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Having strayed from the right, virtuous path of life, Dante finds himself in a dark landscape of ambiguity, confusion, and possible sin. He narrates his own everlasting fame. It is unclear to what degree this forest is a real, earthly place or a more allegorical, spiritual
landscape. Commento Baroliniano Text & Translations Gallery Video Audio life=voyage: Aristotle's definition of time as a "middle-point" ("mezzo") mythic binaries in a visionary landscape the universe governed by love: "divine love" ("l'amor divino") caused the stars to move in the moment of creation (verses 39-40); this
passage effectively constitutes the Commedia's first Creation discourse la lupa (the she-wolf) as the embodiment of negative desire, cupiditas "Nel mezzo" as an extraordinary meeting-point of cultural imbrication. To the traditional glosses which include Isaiah 38:10 and Horace's Ars Poetica, I add: 1) the existential
mezzo, from Aristotle's definition of time as a "kind of middle-point" in the Physics (cited by Dante in the convivio) and 2) the ethical mezzo, from Aristotle's definition of time as a "kind of middle-point" in the Physics (cited by Dante in the canzone Le dolci rime and later in the Convivio) Vergil/Virgilio and the introduction of history, seen as crucially
informing the present: from Roman history to that of contemporary "Italia" (106), from Roman poetry (the Aeneid) to contemporary "Italia" (206), from Roman poetry (the Aeneid) to contemporary "Italia" (206), from Roman poetry (106), from Roman po
textuality; classical culture both in bono and in malo a blueprint of the afterlife [1] Inferno 1 and Inferno 2 are both introductory canti, although in quite different ways: Inferno 1 is more universal and world-historical in its focus, while Inferno 2 is more attentive to the plight and history of one single man. The hero's journey
through Hell does not begin until Inferno 3. So what happens before we get to Inferno 3? What happens in conversations with Virgilio (to whom we shall return). In these conversations the poet lays out the ideological
premises of the journey that the protagonist is about to undertake. Inferno 1 and Inferno 2 do not advance Dante-protagonist's material journey so much as they provide the underlying ideological foundation on which Dante-poet can build. In other words, Inferno 1 and Inferno 2 lay the ideological foundation without which
the pilgrim's journey would lack credibility. [3] The reader will note that in the above paragraphs I use the terms "hero", "protagonist", and "pilgrim", all terms that I distinguish from the "poet". I am introducing the reader to the "bifocals" that we wear as readers of the Commedia, the hermeneutic lenses with which we are
able to keep track of the distinction between the poet and the protagonist. The poet writes in the present tense of his writing (which occurs long after the experience of the vision in 1300) and writes in the past tense of his journey through the afterlife in the spring of 1300. The protagonist or hero or pilgrim is the voyaging-
self within the fiction, as described by the writing poet. [4] The traveler is the protagonist of the plot; the poet is the maker of the plot and protagonist of the plot — in the first verses of the poem, a primer that we can access by tracking verb
tenses. The pilgrim's story takes place in the past, and thus the first verb of the Commedia is in the past absolute (passato remoto in Italian), the past tense that describes a specific occurrence: "mi ritrovai in una selva oscura" (2). In the next verse we are introduced to the work-horse of the plot, the imperfect tense of
ongoing action in the past that undergirds the narrative: "che la diritta via era smarrita" (3). The first terzina in this way introduces the poet, the narrator who is telling the story, and therefore we encounter two verbs in the present
tense. One ("è") refers to the experience of the verb to be ("era") — the descriptor of what the protagonist's experience was like in
the past — is placed next to the present tense of the verb to be ("è") which describes the experience of the writer: how difficult it is ("è" in the present) to speak ("dir") of what that experience was ("era") in the past! That past experience was so fearsome that the thought of it still now — in the present of the writing writer —
renews ("rinova") his fear. [7] The third terzina continues with the writer and his recollections in the present of an experience so bitter that death is barely more so, using two present-tense verbs to communicate the ongoing nature of such an experience: "Tant'è amara che poco è più morte" (7). But the ultimate goal of the
bitter experience was to find the good, and in order to treat the good that he found ("per trattar del ben ch'io vi trovai" [8]), the poet "will tell" of the other things that he saw: "dirò dell'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte" (9). In verse 8 we see the return to the past absolute ("trovai") and in verse 9 the introduction of two new tenses:
the future tense of the author and what he will say — "dirò" — and a new past tense, the passato prossimo ("ho scorte"). Hence by the time the poet arrives at the end of terzina 3 he has put in all his temporal markers and accustomed us to his toggling back and forth between the events of the past and his recollections of
them in the present. [8] Because, in Inferno 1 and Inferno 2, Dante-poet is creating the premises that enable the reader to suspend credibility and to "believe" in that action — he is already engaged in the Commedia's great project of creating a virtual reality. [9] Inferno
consists of 34 canti, Purgatorio of 33 canti, and Paradiso of 33 canti, making Inferno 1 the "extra" unit of text, as befits a canto that offers a prelude to the journey as a whole. Inferno 1 concludes with a schematic outline of the three regions of the afterlife: verses 114-117 describe Hell, verses 118-120 describe Purgatory,
and verses 121-129 describe Paradise. Together, this section offers a blueprint of the entire journey, of all 100 canti of the poem. [10] Therefore, when Dante wrote Inferno 1 he knew at least in schematic terms that the Commedia would comprise three regions, likely corresponding to three books. * * *
[11] The Commedia is the story of a journey through the Christian "after-life" of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Ideas of the imagining of the Christian afterlife, a place that can be traced and debated. [12] Dante's signature moves in the forging of
his afterlife are the mixing of classical with Christian sources and of high with low culture: Therefore, although Dante reflects the most informed theological template, he widens the range of cultural resources available to him in two
fundamental ways: one, he utilizes pagan sources as well as Christian ones; two, he does not limit his Christian sources to the high culture) pagan sources as Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, which he credits as a source for the structure of his hell, and
Vergil's underworld in Aeneid 6, various of whose characters and features he appropriates and transforms. But Dante's hell also demonstrates clear links to the established popular iconography of hell and to popular iconography
da la Riva and Giacomino da Verona. As Alison Morgan correctly notes in Dante and the Medieval Other World, Dante "is the first Christian writer to combine the popular material with the theological and philosophical systems of his day" ("Medieval Multiculturalism and Dante's Theology of Hell," cited in Coordinated
Reading, p. 103). [13] The premise of Dante's journey is that he has lost his way: "ché la diritta via era smarrita" (for the straight way was lost [Inf. 1.3]). Before the arrival of assistance, the pilgrim is dismayed by the three beasts who successively block his path. Following the first beast, the lonza, the poet informs us that
he was heartened by the knowledge that "the sun was rising now in fellowship / with the same stars that had escorted it / when Divine Love first moved those things of beauty" (Inf. 1.38-40). In other words, the sun is in Aries, and it is springtime. The verses that tell us that the season is springtime constitute the
Commedia's first astronomical periphrasis (see the diagram at the end of this page). [14] The conjuring of the moment when "Divine Love first moved those things of beauty" (the "cose belle" are the stars in the heavens) is also effectively the first of the Commedia's many Creation discourses. The Paradiso is studded
with meditations on Creation, when the One became the Many. We sometimes forget that the first Creation discourse is embedded in Inferno 1's reference to springtime, which becomes through a redolent periphrasis the season when Creation occurred. We note too that the ground of being is also the ground of
aesthetics: God made cose belle — things of beauty. [15] In the first verses of the poem, the pilgrim is lost in a dark wood at the mid-way point of life's path, which is to say, at 35 years old. Very conveniently, Dante was born in 1265 and in 1300, the year he stipulates for his afterlife journey, he was precisely 35, midway
through a lifespan of 70 years (see Psalm 90:10: "Our days may come to seventy years"). The poet has combined biblical and classical motifs to create a uniquely hybrid "middling" textuality. Dante's beginning in the middle, "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" (Midway upon the journey of our life [Inf. 1.1]), evokes, as
critics have long noted, both biblical and classical precedents, both Isaiah 38:10 ("In the middle of my days I must depart") and Horace's injunction in Ars Poetica to commence a narrative "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart") and Horace's injunction in Ars Poetica to commence a narrative "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart") and Horace's injunction in Ars Poetica to commence a narrative "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart") and Horace's injunction in Ars Poetica to commence a narrative "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart") and Horace's injunction in Ars Poetica to commence a narrative "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart") and Horace's injunction in Ars Poetica to commence a narrative "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart") and Horace's injunction in Ars Poetica to commence a narrative "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias res" (in the middle of my days I must depart "in medias 
[16] To the above intertexts for "Nel mezzo" I would add the Aristotelian understanding of time. In the Physics, Aristotle describes time as "a kind of middle-point, uniting in itself both a beginning and an end, a beginning of future time and an end of past time" (Physics 8.1.251b18-26). In his philosophical prose treatise,
Convivio, Dante shows that he is acquainted with Aristotle's writings on time, citing the Physics as follows: "Lo tempo, secondo che dice Aristotle nel quarto de la Fisica, è 'numero di movimento, secondo prima e poi" (Time, according to Aristotle in the fourth book of the Physics, is "number of movement, according to
before and after" [Conv. 4.2.6]). [17] When Dante uses the word "mezzo" in the first verse of the Commedia he therefore alerts us to our existential being in time, for time is "a kind of middle-point" according to Aristotle. The word thus possesses a metaphysical valence. [18] The metaphor "cammin di nostra vita"/"journey
of our life" begins the work of conflating the journey of the poem with the existential and personal journeys through time and space that each of us on this planet experiences every day. As Dante had previously written in the Convivio, human life is a "new and never before traveled path": "[il] nuovo e mai non fatto
cammino di questa vita" (the new and never before traveled path of this life [Convivio 4.12.15]). The Commedia's work of creating a virtual reality, of encouraging its readers to feel that they are journeying along with Dante, begins with the metaphor of life as a path on which we all walk. The walkers are plural and many,
and each has her own path; in this sense the path are many. But we all walk the cammino di questa vita: in this existential sense the path is one. The experience of life as a journey through time and space is an experience shared by all. [19] The opening metaphor of the path, of the voyage by land, will shortly be
enriched by the simile of a disastrous voyage by sea. The shipwrecked man who climbs from the watery deep to the shore is the first "Ulyssean" reference of the poem (Inf. 1.22-24). The mythic Greek hero Odysseus, Ulysses in Latin, as Dante encountered him in Vergil's Aeneid and Cicero's De Finibus and other Latin
texts, is a prime reference point in the Commedia, featured in Inferno 26: he is the quintessential voyager who comes to perdition, who is lost at sea. As many have noted, Ulysses is Dante-pilgrim's negative double. However, as my book The Undivine Comedy argues, Dante-poet becomes ever more transgressive and
Ulyssean as the Commedia proceeds. From the point of view of the writing poet, Paradiso is the most transgressive part of the poem. My usage of "Ulyssean" will be clarified going forward and is a major theme of The Undivine Comedy. [20] The protagonist sets out to climb a hill whose heights are "dressed" in divine
light. He attempts to climb the hill three times and three times and three times he is repulsed and forced backward and downward, to perdition. The poet here creates a "stuttering" narrative life to the bumpy and ever-impeded paths of our
existential lives. The three beasts who block the pilgrim's way grow ever more fearsome: the first is a leopard (lonza), then comes a lion (leone), and finally a she-wolf (lupa). Particularly important for the essential
Dantean theme of desire as it will be unfolded throughout the Commedia is the lupa, the only one of the three beasts who will be specifically recalled in a later canto (see Purgatorio 20.10-12, cited in the long quote from Undivine Comedy in par. 22 below). The she-wolf goes beyond a narrow definition of avarice and
embodies the negative polarity in the spectrum of desire; cupiditas, [21] Desire is defined in the Convivio as that which we lack; "ché nullo desidera quello che non ha, che è manifesto difetto" (for no one desires what he has, but what he does not have, which is manifest lack [Conv. 3.15.3]). Desire is
defective, as I write in The Undivine Comedy: Desire is defective, while the cessation of desire is happiness, beatitude as spiritual autonomy — as emancipation from the new — is introduced as early as the Vita Nuova, where Dante learns to place his beatitudine not in Beatrice's greeting
which can be removed (thus causing him to desire, to exist defectively), but in that which cannot fail him: "guello che non mi puote venire meno" (VN 18.4). Since nothing mortal can satisfy these conditions, we either learn from the failure of one object of desire to cease to desire mortal objects altogether, or we move
forward along the path of life toward something else, something new. (The Undivine Comedy, p. 26) [22] The description of the lupa connotes desire as lack, for she eats and remains hungry, embodying Augustinian cupidity and lack of peace: The lupa of Inferno 1 illuminates the negative side of the basic human
condition whereby disire è moto spiritale and recalls Augustine's own reduction of all desire to spiritual motion, either in the form of "charity," desire that remains rooted in the flesh. As cupidity, our dark desire, the lupa is quintessentially without peace, "la bestia sanza pace"
(Inf. 1.58). Her restlessness and insatiability denote unceasing spiritual motion, unceasing desire: heavy "with all longings" — "di tutte brame" (49) — her greedy craving is never filled, and after eating she is more hungry than before: "mai non empie la bramosa voglia, / e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria" [Inf. 1.98-99])
Her limitless hunger is both caused by unsatisfied desire and creates the condition for ever less satisfaction, since, in Augustine's words, "When vices have emptied the soul and led it to a kind of extreme hunger, it leaps into crimes by means of which impediments to the vices may be removed or the vices themselves
sustained" (De Doctrina Christiana 3.10.16). When the "antica lupa" is recalled as an emblem of cupidity on purgatory's terrace of avarice (again indicating the common ground that underlies all the sins of inordinate desire), her "hunger without end" is once more her distinguishing characteristic: "Maladetta sie tu, antica
lupa, / che più che tutte l'altre bestie hai preda / per la tua fame sanza fine cupa!" (Cursed be you, ancient wolf, who more than all the other beasts have prey, because of your deep hunger without end! [Purg. 20.10-12]). (The Undivine Comedy, p. 110) [23] Desire is lack, but therefore it is also the imperative of forward
motion: the "spiritual motion" in which we engage to fill the lack. As Dante tells us in Purgatorio 18, desire is spiritual motion: "disire, / ch'è moto spiritale" (Purg. 18.31-32]). Desire leads us astray, but desire also leads us to the good. How we negotiate our impulse of desire, whether we regulate it with our reason — these
are the keys to our destiny. Desire for Dante is not wrong per se, but must always be controlled by reason, as discussed in the Commento on Inferno 5. [24] Dante's interest in the regulation of desire by reason leads him to value misura, the moderating force in the Aristotelian ethical scheme. Aristotle wrote on virtue as
the mean between two vicious extremes in Nicomachean Ethics and Dante, by the time he came to write Inferno 1, had already meditated at length on the idea of virtue as the mean. Indeed, in his canzone Le dolci rime (ca. 1294), Dante translates Aristotle from Latin into Italian, referring to the Aristotle ian "mean" in
Italian as "mezzo": "Quest'è, secondo che l'Etica dice, / un abito eligente / lo qual dimora in mezzo solamente" (This is, as the Ethics states, a "habit of choosing which keeps steadily to the mean" [Le dolci rime, 85–87; Foster-Boyde trans.]). [25] One of the themes of this commentary is the degree to which the Aristotelian
idea of virtue as the mean permeates the deep structures of Dante's thought. In other words, although Dante certainly resonates to Augustine and other dualist Christian thinkers on the topic of desire, he does not keep his analysis within a binary structure, but opens it to an Aristotelian spectrum. [26] Aristotle's idea of
the mezzo belongs within a unified and non-dualistic construction of human behavior. On this topic, see my essay "Aristotle's Mezzo, Courtly Misura, and Dante's Canzone Le dolci rime: Humanism, Ethics, and Social Anxiety," cited in Coordinated Reading above, and, for further elaboration of this belief-system, see the
Commento on Inferno 5. Inferno 7, and Inferno 7, and Inferno 11. [27] In my view the word "mezzo" in the first verse of Inferno 1 reflects two fundamental Aristotelian definition of time from the Physics, in which time is "a kind of middle-point, uniting in itself both a beginning and an end.
a beginning of future time and an end of past time" (Physics 8.1.251b18-26). This Aristotelian passage was already cited by Dante in his prose treatise, Convivio. And the word "mezzo" reflects as well the Aristotelian definition of virtue as the mean between vicious extremes from Nicomachean Ethics. As we saw, Dante
explicitly translates Aristotle on the virtuous "mezzo" in the early canzone Le dolci rime (1294), a canzone to which he returns more than ten years later in Book 4 of the Convivio, devoted to a discussion of Aristotle's ethical system in which virtue is the mean. This long meditation clearly informs the first verse of the
Commedia. [28] The word mezzo in the Commedia's first verse is thus Aristotelian as well as biblical. It resonates both to Aristotle on virtue, in a moral sphere. * * * [29] Structurally, Inferno 1 is a canto that divides into 2 parts: the part that precedes the arrival of
Virgilio, and the part that follows the arrival of Virgilio. Throughout this commentary I use Italian "Virgilio" (invented by Dante Alighieri) from the historical person, Vergil, the Roman author of the Aeneid who lived from 70 BCE to 19
BCE. (On the reasons for my choice of spelling of "Vergil," see Dante's Poets, p. 207, n. 25.) [30] The first part of Inferno 1 takes place in an ambiguous surreal topography, one that is dream-like and uncanny, organized around mythic binaries: up/down, straight/crooked, light/dark, true/false, life/death. The actual
landscape does not change until the entrance into Hell at the beginning of Inferno 3, but the narrative atmosphere, the poem's tonality, shifts with the arrival of Virgilio, whose presence historicizes and grounds the text. [31] In the first conversation between the pilgrim and Virgilio, Dante-poet moves his narrative from the
mythic and visionary exordium of the poem (consider the visionary "sleep" of verse 11) toward that mimetic and historical engagement with "reality" for which the Commedia is renowned. [32] Indeed, the suture marks that tie the mythic to the historical are apparent when we consider that the lupa is — rather
unrealistically — present during the entire opening dialogue between Dante and Virgilio. The terrifying beast waits patiently during at least 26 verses of conversation, until the pilgrim, in verse 88, finally points to the lupa and asks for help: Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi: aiutami da lei, famoso saggio, ch'ella mi fa tremar
le vene e i polsi. (Inf. 1.88-90) You see the beast that made me turn aside; help me, o famous sage, to stand against her, for she has made my blood and pulses shudder. [33] Virgilio's first words embed his character in temporal and geographical specificity (at times resulting in curious anachronisms, like his reference to
his family as "Lombard" in verse 68). In the phrase "Nacqui sub Julio" (I was born under Julius [Inf. 1.70]), Virgilio asks Dante why he is going in the wrong direction, why he isn't climbing the mountain that is "the origin and cause of every joy" (78). Dante does not answer these
questions, although they offer the opportunity to address the presence of the she-wolf. In effect the pilgrim turns down the opportunity to beg for protection from the lupa, because he is much more interested by the identity of the shade whom he has just met. [35] Dante replies by posing his own amazed question, which
amounts to "Are you really Virgilio?": "Or se' tu quel Virgilio, which pertains to the canto's major plot-line of Dante's distress, and the protagonist's digressive reply, which opens a new plot-line regarding Dante's
overpowering love for Vergil and his poetry — a love that in the moment takes precedence even over seeking refuge from the lupa and being able to climb the mountain — we learn something new about this poet. We see how Dante-poet uses dialogue to generate new plot-lines and thus complexity. He also uses
dialogue to construct character. [36] Virgilio explains figuratively the nature of the lupa and the threat that the beast poses: "e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria" (when she has fed, she's hungrier than before [Inf. 1.99]). We infer that the negative desire the lupa embodies is cupiditas, an ever-unsatisfied hunger and
greed that can never be filled. The lupa is so fierce an impediment that the hill that she blocks cannot be climbed. Unable to go directly upward, Dante must take a much longer route to the heights by traversing the three realms of the afterlife. Describing the three realms, Virgilio tells Dante that he will eventually come to
a place where he must leave him and where another guide, a woman, will take his place: "con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire" (With her at my departure I will leave thee), is signally important: it provides a benchmark
that the reader can use to measure Dante's ability to conjure real affect in real time. Right now, in Inferno 1, Dante-protagonist (and mirroring him the reader) pays little attention to this announcement of Virgilio's eventual departure. However, when that departure occurs in Purgatorio 30, much time and textual space later,
the protagonist (and in my experience as a teacher, most readers) will be distraught, experiencing Virgilio's "partire" as a personal abandonment. Between Inferno 1 and Purgatorio 30, therefore, Dante-poet moves Dante-pilgrim from a poetic enthusiast who does not care that Virgilio will ultimately leave him to the man
whose sorrow at his loss of his father-guide will momentarily eclipse the arrival of Beatrice. [38] Inferno 1 ends with the pilgrim's embrace of Virgilio as his leader and guide. In the canto's last verse the journey apparently begins: "Allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro" (Then he moved on, and I behind him followed [Inf
1.136]). And yet, the beginning will be delayed, and Inferno 2 will again end with verses that signal the beginning of the journey: "Così li dissi; e poi che mosso fue, / intrai per lo cammino alto e silvestro" (These were my words to him; when he advanced / I entered on the steep and savage path [Inf. 2.141-2]). [39] Dante
in this way stages the beginning of the Commedia with multiple new beginnings, using a textured and layered approach that function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a state in which there are no beginnings and endings, for time "is a kind of middle-point, as a function of time and is a function of 
uniting in itself both a beginning and an end, a beginning of future time and an end of past time" (Aristotle, Physics 8.1.251b18-26). As discussed in chapter 2 of The Undivine Comedy, the poem's rhyme scheme, terza rima, is a metrical embodiment of these same principles: If we consider aba/bcb/cdc, we see that in
each tercet the new enters in the form of the second or middle rhyme, while the rhyme that was "new" in the previous tercet becomes the identity of the subsequent tercet, imitates the genealogical
flow of human history, in which the creation of each new identity requires the grafting of alterity onto a previous identity. (The Undivine Comedy, p. 25) [40] I mentioned the lovely interlude in which the pilgrim reacts with amazement to being in the presence of a poet whose work has been of seminal importance to him in
his own poetic self-fashioning (Inf. 1.82-87). We readers too, in mimetic reflection of the pilgrim, should be amazed: the quide chosen for this guintessentially Christian quest is the great author of the Latin epic of the founding of Rome. Through the creation of the character of Virgilio and the story-line that he devises for
him, Dante-poet engages his deep feelings about classical antiquity, a major theme of this poem. [41] Dante's adoration of classical culture is real (and, in historiographic terms, it certainly qualifies as an early form of humanism).
So too is his concern about the non-Christianity of that culture. [42] Thus, Dante has his character Virgilio announce that he lived "in the time of the false and lying gods" ("nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi" [Inf. 1.72]), but he also makes clear his "great love" for the Roman poet: "O de li altri poeti onore e lume / vagliami 'I
lungo studio e 'I grande amore / che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume" (O light and honor of all other poets, / may my long study and the intense love / that made me search your volume serve me now [Inf. 1.82-84]). Both statements reflect genuine belief and genuine feeling: Dante does indeed consider Vergil to have lived
in a time of false deities, and at the same time he does truly love and honor Vergil's poetry. Dante's love for the poet Vergil, which takes poetic form as the protagonist's love for the character Virgilio, structures conflict and tension into the Commedia. In retrospect we understand that this conflict and tension are already
present in the first canto. [43] The Commedia will give us ample opportunity to ponder the novelty and significance of a Christian poet who chooses a Roman poet who choose
hence for classical poetry. In chapter 3 of Dante's Poets, I trace Dante's usage in the Commedia of four words that he uses in Inferno 1 for Virgilio, namely poeta, saggio, volume, and autore are used in only two
contexts: in Inferno for Vergil, and in Paradiso for God. The transition is so immense that it both heightens Vergil, the only poet who is an autore and whose book is a volume, and shrinks him by comparison with that other autore. Who is God, and that other volume, which is God's book (volume is used variously in the last
canticle, but always with relation to texts "written by" God, for instance the book of the future, the book of justice, the universe gathered into one volume). Moreover, when God is termed an author, He is not "I mio autore" (Inf. 1.85), but the "verace autore" (Par. 26.40). (Dante's Poets, p. 268) [44] While the words volume
and autore are used only for Virgilio and God, the word poeta traces a poetic lineage in the Commedia. This genealogy leads to Dante: If Statius replaces Vergil in Purgatorio 22 when he appropriates for himself (albeit in modified form) the name poeta,
the final displacement is accomplished by Dante, when he becomes the only poeta of the last canticle, announcing in Paradiso 25 that he shall return as poet to Florence to receive the laurel crown. Although that hope was never fulfilled, the impact of the phrase "ritornero poeta" remains undiminished at a textual level,
since it reveals the arc Dante has inscribed into his poem through the restricted use of the word poeta; the poetic mantle passes from the classical poets, essentially Vergil, to a transitional poet, whose Christianity is disjunct from his poetic practice (and hence the verse in Purgatorio 22 with its neat caesura: "Per te poeta
fui. per te cristiano" [73]), to the poet whose Christian faith is a sine qua non of his poetics. (Dante's Poets, p. 269) [45] The poetic denealogy that is inscribed into the Commedia reveals the arc of poetic history moving from Vergil to Statius to Dante himself. Thus the sub-titles of chapter 3 of Dante's Poets are: "Vergil:
Poeta fui", "Statius: Per te poeta fui", and "Dante: ritornerò poeta". This poetic genealogy, which is unfolded incrementally along the Commedia's overture is
Roman history. The first historic moment of consequence that we encounter in this Christian poem is that of classical antiquity, which is immediately sutured to contemporary Italy. Contemporary Italy.— "Italia" of verse 106 (it is far from transparent what "Italia" signifies in the fourteenth century, as Dante is well aware)—
is invoked as the "umile Italia" for which Vergilian heroes and heroines gave their lives in the past, in an uninterrupted continuum: Di quella umile Italia fia salute per cui morì la vergine Cammilla, Eurialo e Turno e Niso di ferute. (Inf. 1.106-8) He will restore humble Italy for which the maid Camilla died of wounds, and
Nisus, Turnus, and Euryalus, [47] Myth meets history, and the Commedia has begun. * * * The Undivine Comedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), Chapter 5, "Purgatory as Paradigm," p. 110; "Guittone's Ora parrà, Dante's Doglia mi
reca, and the Commedia's Discourse of Desire," 1997, rpt. Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture, pp. 102-21; "Aristotle's Mezzo, Courtly
Misura, and Dante's Canzone Le dolci rime: Humanism, Ethics, and Social Anxiety," in Dante and the Greeks, ed. Jan Ziolkowski (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 2014), pp. 163-79; Dante's Poets (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1984), chapter 3. Barolini, Teodolinda. "Inferno 1: Myth Meets History, Isaiah Meets Aristotle."
Commento Baroliniano, Digital Dante, New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018, Commento Table of Contents Poem (Petrocchi Edition) Mandelbaum Longfellow 1 Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita 2 mi ritrovai per una selva oscura 3 ché la diritta via era smarrita, 4 Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura 5
esta selva selva gria e aspra e forte 6 che nel pensier rinova la paura! 7 Tant' è amara che poco è più morte; 8 ma per trattar del ben ch'i' v'intrai, 11 tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto 12 che la verace via abbandonai. 13 Ma poi ch'i' fui al piè
d'un colle giunto. 14 là dove terminava quella valle 15 che m'avea di paura il cor compunto. 16 guardai in alto, e vidi le sue spalle 17 vestite già de' raggi del pianeta 20 che nel lago del cor m'era durata 21 la notte ch'i' passai con tanta pieta. 22 E
fermo sempre era 'l più basso. 31 Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar de l'erta, 32 una lonza leggera e presta molto, 33 che di pel macolato era coverta; 34 e non mi si partia dinanzi al volto, 35 anzi 'mpediva tanto il mio cammino, 36 ch'i' fui per ritornar più volte vòlto. 37 Temp' era dal principio del mattino, 38 e 'l sol montava 'n
sù con quelle stelle 39 ch'eran con lui quando l'amor divino 40 mosse di prima quelle cose belle; 41 sì ch'a bene sperar m'era cagione; 44 ma non sì che paura non mi desse 45 la vista che m'apparve d'un leone. 46 Questi parea che contra me
venisse 47 con la test' alta e con rabbiosa fame. 48 sì che parea che l'aere ne tremesse, 49 Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame 50 sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza, 51 e molte genti fé già viver grame, 52 guesta mi porse tanto di gravezza 53 con la paura ch'uscia di sua vista, 54 ch'io perdei la speranza de l'altezza, 55 E
gual è quei che volontieri acquista, 56 e giugne 'I tempo che perder lo face, 57 che 'n tutti suoi pensier piange e s'attrista; 58 tal mi fece la bestia sanza pace, 59 che, venendomi 'ncontro, a poco 60 mi ripigneva là dove 'I sol tace. 61 Mentre ch'i' rovinava in basso loco, 62 dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto 63 chi per
lungo silenzio parea fioco. 64 Quando vidi costui nel gran diserto, 65 «Miserere di me», gridai a lui, 66 «qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!». 67 Rispuosemi: «Non omo, omo già fui, 68 e li parenti miei furon lombardi, 69 mantoani per patrïa ambedui. 70 Nacqui sub Iulio, ancor che fosse tardi, 71 e vissi a Roma sotto
'I buono Augusto 72 nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi. 73 Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto 74 figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia, 75 poi che 'I superbo Ilión fu combusto. 76 Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia? 77 perché non sali il dilettoso monte 78 ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?». 79 «Or se' tu quel Virgilio e
quella fonte 80 che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?», 81 rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte. 82 «O de li altri poeti onore e lume 83 vagliami 'I lungo studio e 'I grande amore 84 che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume. 85 Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'I mio autore; 86 tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi 87 lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto
onore. 88 Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi: 89 aiutami da lei, famoso saggio, 90 ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi». 91 «A te convien tenere altro vïaggio», 92 rispuose poi che lagrimar mi vide, 93 «se vuo' campar d'esto loco selvaggio; 94 ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride, 95 non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,
96 ma tanto lo 'mpedisce che l'uccide; 97 e ha natura sì malvagia e ria, 98 che mai non empie la bramosa voglia, 99 e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria acui s'ammoglia, 101 e più saranno ancora, infin che 'l veltro 102 verrà, che la farà morir con doglia. 103 Questi non ciberà terra né peltro, 104
ma sapïenza, amore e virtute, 105 e sua nazion sarà tra feltro e feltro. 106 Di quella umile Italia fia salute 107 per cui morì la vergine Cammilla, 110 fin che l'avrà rimessa ne lo 'nferno, 111 là onde 'nvidia prima dipartilla. 112 Ond' io per lo tuo me'
penso e discerno 113 che tu mi segui, e io sarò tua guida, 114 e trarrotti di gui per loco etterno, 115 ove udirai le disperate strida, 118 e vederai color che son contenti 119 nel foco, perché speran di venire 120 guando che sia a le beate genti.
121 A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire. 122 anima fia a ciò più di me degna: 123 con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire: 124 ché quello imperador che là sù regna. 125 perch' i' fu' ribellante a la sua legge. 126 non vuol che 'n sua città per me si vegna. 127 In tutte parti impera e quivi regge: 128 quivi è la sua città e l'alto seggio:
129 oh felice colui cu' ivi elegge!». 130 E io a lui: «Poeta, io ti richeggio 131 per quello Dio che tu non conoscesti, 132 acciò ch'io veggia la porta di san Pietro 135 e color cui tu fai cotanto mesti». 136 Allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro. When I
had journeyed half of our life's way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray. Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was, that savage forest, dense and difficult, which even in recall renews my fear: so bitter—death is hardly more severe! But to retell the good discovered there, I'll also
tell the other things I saw. I cannot clearly say how I had entered the wood; I was so full of sleep just at the point where I abandoned the true path. But when I'd reached the bottom of a hill—it rose along the boundary of the valley that had harassed my heart with so much fear—I looked on high and saw its shoulders
clothed already by the rays of that same planet which serves to lead men straight along all roads. At this my fear was somewhat guieted; for through the night of sorrow I had spent, the lake within my heart felt terror present. And just as he who, with exhausted breath, having escaped from sea to shore, turns back to
watch the dangerous waters he has guit, so did my spirit, still a fugitive, turn back to look intently at the pass that never has let any man survive. I let my tired body rest awhile. Moving again, I tried the lonely slope—my firm foot always was the one below. And almost where the hillside starts to rise— look there!—a
leopard, very quick and lithe, a leopard covered with a spotted hide. He did not disappear from sight, but stayed; indeed, he so impeded my ascent that I had often to turn back again. The time was the beginning of the morning; the sun was rising now in fellowship with the same stars that had escorted it when Divine Love
first moved those things of beauty; so that the hour and the gentle season gave me good cause for hopefulness on seeing that beast before me with his speckled skin; but hope was hardly able to prevent the fear I felt when I beheld a lion. His head held high and ravenous with hunger—even the air around him seemed
to shudder—this lion seemed to make his way against me. And then a she—wolf showed herself: she seemed to carry every craving in her leanness; she had already brought despair to many. The very sight of her so weighted me with fearfulness that I abandoned hope of ever climbing up that mountain slope. Even as
he who glories while he gains will, when the time has come to tally loss, lament with every thought and turn despondent, so was I when I faced that restless beast which, even as she stalked me, step by step had thrust me back to where the sun is speechless. While I retreated down to lower ground, before my eyes there
suddenly appeared one who seemed faint because of the long silence. When I saw him in that vast wilderness, "Have pity on me." were the words I cried, "whatever you may be—a shade, a man." He answered me: "Not man: I once was man. Both of my parents came from Lombardy, and both claimed Mantua as native
city. And I was born, though late, sub Julio, and lived in Rome under the good Augustus— the season of the false and lying gods. I was a poet, and I sang the righteous son of Anchises who had come from Troy when flames destroyed the pride of Ilium. But why do you return to wretchedness? Why not climb up the
mountain of delight, the origin and cause of every joy?" "And are you then that Virgil, you the fountain that freely pours so rich a stream of speech?" I answered him with shame upon my brow, "O light and honor of all other poets, may my long study and the intense love that made me search your yolume serve me now,
You are my master and my author, you—the only one from whom my writing drew the noble style for which I have been honored. You see the beast that made me turn aside; help me, o famous sage, to stand against her, for she has made my blood and pulses shudder," "It is another path that you must take," he
answered when he saw my tearfulness, "if you would leave this savage wilderness; the beast that is the cause of your outcry allows no man to pass along her track, but blocks him even to the point of death; her nature is so squalid, so malicious that she can never sate her greedy will; when she has fed, she's hungrier
than ever. She mates with many living souls and shall yet mate with many more, until the Greyhound arrives, inflicting painful death on her. That Hound will never feed on land or pewter, but find his fare in wisdom, love, and virtue; his place of birth shall be between two felts. He will restore low-lying Italy for which the
maid Camilla died of wounds, and Nisus, Turnus, and Euryalus. And he will hunt that beast through every city until he thrusts her back again to Hell, for which she was first sent above by envy. Therefore, I think and judge it best for you to follow me, and I shall guide you, taking you from this place through an eternal
place, where you shall hear the howls of desperation and see the ancient spirits in their pain, as each of them laments his second death; and you shall see those souls who are content within the fire, for they hope to reach—whenever that may be the blessed people. If you would then ascend as high as these, a soul
more worthy than I am will guide you; I'll leave you in her care when I depart, because that Emperor who reigns above, since I have been rebellious to His city, His high capital: o happy those He chooses to be there!" And I
replied: "O poet-by that God whom you had never come to know—I beg you, that I may flee this evil and worse evils, to lead me to the place of which you spoke, that I may see the gateway of Saint Peter and those whom you describe as sorrowful." Then he set out, and I moved on behind him. MIDWAY upon the journey
of our life I found myself within a forest dark, For the straightforward pathway had been lost. Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say What was this forest dark, For the good to treat, which there I found, Speak will I of the other
things I saw there. I cannot well repeat how there I entered, So full was I of slumber at the moment In which I had abandoned the true way. But after I had reached a mountain's foot, At that point where the valley terminated, Which had with consternation pierced my heart, Upward I looked, and I beheld its shoulders
Vested already with that planet's rays Which leadeth others right by every road. Then was the fear a little quieted That in my heart's lake had endured throughout The night, which I had passed so piteously And even as he, who, with distressful breath, Forth issued from the sea upon the shore, Turns to the water perilous
and gazes; So did my soul, that still was fleeing onward, Turn itself back to re-behold the pass Which never yet a living person left. After my weary body I had rested, The way resumed I on the desert slope, So that the firm foot ever was the lower. And lo! almost where the ascent began, A panther light and swift
exceedingly, Which with a spotted skin was covered o'er! And never moved she from before my face, Nay, rather did impede so much my way, That many times I to return had turned. The time was the beginning of the morning, And up the sun was mounting with those stars That with him were, what time the Love Divine
At first in motion set those beauteous things; So were to me occasion of good hope, The variegated skin of that wild beast, The hour of time, and the delicious season; But not so much, that did not give me fear A lion's aspect which appeared to me. He seemed as if against me he were coming With head uplifted, and
with ravenous hunger, So that it seemed the air was afraid of him; And a she-wolf, that with all hungerings Seemed to be laden in her meagreness, And many folk has caused to live forlorn! She brought upon me so much heaviness, With the affright that from her aspect came, That I the hope relinquished of the height
And as he is who willingly acquires. And the time comes that causes him to lose. Who weeps in all his thoughts and is despondent, E'en such made me that beast withouten peace. Which, coming on against me by degrees Thrust me back thither where the sun is silent While I was rushing downward to the lowland.
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Before mine eyes did one present himself, Who seemed from long-continued silence hoarse. When I beheld him in the desert vast, "Have pity on me," unto him I cried, "Whiche'er thou art, or shade or real man!" He answered me: "Not man; man once I was, And both my parents were of Lombardy, And Mantuans by country both of them. Sub Julio was I born, though it was late, And lived at Rome under the good Augustus, During the time of false and lying gods. A poet was I, and I sang that just Son of Anchises, who came forth from Troy, After that Ilion the superb was burned But thou, why goest thou back to such annoyance? Why climb'st thou not the Mount Delectable Which is the source and cause of every joy?" Now, art thou that Virgilius and that fountain Which spreads abroad so wide a river of speech?" I made response to him with bashful forehead. "O, of the other poets honour and light, Avail me the long study and great love That have impelled me to explore thy volume! Thou art my master, and my author thou, Thou art alone the one from whom I took The beautiful style that has done honour to me. Behold the beast, for which I have turned back; Do thou protect me from her, famous Sage, For she doth make my veins and pulses tremble." "Thee it behoves to take another road," Responded he, when he beheld me weeping, "If from this savage place thou wouldst escape; Because this beast, at which thou criest out, Suffers not any one to pass her way, But so doth harass him, that she destroys him; And has a nature so malign and ruthless, That never doth she glut her greedy will, And after food is hungrier than before. Many the animals with whom she weds, And more they shall be still, until the Greyhound Comes, who shall make her perish in her pain. He shall not feed on either earth or pelf, But upon wisdom, and on love and virtue; 'Twixt Feltro and Feltro shall his nation be; Of that low Italy shall he be the saviour, On whose account the maid Camilla died, Euryalus, Turnus, Nisus, of their wounds; Through every city shall he hunt her down, Until he shall have driven her back to Hell, There from whence envy first did let her loose. Therefore I think and judge it for thy best Thou follow me, and I will be thy guide. And lead thee hence through the eternal place. Where thou shalt hear the desperate lamentations, Shalt see the ancient spirits disconsolate. Who cry out each one for the second death; And thou shalt see those who contented are Within the fire, because they hope to come. Whene'er it may be, to the blessed people; To whom, then, if thou wishest to ascend, A soul shall be for that than I more worthy; With her at my departure I will leave thee; Because that Emperor, who reigns above, In that I was rebellious to his law, Wills that through me none come into his city. He governs everywhere and there he reigns; There is his city and his lofty throne; O happy he whom thereto he elects!" And I to him: "Poet, I thee entreat, By that same God whom thou didst never know, So that I may escape this woe and worse, Thou wouldst conduct me there where thou hast said, That I may see the portal of Saint Peter, And those thou makest so disconsolate." Then he moved on, and I behind him followed. When I had journeyed half of our life's way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, dense and difficult, which even in recall renews my fear: so bitter—death is hardly more severe! But to retell the good discovered there, I'll also tell the other things I saw. 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He governs everywhere and there he reigns; There is his city and his lofty throne; O happy he whom thereto he elects!" And I to him: "Poet, I thee entreat, By that same God whom thou didst never know, So that I may escape this woe and worse, Thou wouldst conduct me there where thou hast said, That I may see the portal of Saint Peter, And those thou makest so disconsolate." Then he moved on, and I behind him followed. At the very beginning of the Commedia, Dante finds himself in middle age, in a dark wood, confronted by 3 beasts: a lion, a leopard and a she-wolf, he cannot evade. At last, Virgilio appears. View all lecture videos on the Dante Course page. For more readings by Francesco Bausi, see the Bausi Readings page.

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