, grace, and poetry—all forces that surmount the rational and are associated with Beatrice in Dante's life.

Jaroslav Pelikan, in his authoritative compendium *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, concedes that the most influential presentation of the doctrine of the relation between reason and revelation was not by any theologian but by Dante. Virgil's function as reason leading to revelation, and even more, the idea of nature being completed but not abolished by grace is warranted by the language of the poem and indeed by its very structure. According to John Laskin, "Virgil's Reason cannot interact with Beatrice's Faith, nor is Virgil permitted to be present, even as a silent observer, at his disciple's moment of truth: The dying flame of Virgil's Reason becomes the brightening one of Beatrice's Revelation."<sup>4</sup> The critic rightly accents the starkness of the transition, which Dante has made as acute as possible: it is the masculine replaced by the feminine; one he reveres by one he adores; the poet by the saint; the classical by the vernacular; and of course the classical by the Christian; Reason by Faith.

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<sup>4</sup> John Laskin, "The Entrance of Beatrice in Dante's *Purgatorio*: Revelation, Duality and Identity," 120.

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But what then is Beatrice? Is she simply a conceptual marker, as I have been guilty of treating her for the past few minutes? If she were, she could not awaken that personal and temporal dimension in Dante that we have seen is crucial here. Dante's entire journey is impelled forward by erotic love for Beatrice (*l'antica fiamma*). We misread the poem if we make his love for her into a simple love of an ideal, or of an abstract beauty. This is not simply the Platonic ladder of love, nor is it merely courtly love; it is a unique and personal love, a gift from God, a symbol of the beauty and goodness of creation, though it is colored by overtones of Platonism and *fin amor*. She is an incarnation for him, a word made flesh; she is a beautiful woman; a lady with grace and authority. She is, as Charles Williams says, a God-bearer.<sup>5</sup> But Dante loves her with all the passion with which a man can love a woman. Paradoxically, in being loved precisely just for who she is, Dante's Beatrice opens up the entire analogical cosmos of meaning and even of embodiment, making real in his moment of life the creation and the Incarnation.

And she too will be replaced as the pilgrim's guide, for in the highest heaven of the *Paradiso* she returns to take her place in the eternal Mystical Rose, and Dante turns to find at his side an old man, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, bearer not of reason or revelation but of the mystical way, to lead him to his final vision of God. Neither reason nor revelation is anything, in the end, but another stepping-stone. But that is the subject for another study.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, 222.

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