

# Rime and Reason

## Conversion and Vergilian Poetics in Dante's *Commedia*

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*This essay discusses how the use of similes and metaphors from Vergil's Aeneid in Dante's Divina Commedia exemplifies both the poetics of conversion and the conversion of poetics, that is, that Dante borrows these figures of speech to illustrate how pre-Christian ideas are converted by Medieval Catholic thought, and to embody Dante's view on the nature and process of conversion. To argue this, I adapt Raymond Williams's terms for cultural analysis in Marxism and Literature, in order to untangle Vergilian figures of speech in the Commedia into their residual, dominant, and emergent parts. I analyse then how the parts compare between the Vergilian original and the Dantean copy. In this essay, I focus on the simile of the falling leaves (Inferno III) and the metaphor of the ancient fire (Purgatorio XXX). The essay concludes by connecting Dante's ability to imbue new meaning into figures of speech to God's power to create and convert. Dante thus exemplifies through his poetic methodology his own belief that the gift of the very best of poets is true imitation of God's method of creation.*

If, as Quintilian proposes, Homer is the Ocean from which all eloquence flows<sup>1</sup>, then it is little wonder that Vergil<sup>2</sup>, who is oft-treated as his literary successor in the epic genre, has been a source of poetic inspiration and cause for “creative imitation”<sup>3</sup> for generations of poets. Meeting the character of Virgil in the first canto of the *Divina Commedia*, Dante the pilgrim overflows with admiration, calling him “[his] master and [his] author” (*Inferno* I.85). In succeeding cantos, he attributes to Vergil both poetic and philosophical mentorship.

Seas of ink have been spilled by scholars of Dante to qualify the relationship between the *Aeneid* and the *Commedia* and, more specifically, to explain why Dante would choose Vergil-the-poet turned Virgil-the-character as his guide. Most analyses fall within two categories: either that allusion to Vergil adds literary depth or chthonic authority to the text or that inserting Virgil allows Dante the pilgrim to surpass him within the story, which represents how Dante the poet surpasses Vergil in real life. As we will discuss later, the focus of commentators in analysing this relationship between the poets has remained largely on the level of plot, and how the characters are representative of their respective philosophies.

This essay argues that there is a third reason for Dante’s use of Vergilian references in his poem: The *Aeneid* is incorporated into the *Commedia* to demonstrate the conversion of ideas and illustrate the nature of conversion. By “demonstrate the conversion of ideas,” I am

referring to how Dante shows us through reinterpretations of Vergilian literary devices that Christian theology gives new life to classical philosophy, and by “illustrate the nature of conversion,” I mean that the literary devices themselves, which weave the *Aeneid* into the *Commedia*, exemplify the process of conversion through a conversion of poetics. In demonstrating this claim, I will focus on the use of similes or metaphors that Dante inherited from the *Aeneid*.

As noted earlier, preceding studies on the relationship between Vergil and Dante have focused mostly on either the confluence or the clash between Christian and Classical cultures in the *Commedia*. Kevin Brownlee discusses how commentators note two key functions of Virgil in the text. First, as Vergil is the author of other key classical texts, references to his work imbue Dante’s poem with a historical richness and literary depth, which maintain Virgil’s presence in the text in spite of his departure from the plot. Such a move would be in-keeping with the culture of poetic lineage that dominates the epic genre, wherein new poets position themselves in a grand literary tradition of previous epics.<sup>4</sup> Second, as Dante’s guide, Virgil represents the pinnacle of classical culture, knowledge, and virtue, which allows him to lead Dante to the summit of earthly experience in Eden. Virgil then disappears near the end of *Purgatorio* while Dante journeys further into *Paradiso* -- an intra-poetic move which scholars claim dramatizes how Christianity philosophically supersedes Classical antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Colin Burrow similarly

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson, 2002, X.1.

<sup>2</sup> As is literary convention, in this paper, Vergil refers to the actual person of Publius Vergilius Maro and Virgil refers to the character within the *Commedia*.

<sup>3</sup> Hardie, 1992, xi.

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<sup>4</sup> Dante makes this desire to be part of the line of important epic poets particularly clear in *Inferno* IV when he is welcomed in Limbo into the great poetic circle of Homer, Ovid, Lucan, Horace.

<sup>5</sup> Kirkpatrick, 2014, Chapter 1. Robin Kirkpatrick notes:

suggests that most writers see Vergil as a proto-Christian figure whose works prefigured the Christian era, but who was himself a part of a secular, imperial power that Christian writers were to leave behind. For both scholars, the focus of commentators in analysing the relationship between Dante and Virgil has been on genre, plot or how the characters are representative of their respective philosophies.

Thus, to expand our understanding, it may help to consider other avenues for exploring Dante and Vergil's relationship, such as the close-reading of similes or metaphors that Dante borrows from Vergil. In his work on "Dante's Use of the Extended Simile in the *Inferno*," James Applewhite traces the shift in popular scholarship regarding Dantean similes. The focus, he claims, has moved from the descriptive power of these similes, a perspective which gave ideas a semblance of verisimilitude, to more contemporary readings which shift the focus of the analysis to the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle,<sup>6</sup> the simile and the surrounding context, or the simile and the entire poem. I contend that these need not be exclusive aims in analysing

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"Running through Dante's representation of [Vergil] in the *Commedia* is a profound concern over the limits as well as the virtues which characterize the literary, discursive, and ethical codes of the pagan world." Dante moving literally and literarily beyond Vergil *in* the text suggests that the same is true of the philosophies they each uphold outside the text -- that pagan antiquity has limits which Christianity surpasses.

<sup>6</sup> Baldick, 2008. In a simile or metaphor, the tenor is the 'subject to which a metaphorical expression is applied. In a metaphor like *the ship of state*, the *state* is the tenor, while the metaphorical term *ship* is called the 'vehicle'. This distinction between tenor and vehicle was formulated by the critic I.A. Richards in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), where he argues that the total meaning of a metaphor is the product of a complex interaction between them.'

some of the similes and metaphors (i.e. those that Dante borrows from Vergil) if we consider how both the descriptive power of the content and the structure of the figures of speech can speak of the same thing: conversion.

To shed light on the mechanism behind the 'conversion' of these literary devices, I lean on Raymond Williams' terms for "'epochal' analysis".<sup>7</sup> According to Williams, there are four elements in the process of cultural transition: the dominant, the emergent, the residual, and the archaic. In this paper, I have adapted these terms as follows: the dominant is the mode of thought which has the greatest influence within a culture.<sup>8</sup> Residuals are elements from a preceding culture that remain "active in the cultural process."<sup>9</sup> These are unlike archaic elements, which have ceased to be "effective elements of the present".<sup>10</sup> Lastly, emergent elements are "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships" that come out of the dominant.<sup>11</sup> In order to demonstrate how Williams's understanding of cultural shift contributes to our reading, let us first consider a well-known example of Dante's simile-borrowing: the simile of the birds and falling leaves.

As leaves that yield their hold on boughs and  
fall  
Through forests in the early frost of autumn,  
Or as migrating birds from the open sea  
That darken heaven when the cold season  
comes  
And drives them overseas to sunlit lands.

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, 1977, 121-35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

There all stood begging to be first across  
And reached out longing hands to the far  
shore.  
(*Aeneid* VI.419-25)

As in autumn the leaves remove  
themselves one after the other, until the  
branch sees all its raiment on the ground:  
so the evil seed of Adam throw  
themselves from that shore one by one,  
when beckoned to, each like a falcon to its  
lure.  
(*Inferno* III.112-7)

In both similes, the tenor is the souls of the dead, while the vehicles are the images of falling leaves or flying birds. The shared tenor and vehicles form the residual element of the simile across the texts, i.e. that which stays the same and active from the *Aeneid* to the *Commedia*. The dominant element, I would suggest, is Medieval Catholic theology, which underpins the *Commedia*. What we are left to meditate on, then, is what is emergent, meaning that which changes due to the interaction between these residual and dominant elements.

The key difference between the similes is the impetus for the movement of the souls. It is implied that, by being compared to the image of falling autumn leaves or migrating birds, Vergil's souls cross the Cocytus because such a trajectory is as natural as seasonal change. The Underworld of pagan antiquity is an inevitable waiting place for the dead before they are reincarnated. In the *Commedia*, the picture presented is also of leaves falling in autumn and birds travelling, but Dante's souls either "remove" or "throw" *themselves* (note that he uses "*gittansi*" in *Inferno* III line 116, the reflexive form of the verb) across the river or are seemingly lured to cross just as falcons are by their masters

(III.61). These actions are both violent and wilful, suggesting that one enters Dante's *Inferno* wilfully and with violence. Additionally, Dante refers to the souls as the "evil seed of Adam" (III.115), whereas Vergil simply calls them "souls" (*Aeneid* VI.418). In so doing, Dante absorbs all the Vergilian souls into the Christian creation story with Adam as the progenitor of all humanity and casts moral judgement on these souls entering Hell. Through these emergent elements, emphasis is placed on the sense that this movement to Hell is both natural and yet a *choice*; even with the vehicle of falcons being lured, the falcon, representing the soul, must decide to take the bait - to give into temptation. The difference between the texts brings to mind St. Thomas Aquinas's ideas, which pervade the *Commedia*,<sup>12</sup> regarding free will: that in being freely given the grace to love God, humans are also free to choose sin and, therefore choose Hell.<sup>13</sup> Generalizing what has been observed from the simile of the falling leaves and flying birds, the movement of the culture of classical antiquity (represented by Vergil's literary devices) through the dominant lens of Catholic theology and Medieval Italian culture<sup>14</sup> creates Dante's simile, which is a

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<sup>12</sup> Iannucci, 2000, 811-3.

<sup>13</sup> Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920, I, q. 23, a. 3. In his reply to an objection that God does not predestine anyone to hell, St. Thomas Aquinas says: 'Reprobation, however, is not the cause of what is in the present--namely, sin; but it is the cause of abandonment by God. It is the cause, however, of what is assigned in the future--namely, eternal punishment. But guilt proceeds from the free-will of the person who is reprobated and deserted by grace. In this way, the word of the prophet is true--namely, "Destruction is thy own, O Israel.'" [emphasis mine]

<sup>14</sup> For further readings in Catholic theology and Medieval European culture, see Lennan, 1998; Cantor, 1995; and Blockmans & Hoppenbrouwers, 2014.

combination of residual elements from the original tenor and vehicle with an emergent twist.

What is striking about the above analysis is that this mechanism resembles the process of Christian conversion. The literary device enters the experience of Medieval Catholic theology or culture, which leads to a *conversio* (i.e. a turning) towards God. The integrity of the tenor and vehicle of the simile, like the uniqueness of a person, is largely preserved, but certain elements change to reflect the new 'cultural' orientation of the device with respect to the Divine.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the simile of the falling leaves first informs the reader of the conversion of the idea that souls inevitably end up in the Underworld into the idea that the afterlife has divisions and it is our choices in life that determine where we go. Moreover, the simile, in and of itself, exemplifies the process of conversion because a new spirit is breathed into the Vergilian model.<sup>16</sup> Each utterance in the *Commedia* is beautifully and maximally indicative because the very form of the poem demonstrates its content. *Rime* and reason are one.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Reta, 1999, 239-42. Fr. Reta writes: 'The whole of Christian conversion is the return to God, the Supreme Good, from which the soul has distanced itself through sin.' St. Augustine, he adds, teaches that when converted, one is still oneself - man is still man - but there is a change of heart or a miracle in the soul. It is this 'interiorization of Christ as redeemer and helper' that enables conversion.

<sup>16</sup> Ezekiel 36:26 Vulg. '*et dabo vobis cor novum et spiritum novum ponam in medio vestri et auferam cor lapideum de carne vestra et dabo vobis cor carneum*'; [translation mine] I will give to you a new heart and I will put a new spirit at your centre. I will take out of your body a heart of stone and I will give to you a heart of flesh.

<sup>17</sup> My sincerest thanks go to Professor John Freccero for his beautiful essays in *The Poetics of Conversion* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), which inspired this view.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the use of the term 'emergent' in this case does depart somewhat from how Williams originally uses it, but even considering the original usage of the term allows us to consider other aspects of conversion. Williams clarifies that the emergent in the strictest sense is not simply a "new phase of the dominant culture", but something "substantially alternative or oppositional to it".<sup>18</sup> Indeed, what we called emergent in the earlier simile does not counter Medieval Catholic theology. If we take orthodox Christian philosophy as the dominant, then it is true that this process of converting literary devices (theoretically) creates emergent similes and metaphors that neither seek to be alternative nor in opposition to the dominant culture. This, however, assumes that Catholic theology is entirely homogenous, which is not true. Ideas continue to be refined in light of developments in ecclesiastical study and revelation. In the previous example, Dante could be responding to Augustinian ideas, which emphasized the element of God's will over human agency in explaining one's destiny after death. While Dante's simile is not alternative or oppositional to Medieval Catholicism as a whole, it does respond to particular strains of thought within the larger theological framework, just as Williams would envision emergent elements doing.<sup>19</sup> To better illustrate this, we can turn our attention towards the metaphor of fire, which is used to

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, 1977, 123.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary of differing medieval views on free will and their possible implications on moral responsibility and judgement in the afterlife, see McClusky, 2002. The piece includes the positions of Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter Lombard, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus, with a reference list for further reading.

describe both the relationships between Dante and Beatrice and between Dido and Aeneas.

This man alone had wrought upon me so  
and moved my soul to yield. I recognize  
The signs of the old flame, of old desire.  
(*Aeneid* IV.30-2)

I turned to the left . . .  
to say to Virgil: “Less than a dram of blood  
is left me that is not trembling: I recognize the  
signs of the ancient flame!”  
(*Purgatorio* XXX.43,46-8)

We can easily identify the residual elements of the metaphor: the vehicle of a remembered fire and the tenor of sexual desire. The dominant element again is medieval theology, which leaves us to discern what is emergent. Without an emergent difference between the two uses of the same metaphor, Dante’s use of Virgil’s image to represent his desire for Beatrice does not fit with what we know of Dante’s sinless state in Eden.

Returning to the *Aeneid*, sexual desire is connected to fire to highlight that it is insatiably destructive. Dido is “inflam[ed] . . . with lust / To the marrow of her bones”<sup>20</sup> and when Aeneas must leave her to fulfil his destiny, she is “all aflame / With rage, like a Bacchante driven wild”.<sup>21</sup> Having stabbed herself in a funeral pyre, the Sidonian queen curses Aeneas that he might “drink in this conflagration / And take with him the omen of [her] death.” Dido’s boundless desire for Aeneas consumes her first internally and then externally, leading to her death and the ruin of her queendom. If such a fire also exists between Dante and Beatrice,

which an “un-converted” reuse of the fire metaphor might suggest, then readers are left at an impasse. Dante, having just climbed out of the Terrace of the Lustful in *Purgatorio* XXVII, ought no longer to sin.

Fire must be imbued with a new meaning in *Purgatorio*. This understanding cues us to the emergent element: the tenor of sexual desire is converted from a want of continence in the *Aeneid* to a pleasure which “[leads] you to love the Good / beyond which there is nothing one can aspire to” (XXXI.23-4) in the *Commedia*. It is Dante’s “thousand desires hotter than flame” (XXXI.118) for Beatrice that leads him to look at the gryphon, which represents Christ. Like a flame, Dante’s desire for Beatrice melts “the ice that tightened around [Dante’s] heart” (XXX.97), which prevented his complete conversion. The resulting anguish from realizing how he had hurt the woman he desired and loved draws from Dante “such repentance as pours forth tears” (XXX.145). Thus, sexual desire in the *Commedia* is not the all-consuming passion of Dido, but rather, a fiery love that sanctifies the pilgrim who is drawn by his attraction to Beatrice to turn fully and finally away from sin towards God.

This conversion of the fire metaphor creates an emergent conception of sexual desire that comes closer to Williams’ use of the term “emergent”. Sexual desire in medieval, ecclesiastical culture was sometimes perceived as something dirty and to be strictly regulated within marriage,<sup>22</sup> Dante’s use, which is closer to the contemporary teachings of the Catholic Church, saw the possibility of taking one’s “own pleasure . . . as leader” (XXVII.131). As Dante’s conscience had been purified in Purgatory with its final wall of fire in Canto XXVII to pursue only good, that he retained sexual desire even in his sinless state suggests that sexual desire is

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<sup>20</sup> Fitzgerald, 1990, 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

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<sup>22</sup> Karras, 2005, 1-6.

not necessarily destructive or dirty, as one would expect from Vergil's depiction or medieval Catholic convention. Through Dante's on-going conversion as he journeys towards *Paradiso*, even his sexual desires have been purified such that they too could lead him to God.

This analysis of the simile of the leaves and the metaphor of ancient fire invites, one hopes, further study in Dante scholarship into how Dante infuses the idea of conversion into figures of speech that he borrows from Vergil. It is clear that Dante does not align himself with or depart from Vergil as a matter of taste, but of principle. Conversion, as we have come to understand in Dante's view and to use Williams' terms, requires an immersion by an idea or individual into a dominant culture in order to create something that carries with it the integrity of the original form (the residual), but also an internal turning towards the Divine (the emergent). Thus, we see even in a figure of speech occupying a single tercet the story of the entire *Commedia*: the gradual movement by the same figure from Hell to Heaven, turning away from despair to enlightenment by Classical antiquity, and finally, to the joyful completeness of Paradise.

This, perhaps, is a lesson that we can take from Dante: to be fair readers of those who journeyed before us, even if they may not have viewed the world exactly as we do, and to discern that which we will absorb and that which we can respectfully disagree with. Dante takes this a step further and weaves the *Commedia* in a way that preserves the artistic and philosophical excellence of antiquity while honouring the integrity of his own faith. This is to Dante's credit for, as he wrote in his *Letter to Cangrande*, he believes that emulation of God's way of creating is the gift of the very best of

poets.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in the *Commedia*, Dante masterfully breathes into his similes and metaphors the same Spirit that was breathed into him, in perfect imitation of the Divine.

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<sup>23</sup> Singleton, 1952, 205.

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