La Divina Mimesis

Art in the Terrace of Pride in *Divina Commedia*

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In Divina Commedia*, the nature of art and the artist is discussed most thoroughly in the terrace of Pride (*Purgatorio *10-12), as the pilgrim navigates through the divine art which is in turn portrayed by the human poet. In creating a mimesis that transcends reality, Dante complicates the roles of creator and imitator, and with that, the relationship between presentation and re-presentation. On the one hand, God—the ultimate Author—takes on the conceit of the artist, as humans, nature, and eventually reality are shown to be magnificent works of divine art. On the other hand, the human poet, who merely imitates, slowly assumes an auctoritas ("authority") as he proves his own capacity for realism. The tension between Arachnean*[1] *and divine art leads to the discourse on the didactic nature of God's creation, which is a teaching to the human artist as he goes through the terrace of Pride.*

[1] Arachne: the weaver who challenges the goddess Minerva with her weaving skills, and who later becomes the symbol of human pride against the divine. For more on Arachne, please see Ovid (2008). *Metamorphoses.* (A. D. Melville, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 6.1-145.

The nature of art and the artist in the *Commedia* becomes the most prominent issue in the terrace of Pride, as Dante encounters the divine artwork which he reproduces by his own medium of art. In that re-presentation, we see the blurred boundary between the author and the artist, when God is described as the ultimate Artist and Dante, in a sense, strives for the supreme *auctoritas*. By looking at these complications—God as the Artist, Dante as the author, and the tension in this seeming reversal of roles—this paper will eventually show the didactic nature of divine art, which is both a teaching and a warning to the human imitator.

Truth as Art

The status of God as the ultimate Artist is most overt in the terrace of Pride, even though Dante makes several allusions to it in *Inferno*. Most important in *Purgatorio* 10 is the introduction of God's art for the first time in the *Commedia*, and furthermore, the introduction of an art that violates the principle of mimesis. Instead of the human art that mimics Nature and stays within the boundary of representation, Dante strives to re-produce an art that already goes beyond the capacity of "verisimilitude" to become the *ver*—the divine art that would put even Nature to scorn.[1,2] Such transcendence is possible because the creator of divine art is the ultimate Author *and* Artist, whose creations are perfection, to the point where it is impossible to draw the line between art and life.

As Dante and Vergil emerge from the gate of Purgatorio and look at the *relievo* on the marble walls, Dante is overwhelmed by a synesthetic experience: the figures that are shown to him in a visual medium slowly evoke his other senses, and, eventually, overcome them. The sensorial confusion increases as Dante travels along the engraved scenes; from the Annunciation, where he only has the perception of hearing, to the Ark of the Covenant, where his eyes and his nose communicate different impressions of the burning incense. Finally, even his sight succumbs to the magic of God's art, as he witnesses the *visibile parlare* ("visible speech") between Trajan and the widow:

> The wretched woman, among all these, *seemed to be saying*: "Lord, avenge my son who has been killed, so that I am broken-hearted!"—
>
> and he *to be replying*: "Now wait until I return"—
>
> and she: "My lord," as a person speaks in whom sorrow is urgent,
>
> "if you do not return?"—and he: "Whoever will be in my place will do it for you"—and she: "What will another's good be to you, if you forget your own?"—
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> then he:" Now be comforted; for it is fitting that I fulfil my duty before I move: justice demands it and compassion holds me here."[3]

The overcoming of the senses is the hallmark of realism, when the audience has to

[1] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.33.

[2] Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheoligizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 122.

[3] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.82-93; emphasis mine.

employ not only one, but multiple means to interact with the work of art. In other words, God's sculpture is not a mere display that one finds in the museum, to be marvelled at by sight; rather, it is the re-installation of one's living experience with full engagement of the senses, mind, and intellect. To enjoy God's art, then, is to be immersed in it. As God creates a visual medium that is endowed with a verbal medium,[4] bringing figures to the verge of coming to life, one cannot help but notice the similarity between the creation of art and the creation of humans. Dante himself provides an account of the human birth in *Purgatorio* 25, where human beings are born from the union of the body and the soul. What separates them from animals is the rational spirit gifted by God, which unites the vegetative and appetitive parts into one single soul with one conscious ruling.[5] And if, as Aristotle argues, the ability to think begets the ability to speak,[6] then humans are also the sculptures of God imbued with a verbal medium.

The idea that humans are the artistic creation of God becomes the red thread running through the terrace of Pride, as the similarity between humans and art is addressed once more in *Purgatorio* 10. The sensorial confusion that Dante experiences does not stop at the three engravings. Rather, it lasts until the end of the canto. Whereas it begins with art that reflects real life, it ends with life that reflects art: it is reality—the human penitents—that is compared to art and described in artistic terms: "As to support a ceiling or a roof we sometimes see for corbel a figure that touches knees to breast, . . . so I saw them to be, when I looked carefully."[7] The principle of mimesis is again violated; art is no longer 'lifelike' but has become the point of reference for life. The line between presentation and re-presentation is blurred, the seeming and the being merged into one,[8] because both are the creation of God and capable of perfection.

The heart of God's realism, however, lies within the last four lines of the canto, when amidst the height of confusion, the pilgrim nevertheless finds clarity in his vision:

> *It is true* that they were more and less compressed according as they had more and less upon their backs, and he whose bearing showed the most patience
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> weeping seemed to say: "I can bear no more."[9]

Far more than a simple statement of what is and what is not, "it is true" marks the culmination of Dante's journey thus far; it has the weight of the

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[4] Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheoligizing Dante.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 124.

[5] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 25.70-75.

[6] Aristotle. (1984). Politics. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Volume 2.* J. Barnes (Ed.). (B. Jowett, Trans.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1253a5-15.

[7] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.130-135.

[8] Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheoligizing Dante.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 130.

[9] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.136-139; emphasis mine.

pilgrim's dawning realization as he beholds the truthfulness in divine art. A short detour back to *Inferno* could help us see the significance of this statement. The terrace of Pride, geographically, is the first proper realm Dante enters after *Inferno* where the greatest art *is* the greatest lie. The pilgrim surely remembers his encounter with Geryon, the "filthy image of fraud,"[10] who nevertheless with his face of truth could trick the pilgrim, even if for only a moment:

> . . . by the notes of
> this comedy, reader, *I swear to you*, so may they not fail to find long favour,
> that I saw . . . [Geryon] come swimming upward.[11]

Every reader of the *Commedia* must have experienced some unease reading these two tercets. How should we believe in Dante's words when he stakes the truthfulness of his whole poem on this emblem of fraud? Yet we are to be reminded that the pilgrim, at any point, is still a fallible human; the self-authenticating "I swear to you," though full of personal conviction, speaks nothing of the objective truth. Geryon may trick the guileless Dante, but he holds no power over the worldly Vergil who, with his speech, shows the pilgrim the true nature of the beast: "Behold the one that makes the whole world stink!"[12] In the terrace of Pride, however, Dante needs no such correction. His conviction is strengthened, his language firm—when he says "it is true," he is speaking the tongue of the Absolute. The fraud of Geryon becomes the testament of truth in divine art, as the pilgrim's faith will otherwise seem unwarranted has he not gone through the most dangerous trial. In other words, the greatest of doubt must necessarily precede the greatest of faith. In order to show readers the perfect truthful art, Dante must first show the perfect lying art that he himself has overcome.

As we approach the thinning distinction between art and reality, the representational language also takes on a double meaning to show God's identity as the Artist. The acrostic *segno* ("image") appears most prominently in *Purgatorio* 12, *Paradiso* 6 and *Paradiso* 19, and as the poem progresses, it moves from graphic representation to historical presentation. In *Purgatorio* 12, *segno* remains a likeness, something created after the original:

> Rehoboam, your *image* there no longer seems menacing but full of terror: a chariot carries it off without anyone pursuing.[13]

By contrast, the *segno* that appears in the heaven of Providential history is no longer an artistic creation; rather than an image, it becomes part of the historical events themselves. Posing as

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[10] Alighieri, D. (1997). Inferno. *The Divine Comedy of Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17.7.

[11] Alighieri, D. (1997). Inferno. *The Divine Comedy of Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 16.127-131.

[12] Alighieri, D. (1997). Inferno. *The Divine Comedy of Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17.3.

[13] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12.46-48; emphasis mine.

the imperial eagle ("the sacrosanct emblem"),[14] *segno* is God's messenger with great deeds that humans fail to emulate. The inanimate sign is given an agency, capable of making presentation instead of re-presentation. Finally, in the heaven of Justice, as *segno* is completely transformed into the sign of life, reality and art become one once more in the skywriting of God:

> They *showed themselves*, then, in five times seven vowels and consonants, and I noted the parts as they were dictated to me.
>
> "*DILIGITE IUSTITIAM*" were the first verb and noun of the whole depiction,
> "*QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM*" were the last.
>
> Then they remained arranged in the *M* of the fifth word, so that Jove appeared there silver adorned with gold.[15]

These are the letters made by human souls. *Segno*, quite literally, is still a sign of art, but this is art created from life—the collective artwork made from none other than the blessed spirits of *Paradiso*. They have been art in life and art after death; they are the messengers and also the message, or, as Teodolinda Barolini puts it, "When God chooses to write, the signs he uses are humans."[16] This is also the final destination for, and transformation of, the penitents in *Purgatorio* 10. At the same time, the journey from the terrace of Pride to the heaven of Justice is no mere linear progression. The truth about God's realism is already fully conveyed in *Purgatorio* 12, when Dante professes: "one who saw the true event did not see better than I."[17] The carvings in the terrace of Pride are not likened to reality; they *are* reality, and by taking part in witnessing them, Dante also makes himself a part of history.

The Artist, however, hardly limits his artistic expression to humans. If we were to say that reality is God's art, then Nature is no exception. The concept of Nature as God's art is prevalent in classical tradition, and Dante himself alludes to it prior to his depiction of divine art in *Purgatorio* 10. In *Inferno* 11, Dante introduces the principle of mimesis that he would engage with, and even challenge, in later canti, through the genealogy of human art, Nature, and God: "Nature takes its course from the divine intellect and art; . . . [and] your art follows Nature as much as it can, . . . so that your art is almost God's grandchild."[18] In other words, the imitator cannot surpass the imitated. Human art follows Nature "as much as it can," and Nature, despite being the origin of human art, cannot surpass the divine art which it "takes its course" from. The argument leaves us with the implication that Nature itself is imperfect, and Dante, eventually, affirms the idea.[19] As the heavens of

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[14] Alighieri, D. (2013). Paradiso. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6.32.

[15] Alighieri, D. (2013). Paradiso. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 18.88-95; emphasis mine.

[16] Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheoligizing Dante.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 129.

[17] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12.67-69

[18] Alighieri, D. (1997). Inferno. *The Divine Comedy of Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 11.97-105.

[19] Alighieri, D. (2013). Paradiso. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford:

Paradiso follow a strict Aristotelian structure, it would be no surprise if the rest of the *Commedia* also follows the cosmology of *De Caelo*. Anything in the sublunar realm for Aristotle—that is, the terrestrial world—is imperfect for its lack of circular motions.[20] The Earth, in that sense, is the imperfect wax in which God places his seal, and the Nature that is born from her also suffers from defects. Just as all men are "children of God" but none has the perfection of Christ, earthly Nature, too, cannot claim the perfection that was once given to Eden.

The true divine art, though, is not subject to such limits. With the perfect wax, God can create something that surpasses Nature, for He is the imitator of none and Nature is but one creation of His. Such an art is put on glorious display in the very beginning of *Purgatorio* 10, to which Nature can only pale in comparison:

> I saw that the inner bank, which, rising straight up, permitted no ascent,
>
> was of white marble and adorned with such carvings that not only Polyclitus but even Nature would be put to scorn there.[21]

Art, or *artificio*, it seems, is not always an imperfect conceit, something lacking substance. Through God, we find a kind of art that *is* perfection, which shows that art is perfectible in itself. The nature of the artist decides the value of his creation, and unlike the Lord, fallible humans cannot produce the art that transcends. As the imperfect wax renders the imperfect imprint, human art, failing to find its perfect form in the human artist, remains the imitation and never the imitated.

Art as Truth

As God assumes the identity of the Artist, Dante the poet instead takes the opposite direction: from the human imitator, he slowly establishes himself as the *creator*. When we blur the line between God's art and reality, it is also increasingly hard to distinguish His art from the human art that represents it. In other words, as Dante re-produces God's art, he in fact goes beyond the limits of an imitator and creates an art on the verge of becoming reality. In *Purgatorio* 10, Dante professes to be a teller of truth and not a maker of art,[22] whose words bear the *auctoritas* of the Author:

> *It is true* that they were more and less compressed according as they had more and less upon their backs, and he whose bearing showed the most patience
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> weeping seemed to say: "I can bear no more."[23]

The conviction in the three words "it is true" compels many readings. First, as we have discussed, it testifies to the unparalleled realism of

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Oxford University Press, 13.76-78; Nature can only render the "imperfect wax," like an artist who falls short because of a "trembling hand."

[20] Aristotle. (1984). On the Heavens. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Volume 1.* J. Barnes (Ed.). (J. L. Stocks, Trans.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 269a-269b15.

[21] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.29-33.

[22] Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheoligizing Dante.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 126.

[23] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.136-139; emphasis mine.

God's art. Second, it speaks of the supposed veracity of Dante's creation—which we will address in due course. Third, and perhaps most apparent, it complicates the relationship between God's art and Dante's own, to the point where the two authors are almost interchangeable. Readers are reminded that it is Dante who delivers God's art in its entirety, who, with the *Commedia*, replicates the divine artwork with all its visual allure. This is the perfect mimesis that *is*, or even goes beyond, reality in our earthly senses.[24] If the pilgrim is confronted with sensorial confusion only once, the readers are confounded twice—with God's artistic realism and with Dante's rendering of it. In that rendering, Dante brings his authorship closer to that of God. Their arts are interwoven; the divine art is strangely textual[25] while Dante's becomes more and more visual, as though his art is *visibile parlare* itself. And indeed, as God creates a kind of living art, Dante also makes the conscious attempt to produce his own *visibile parlare*. The story of Trajan and the widow is not a mere overcoming of sight, for it is clear that Dante does not focus on the actions as they unfurl. Rather, he directs our attention to the speech that *seems* to be, one that can be seen by the eyes. From a story originally inscribed in marbles, the tale of Trajan becomes as much a verbal representation as it is visual.

There is another kind of story that Dante, posed as the author, wishes to tell—the verbal history that, with his words, is turned into visual art. The thirteen examples of pride in *Purgatorio* 12 are in fact less of God's carving than of Dante's historical account. And that account is graphically displayed more than told: of the thirteen tercets, four begin with "V," four with "O," and four with "M", together creating the VOM that is "human."[26] Man's history of pride *appears* before the readers' eyes just as the carvings are *seen* by the pilgrim; that in itself is a work of art engraved in textual stones. In other words, Dante the poet is giving us exactly what God gives Dante the pilgrim: an account full of authenticity that evokes all our senses. To go further still, the V-O-M pattern is visual not only in form but also in content. "Vedeva" and "mostrava," one standing for vision and the other for representation, remind readers that Dante is indeed *showing* the history of man. At this point, Dante is no longer just the human imitator who re-creates God's art. He has assumed an authorship while trying to build his own *artificio*.

Dante's authorship, however, lacks one thing still: the authority of the word. This is where the three words "it is true" return with their full resonance. As mentioned, they speak of the veracity in Dante's work—such a claim requires readers to believe in not only what Dante sees, but also what he says. The ontological difference between the pilgrim's experience and the words rendering it on page creates tension within the *Commedia*, and the only way for readers to resolve that tension is to willingly accept the poet's words as the truth. It is, however, not an easy acceptance. Language, much like human art, has the potential for perfection, but too often finds itself in the imperfect wax: while the Annunciation once "bridges the gap between

[24] I owe this point to Professor Andrew Hui.

[25] Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheoligizing Dante.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 126.

[26] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12.25-63

Heaven and Earth,"[27] the tongues of Babel, failing to bridge the same gap, could only dissolve into chaos and confusion.[28] If that is the case, what makes Dante's poetry closer to truth than the words of Nimrod? Dante himself must have had this question in mind at the start of the poem when he carefully delineates the language he will speak—that is, the language of the divine. The first invocation of the poem is dedicated to the Muses, a tribute to the classical epic tradition; at the same time, it is also the acknowledgement that his story needs both divine inspiration and the human "high wit."[29] The poet can produce the form, but the substance, the breath of life, must come from God. *Fictio rhetorica musicaque poita*[30]—poetry is 'the fiction arranged through rhetoric and music,' but the 'fiction' here is not one of fabricated lies. The 'fiction' of poetry is, instead, a *composition* of dual forces (*fictio* from *fictum*, 'to have been composed'), a unity of truth and art, of the divine and the human. Conceived in this way, Dante's *Commedia* becomes the closest approximation to truth, and the poet could finally speak with the authority of a creator and not imitator.

We have arrived to the point where it is surprisingly, and perhaps dangerously, hard to separate Dante the author and God the Artist, and Dante himself playfully treads that thin line. This he resolves by building a dual authorship with the Lord. The greatest—and grandest—visible speech Dante has produced is not the story of Trajan nor the visual account of human history, but the whole *Commedia* itself. Each cantica has its own visible speech: the inscription on the gate of *Inferno*,[31] divine art in *Purgatorio*,[32] and the skywriting of *Paradiso* where the souls form the letters of God.[33] It is as though each realm is a sculpture of God just like each cantica is a sculpture of Dante, and the poem is at once a work of art and reality. But even though Dante is the author of the *Commedia*'s poetic world, he does not try to distance himself from the *auctoritas* of God at all. His choice is reflected in their mutual medium of art—sculpture. Unlike paintings which are created anew, sculptures are only the removal of excess. It is the closest kind of art to truth, one that is not a mimesis but a presentation. When the artist sculpts, he does not invent; he aims to only reveal the truth that already exists, which means the reality that Dante delivers is

[27] Mazzotta, G. (1979). Rhetoric and History. *Dante Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the* Divine Comedy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 73; Mazzotta refers to Virgin Mary's words, "Ecce ancilla Dei," when she accepts Gabriel's message that she would become the mother of Jesus.

[28] Mazzotta, G. (1979). Rhetoric and History. *Dante Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the* Divine Comedy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 73; when Nimrod and the inhabitants of Babel decide to build a tower tall enough to reach Heaven, God punishes them by making their speech unintelligible. See Genesis 11:1-9.

[29] Alighieri, D. (1997). Inferno. *The Divine Comedy of Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2.7.

[30] Marchesi, S. (2011). Poetics. *Dante & Augustine: Linguistics, Poetics, Hermeneutics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 81; Original Latin from Dante Alighieri's *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.iv.2.

[31] Alighieri, D. (1997). Inferno. *The Divine Comedy of Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3.10-12

[32] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.82-95

[33] Alighieri, D. (2013). Paradiso. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 18.88-95

also the reality that God creates in the beginning. As the two authors converge in ideas, Dante also gains his own *auctoritas*, which allows his text to transcend imitation and exceed the limit of historical contingency.[34]

Once this dual authorship takes place, though, a paradox emerges: Dante becomes the greatest human creator by being the greatest emulator of all. Even though he is deeply aware of his own creation, he yields to the Lord and turns himself into a spokesperson, or, in other words, a *scribe*:

> Now stay there, reader, on your bench,
> thinking back on your foretaste here, if your wish to rejoice long before you tire;
> I have set before you: now feed yourself, for all my care is claimed by *that matter of which I have become the scribe*.[35]

Whereas in *Purgatorio* he was still walking on the tightrope between authority and deference, in *Paradiso*, Dante the author has become Dante the scribe. His artistic expression not only is sanctioned by God, but also is the literal *transcript* of the divine message; Dante is now the godly instrument that tells readers the truth as it is. His text is the Scripture made by him, the human scribe, and by God, the ultimate Author not only of the text, but also of Dante and of the entire universe.[36] The *Commedia* is both a Scripture written anew and a reincarnation of the original—Dante is able to infer from the sculptures of *Purgatorio* 10 only because he is well-acquainted with the stories behind them.[37] What he shows readers, thus, is neither his imagination nor an event that he witnesses first-hand. It is a story retold which evokes the final *auctoritas* of God. For this imitation (and not creation), Dante enjoys a prestige that no other artist can lay claim to. As he re-presents the supreme art that equals reality, Dante also achieves a perfect realism in which human art, immaculately conceived, can surpass even Nature. The contradiction here is that the celebration of God's art leads to the celebration of his own mimesis. As he exalts divine art, the human artist, who perfectly imitates it, becomes the greatest of poets only by being a scribe.[38]

In the same way, Dante surpasses all other artists, including Vergil, whose only preoccupation is the re-presentation of Nature. Even though he inherits from the classical tradition—and he would later include himself in that canon[39]—Dante is, ultimately, going a step further. In the one step that he has beyond Vergil in *Purgatorio* 10, Dante leaves

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[34] Ascoli, A. R. (2008). The author in history. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 7.

[35] Alighieri, D. (2013). Paradiso. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri.* (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.22-27; emphasis mine.

[36] Ascoli, A. R. (2008). The author in history. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 7.

[37] Heffernan, J. A. W. (1993). A Genealogy of Ekphrasis. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 44.

[38] Barolini, T. (1984). Dante: 'ritornero poeta.' *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the* Comedy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 275.

[39] Hawkins, P. S. (1992). Self-Authenticating Artifact: Poetry and Theology in *Paradiso* 25. *Christianity and Literature*, 41(4), 388.

the classical tradition behind, moving only with his delight from the divine creation. That is because Vergil, though virtuous, lacks the vision of God, and as Winthrop Wetherbee argues, it has come to the point where his art is inadequate to express the new reality. Classical art, it seems, is inspiring but static.[40] It lacks depth and motion, while the art of Dante will continue to evolve. This is also the crucial point which foreshadows Vergil's disappearance at the end of *Purgatorio*. Though he is Dante's beloved and indispensable guide in *Inferno*, as they come closer to God in their ascent, Vergil's authority over Dante is slowly washed away. Enrico Mestica likewise emphasizes that Vergil's art is a tableau, but Dante's is a *relievo*: "Vergil paints descriptively, employing ample display of images and colours; Dante sculpts, using speech made visible."[41] Living art—*visibile parlare*—is beyond what the pagan poet could ever accomplish. And as Dante seeks an expression that goes beyond human capacity, he has to move past Vergil, who, while nudging Dante forward, can only remain in one place.

Author, Scribe, Messenger

There is danger lurking, still, in Dante's presumption to be the divine scribe. Dante himself is not unaware of such danger: as he treads the fine line between being author and being imitator, one misstep is enough for him to become the second Arachne. That leads us to the didactic function of art, and the reason divine art appears, for the first time in the *Commedia*, in the terrace of Pride. God's art is placed in the terrace of Pride because that is the one vice Dante might be guilty of, once the pull from the fire of Ulysses becomes too great to resist. There is nothing to guarantee that the human artist, capable of creating an art that rivals reality, would not want to create for himself his own world. Such was the tragedy that befell Ulysses, who in his mad flight to find the *nova terra* [42] did not realize his transgression. The sculptures in *Purgatorio*, then, are a teaching and a warning—to teach the penitents the grace of humility and to warn the artist about his human limit. It is no coincidence that to look at the examples of pride, penitents have to walk with their eyes cast down; they have to assume a humble posture before learning about the fallen proud. This also reiterates the high moral position that Dante ascribes to divine art.[43] Art, as we have discussed, has no inherent moral value; it only takes on the character of the artist. And divine art, whose artist is the Lord, indeed has the supreme nature needed for such guidance. Just as Minerva tries to warn her emulator by her handiwork, God inscribes his warning and teaching in stone,[44] lest the human sculptor falls prey to Arachnean pride. Yet despite their similarities, Dante would not become the second Arachne. The figures of Arachne and Ulysses serve as the constant reminder for Dante, who,

[40] Wetherbee, W. (2008). Ovid and Vergil in Purgatory. *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 134-135.

[41] Mestica, E. (1921-22). Commentary to *Inferno*, III. 82-99. (R. Hollander, Trans.). Firenze: R. Bemporad & figlio. Retrieved from http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu.

[42] Alighieri, D. (1997). Inferno. *The Divine Comedy of Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 26.124-137.

[43] Kelemen, J. (2008). Canto XII: Eyes Down. *Lectura Dantis: Purgatorio*. A. Mandelbaum, A. Oldcorn, & C. Ross (Ed.). Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: The University of California Press, 127.

[44] Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheoligizing Dante.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 131.

having witnessed their *folle volo*, is able to gain his mental vision.[45] The poet is aware of his Ulyssean language and aim, but that awareness keeps him inside the boundary that should not be crossed. Arachne falls because she did not have the goddess in her vision, whereas Dante, in his creation, is always conscious of the real Author. The ship that brought Ulysses his demise in *Inferno* 26 returns in *Purgatorio* 12,[46] but this time with a positive ending: with its wings and oars, Dante will fly. That is because, freed from pride, Dante has transformed into the angelic butterfly who "flies to justice without a shield";[47] he was walking out of the terrace of Pride with a straight posture but a humble mind. This is the flight that will eventually take him to God, unlike Icarus, whose flight to the Sun ends in failure.

The placement of divine art in the terrace of pride also shows Dante's *officio commesso*—his duty as the enlightened one to provide guidance to others. As one who blurs the line between art and reality, author and imitator, Dante now assumes the role of learner and teacher as well. In his own acrostic there is a lesson. The "V" in "VOM"—human—has both the peaks of the blessed and the abyssal depth of the fallen;[48] it indicates both the perfectibility of human soul and our tendency to stray from the right path. The collective of poets and artists in *Purgatorio* is the proof for that. With their eyes fixated on "supremacy" instead of God, they all suffer from the harm of pride despite their otherwise perfectible art and soul. The spiritual path after death, it seems, is not pre-destined. Rather, as Dante has stated in his *Epistle to Cangrande*, man deserves of reward or punishment according to his virtues and vices, exercised by his own free will.[49] As Dante's greatest art, the *Commedia* is also his greatest sculpture for humankind—Dante is teaching man what he has learned from God. The didactic nature of the *Commedia* cannot be denied: as the pilgrim undertakes a journey that would eventually lead to salvation, he is also showing the correct path to take, or in other words, how to attain the state of the blessed souls.

Ultimately, this *officio commesso* is what separates Dante from Arachne. Arachne's artistic vision is fraught with ills, and her craft, though flawless, in the end is nothing more than the deceits she chooses to capture. Dante's art, however, is not fraud, but guidance; not trickery, but truth. By submitting to the highest moral good of God's creation, the poet could claim that moral transcendence for himself. It is in this deference to God that Dante resolves the tension between the author and the Artist, and in the process creates a mimesis that, though borne of a human, is in nature divine.

Acknowledgements

[45] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.121-123.

[46] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12.4-6.

[47] Alighieri, D. (2004). Purgatorio. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.124-126.

[48] Ascoli, A. R. (2008). The author of the *Commedia*. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 395.

[49] Alighieri, D. (1991). Epistle to Cangrande. *Critical Essays on Dante*. (G. Mazzotta, Trans.). London: MacMillan Publishing Company, 6.

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