

## ‘Dante’s Other-worldly Surprises and This-worldly Polemic’

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### Introduction

Towards the end of his life, Dante developed a friendship with the Bolognese professor, Giovanni del Virgilio, exchanging poetical epistles which have come down to us as his Latin eclogues.<sup>1</sup> After Dante’s death, Giovanni composed an epitaph in memory of the theologian-poet who, he writes, assigned ‘to the dead, their places, and to the twin swords, their kingdoms’ (‘qui loca defunctis, gladiisque regnumque gemellis’).<sup>2</sup> In one line, Giovanni celebrates, and gives equal weight to, Dante’s vision of the Christian afterlife in the three canticles of the *Commedia*, and to his argument for the strict division between temporal and spiritual power (the ‘twin swords’) in the three books of *De Monarchia*. An eschatological poem in the vernacular and a this-worldly political thesis in Latin might seem like two separate enterprises and, indeed, a dominant critical tradition has sought not only to emphasize the ‘fundamental difference’ between these two works, but to relegate the *Monarchia* as a minor and premature work, whose central tenets Dante would abandon by the time he wrote the *Commedia*.<sup>3</sup> The compositional chronology underpinning this view, however, has been convincingly challenged.<sup>4</sup> But the implications of this for how Dante envisages the Christian afterlife have been largely unexamined.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this chapter, then, is show how Dante’s political

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<sup>1</sup> See Philip H. Wicksteed and Edmund G. Gardner, ‘Dante’s Eclogues and del Virgilio’s Poetic Remains’, in *Idem, Dante and Giovanni del Virgilio* (London: Archibald Constable & Company, Ltd: 1902), pp. 117-75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, Nardi, Gilson and Foster, all of whom highlighted the heterodoxy of Dante’s dualism in his prose works, nonetheless regarded this as a phase in Dante’s intellectual development which was left behind, or not directly relevant to, the project of the *Commedia*. See Bruno Nardi, *Dal ‘Convivio’ alla ‘Commedia’*, ed. with a new introduction by Ovidio Capitani (Rome: Muratori, 1992); Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. by David Moore (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949); and Kenelm Foster, *The Two Dantes, and Other Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977). All three of these scholars, at least initially, worked on the basis of the incorrect premise that both the *Convivio* and the *Monarchia* preceded the composition of the *Commedia*.

<sup>4</sup> According to Prue Shaw, the date of *Monarchia* is certainly no earlier than 1314; further contextual and historical arguments provided by Kay and Cassell imply a dating after 1316 and, most probably, 1317-18. See Dante, *Monarchy*, trans. and ed. by Prue Shaw, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. xxxiii; Dante, *Monarchia*, trans. with commentary by Richard Kay (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998), pp. xx-xxxi; Anthony K. Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy: An Historical Study with Accompanying Translations of Dante Alighieri’s ‘Monarchia’, Guido Vernani’s ‘Regutation of the “Monarchia” Composed by Dante’, and Pope John XXII’s Bull ‘Si fratrum’* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), pp. 3-49.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Till Davis re-affirms the centrality of Dante’s distinctive political convictions in the *Commedia*, convincingly overturning the characteristic view of his teacher, Alessandro Passerin d’Entrèves’ generation, that

thought, his ‘this-worldly polemic’, is at the heart of his ‘other-worldly vision’ and, indeed, is behind some of the key surprises that we find there, in relation to previous traditions both popular and learned about the afterlife.<sup>6</sup> The first part presents short, preliminary outlines of Dante’s political thought and of some key features of his eschatological vision as whole. The second part analyses Dante’s striking presentation of pagans in his vision of the afterlife, and argues that this is a major structural argument for the divinely-mandated vocation of Holy Roman Empire. The third part examines Dante’s treatment of Popes and prelates in the afterlife, and argues that this forms part of a highly controversial celestial manifesto for the this-worldly reform of the Roman Church.

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the *Monarchia* was an ‘aberration’. See, for example, Charles Till Davis, ‘Dante and the Empire’, in *Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 257-69 (p. 257). However, although highlighting the political content, Davis does not explore the implications for the formal structure of Dante’s afterlife. Where this has been examined, Dante scholars have taken, in my view, a wrong direction by mistakenly equating the Earthly Paradise in Purgatory with the this-worldly happiness delineated in the *Monarchia*. For this view, see especially John A. Scott’s *Dante’s Political Purgatory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). For a counter-argument, see George Corbett, ‘The Christian Ethics of Dante’s Purgatory’, *Medium Aevum*, 83, n. 2 (2014)., pp. 266-87.

<sup>6</sup> Alison Morgan’s *Dante and the Medieval Other World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) is still the best full-length study of the subject. Her seminal study situates Dante’s own presentation of the Christian afterlife in relation to popular visions with, in six chapters, extremely informative analysis of topographical motifs, inhabitants, the guide, the classification of sin in Hell, the mountain of Purgatory, and the representation of Paradise. My own chapter, with its more specific focus, is nonetheless deeply indebted to many of her findings. A selection of texts about the afterlife prior to Dante is provided by Eileen Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante* (New York: Italica, 1989).

## I. Dante's Political Theory and his Eschatological Vision

The relationship between temporal and spiritual power was one of the most contested issues of Dante's period. Although, in the late thirteenth century, a progressive *via media* had been adopted by Christian-Aristotelian scholars (typically accommodating the relative autonomy of these two powers with degrees of indirect subordination), positions polarized at the beginning of the fourteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In 1302, the extreme papal claim for the direct subordination of temporal to spiritual power is represented by Giles of Rome's *De ecclesiastica potestate* and Pope Boniface VIII's derivative *Unam Sanctam*.<sup>8</sup> In the same year, John of Paris' *Tractatus de regia potestate et papali* rebuffs these claims arguing, instead, that the strict division between temporal and spiritual power is divinely mandated and, indeed, that if the Pope abuses the spiritual sword ('gladius spiritualis'), a temporal monarch may legitimately wage war against him, as an enemy of the public good.<sup>9</sup>

Dante's *De Monarchia* (c. 1317-18; although the dating is still subject to debate) takes this division of jurisdictions to its extreme: Dante argues for the complete independence of two hemispheres of human conduct institutionally governed by the Empire and the Church.<sup>10</sup> Dante's rationale for this theory combines a particular interpretation of Aristotelian anthropology with a novel extension of Aristotle's political theory to apply to universal empire. He starts from the premise that man, uniquely amongst animals, has a hybrid nature: as mortal, he pertains to the world of time and contingency; as immortal, to the sphere of eternity. In virtue of this, man has two ethical goals: human flourishing in this life and the beatific vision in the next. Dante then argues, crucially, that the means to attain these goals have been revealed by the teachings of philosophy and of Divine revelation respectively, and that the institutions divinely ordained to facilitate these journeys are the Empire (with temporal power and the

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<sup>7</sup> Thus, in *De regno* (c. 1267), Aquinas clearly distinguishes the role of the monarch, with responsibility for the temporal sphere, from the priest, with responsibility for the spiritual sphere, but he argues for the indirect power ('potestas indirecta') of the Pope in temporal matters ('in temporalibus'). For a helpful analysis of the context of this debate, see Matthew S. Kempshall, 'Accidental Perfection: Ecclesiology and Political Thought in *Monarchia*', in *Dante and the Church*, ed. by Paolo Acquaviva and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 127-71.

<sup>8</sup> Giles of Rome may even have been the author of the papal bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302). The views of *Unam Sanctam*, in any case, bear clear resemblance to Giles' *De Regimine Principum* (1277-80) and *De ecclesiastica potestate* (1302). See Giles of Rome, *De ecclesiastica potestate*, ed. and trans. by Arthur P. Monahan (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) and Giles of Rome, *De renunciatione pape*, ed. and trans. into German by John R. Eastman (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> John of Paris, *Tractatus de regia potestate et papali*, in Johannes Quidort von Paris, *Über königliche und päpstliche Gewalt (De regia potestate et papali)*, ed. and trans. into German by Fritz Bleinstein (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1969), and see esp. cap. XXII. l. 9-11, p. 196.

<sup>10</sup> Dante's only concession to papal supremacy, which does not include any compromise of temporal power, is his analogy to the reverence that a son owes his father. See *Mon.*, III. xv. 1-18.

responsibility for man's earthly felicity) and the church (with spiritual power and the responsibility for man's eternal beatitude).<sup>11</sup> For Dante, then, the church should possess no temporal power or wealth. Dante's theory, lambasted by the Dominican Guido Vernani in *De reprobatione 'Monarchia' compositae a Dante Alighiero Florentino*, was politically explosive.<sup>12</sup> In 1326, when Louis of Bavaria marched into Italy to oppose Pope John XXII and to install the Anti-pope Nicholas V, Dante's *Monarchia* was cited by the Imperial side to rally troops to its cause.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile Bertrand du Pouget, the papal legate in Italy, accused Dante of heresy, ordered all copies of his *Monarchia* to be publically burnt, and threatened to disinter and incinerate Dante's bodily remains.<sup>14</sup>

Written in the vernacular, Dante's *Commedia* served equally well as imperial propaganda, calling insistently for the restoration of the 'two suns' (Empire and Church) in Rome: 'Soleva Roma, che 'l buon mondo feo, / due soli aver, che l'una e l'altra strada / facean vedere, e del mondo e di Deo' [Rome, which made the world good, used to have two suns that made visible the two paths, of the world and of God] (*Purg.*, xvi. 106-08). But, aside from this political message, the very structure and demography of Dante's afterlife is influenced, as we shall see, by the innovative ethical theory underpinning it. Before analyzing this key relationship between Dante's political-theological theory and the innovations in his eschatological vision, however, let us first briefly sketch the topography, timing and demography of Dante's afterlife, as well as the status and literary purpose of his poem, in order to set out some preliminary bearings.

Where visual depictions of the sufferings of Hell and the rewards of Paradise saturated the medieval imagination, Dante's poetic depiction of the afterlife places Purgatory as its literary and topographical centre. Dante gives equal weight to Purgatory, dedicating a canticle to *Purgatorio* (33 cantos) as well as to *Inferno* (34 cantos) and *Paradiso* (33 cantos). And he transports the region of Purgatory from its traditional location as a monochrome, ante-chamber

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<sup>11</sup> Although Dante develops this theory in *Convivio* III-IV, its most concise statement is in the final chapter of *De Monarchia* (see *Mon.*, III. xv. 1-18).

<sup>12</sup> *Contro Dante (Contra Dantem) Fr. Guidonis Vernani tractatus 'De reprobatione "Monarchiae" compositae a Dante Alighiero Florentino*, ed. and trans. into Italian by Jarro (G. Piccini) (Florence, Rome, and Milan: R. Bemporad & figlio, 1906). For an English translation of Vernani's treatise, as well as of Pope John XXII's Bull *Si fratrum*, see also Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, pp. 174-201.

<sup>13</sup> See Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, p. 34-41: 'Just how deeply Dante's elegant, poetical, and theological *Monarchia*, commandeered by Ludwig's propagandists, influenced these historic charades we can only conjecture, but we do know how it suffered' (p. 37). See also 'L'opera di Dante lodata da Graziolo Bambaglioli', in *Dante e Firenze: Prose antiche*, ed. by Oddone Zenatti (Florence: Sansoni, 1984), pp. 1-3; and 'Preface', in *Vernani*, ed. by Jarro, p. vi.

<sup>14</sup> See Adriano Comollo, 'Accuse, condanne, anatemi di autorità religiose e politiche contro Dante. La censura e Dante', in *Il dissenso religioso in Dante* (Florence: Olschki, 1990), pp. 41-53. See also Anthony K. Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, pp. 3-107 (p. 38).

of Hell to its own, independent location in the southern hemisphere. As Le Goff argues, ‘Dante more than anyone else made Purgatory the intermediate region of the other world’.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Dante represents Purgatory as the central axis of universal salvation. According to his imaginative vision, the spiraling funnel of hell was created in the northern hemisphere when Satan fell from Heaven and the earth recoiled in horror.<sup>16</sup> This displaced earth formed, in turn, the conical mountain of Purgatory which emerged in the southern hemisphere and rises at its summit to the Earthly Paradise, a region Dante equates with Eden. The nine circles of Hell and the three main categories of evil – incontinence (circles 2-5), violence (circle 7) and fraud (circles 8 and 9) – balance the nine regions and three main partitions of Purgatory – Ante-Purgatory, the seven terraces of Purgatory (purifying the seven capital sins), and the Earthly Paradise. In this way, Dante shows how God even out of evil – Satan’s rebellion and subsequent temptation of man – brings about good: the mountain provides sinful man with a way back to God.

Although Dante emphasizes that all the blessed are, in reality, in the Empyrean (beyond space and time), the blessed also appear to the pilgrim in eight of the nine celestial spheres familiar to Ptolemaic, earth-centred astronomy (*Par.*, iv. 28-60). The blessed souls’ glorious lives illustrate, in this way, particular aspects of virtue.<sup>17</sup> As with Hell and Purgatory, the moral structure of Paradise is broadly threefold: the first three planets are shadowed by the earth and arguably allude to the three theological virtues imperfectly pursued (the Moon – faith; Mercury – hope; Venus – love). The next four planetary spheres clearly allude to the four cardinal virtues (the Sun – prudence; Mars – fortitude; Jupiter – justice; Saturn – temperance). The eighth sphere of the fixed stars presents, through St Peter, St James and St John, the perfection of the three theological virtues. The ninth sphere, the *primum mobile*, is the exception and contains the nine orders of angels.

In addition to its innovative topography, the precise timing of Dante’s other-worldly vision is of critical importance. Dante depicts the present-day state of the afterlife on Easter weekend 1300. It is not, in other words, a static depiction of the eschatological condition of souls after the Final Judgement. This has at least five important implications. First, the inhabitants of Dante’s afterlife are not fully human beings: they are shades (‘ombre’), souls awaiting their bodies at the general resurrection. Secondly, Christ’s harrowing of Hell has

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<sup>15</sup> See Jacques Le Goff, ‘The Poetic Triumph: The *Divina Commedia*’, in Idem, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 334-55 (p. 346).

<sup>16</sup> Morgan mistakenly situates Dante’s mountain of Purgatory in the northern hemisphere. See Morgan, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan emphasizes that there is ‘no precedent in the popular tradition for this device’. See Morgan, p. 177.

occurred (33 A.D.), altering the physical landscape and population of Hell. Thirdly, the souls in Dante's afterlife continue to be engaged in differing degrees, and with different capacities, with the world in time. Fourthly, a major group of them are still *in via*: whether awaiting purgation (in Ante-Purgatory), undergoing purgation (in Purgatory), or fulfilling the rites of passage to Paradise (in the Earthly Paradise); these souls desire, therefore, the intercessionary prayers of those on earth. Fifthly, souls in Dante's afterlife may prophecy events in the future with regard to the poem's present (1300), but in the past with regard to the present of the author (c. 1307-1321), a temporal device Dante uses to great narrative effect.

There are some three hundred or so characters encountered in Dante's afterlife. One might expect that all of these would be dead. But there are two notable exceptions. The first, of course, is Dante himself, the poem's central protagonist. Alive and with his body (casting a shadow, much to the astonishment of those he meets in Purgatory), Dante is given the exceptional grace to journey through the afterlife before his death, and is guided by Virgil through Hell and Purgatory and then, subsequently, by Beatrice through the Earthly and Heavenly Paradise. The second is Branca D'Oria whose evil was so great (the treacherous murder of a guest out of cupidity) that his soul was cast straight into Hell while his body, now inhabited by a devil, continues to walk on earth (*Inf.*, xxxiii. 135-47). Although, in theological terms, this is heretical and worried Dante's early commentators, such an encounter was not unprecedented in the visionary tradition.<sup>18</sup> Only a little less controversially, moreover, characters in Dante's Hell also prophecy and name prominent others (alive at the time of the poem) who will join them there.

What, then, are we to make of the status of the journey described? Is it a dream-vision or a mystical experience? Is it a fiction or should it be read as prophecy? What is its literary genre? Such questions particularly exercised Dante critics in the twentieth-century, with Singleton famously coining the confusing phrase that 'the fiction of the *Comedy* is that it is not a fiction' and Bruno Nardi insisting that Dante spoke as 'a divinely inspired prophet'.<sup>19</sup> Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, in their recent reappraisal of the issue (2011), have insisted, by contrast, that such views are 'widely mistaken' and that the poem is a 'literary creation, impassioned and matchlessly imaginative, but *linguistic*, not *supra linguistic*' and derived

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<sup>18</sup> See Morgan, p. 55: 'Despite Dante's astonishment at seeing him there, Branca's case was not without precedent. A number of earlier visionaries came across individuals in the other world who were still alive'.

<sup>19</sup> See Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies I: Elements of Structure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 62; Bruno Nardi, 'Dante Profeta', in *Dante e la cultura medievale: Nuovi saggi di filosofia dantesca* (Bari: Laterza, 1942), pp. 258-334.

entirely from ‘Dante’s meditation on his voluminous reading’.<sup>20</sup> Although recognizing the complexity of the issue, my own view aligns broadly with that of Durling and Martinez: the poem may be categorized within the flexible literary category of a ‘dream vision’ but it is, crucially, a fiction: the journey is metaphorical and takes place entirely within Dante’s imagination.

What, finally, of the subject and purpose of Dante’s afterlife? The *Epistle to Cangrande*, purportedly written by Dante, classifies the poem as a work of ethics (*morale negotium*).<sup>21</sup> Its literal subject is the various states of human souls after death, depicted imaginatively by Dante through the various regions of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Its allegorical subject is man who, by the use of his free will, may merit eternal damnation in Hell, eternal happiness in Paradise, or require temporary expiation for sin in Purgatory. Dante’s stated purpose, then, is to lead people from the misery of sin and direct them to the beatitude of Heaven (*Ep.* XIII, 8). Notably Dante thereby presents his eschatological imagination as at the service of a very immediate practical purpose: the salvation of souls in the here and now. Dante’s primary purpose, in other words, was not to produce an original depiction of the three realms of the Christian afterlife (although he is justly celebrated for having achieved this). Rather, for the poet, this vision served a more important ethical and, I would argue, political purpose: to convert and transform people’s moral lives and to reform the institutions that governed them.

With these orientating observations in place, let us turn now to some of the original and surprising aspects of Dante’s afterlife in relation to popular and learned traditions.

## II. Pagans in Dante’s Christian afterlife, and the ideal of Empire.

Alison Morgan’s analysis of the demography of Dante’s afterlife overturned the generally held critical assumptions that his introduction of contemporary and obscure figures,

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<sup>20</sup> Robert M. Durling, ‘Introduction’, in *Paradiso*, ed. by Durling and Martinez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3-19 (p. 13)

<sup>21</sup> See Dante Alighieri, *Epistola a Cangrande*, ed. by Enzo Cecchini (Florence: Giunti, 1995), xiii. 8. The authenticity of the *Cangrande* epistle (or sections of the epistle) is disputed. This philological discussion has been inflected by varying opinions about the status of Dante’s journey (thus, for example, those in favour of the ‘divinely inspired prophet’ view, such as Nardi, have tended to deny the authenticity of the epistle). More recently, Cecchini argues that the evidence balances in favour of authenticity (see *Epistola*, pp. viii-xxv) as does Robert Hollander in his important study, *Dante’s Epistle to Cangrande* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 1-101. This view is sustained – also in light of the weight of further evidence – by Luca Azzetta, ‘Le chiose alla *Commedia* di Andrea Lancia, *L’Epistola a Can Grande* e altre questioni danteschi’, *L’Alighieri* 21, 5-76.

and his portrayal of them as ‘lifelike individuals’, were major, original contributions to Christian eschatology.<sup>22</sup> Although Dante may be the first to combine a classificatory moral scheme with detailed characterisation (‘a convincing character who incarnates the sin of which he is suffering the consequence’), Morgan shows how, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there emerge many examples of ‘obscure individuals’ in popular visions of the afterlife, many of whom are portrayed as ‘rounded characters’.<sup>23</sup> Dante’s originality lies, instead, ‘in the inclusion of classical figures, who are totally unrepresented in the earlier medieval texts’.<sup>24</sup> Of the approximately three hundred characters resident in Dante’s otherworld, eighty-four are classical figures. Why, then, does Dante not only include classical figures, itself a novelty in prior vision literature, but in such great numbers? Morgan’s explanation is brief and reductive: the visions are ‘popular in nature’ whereas Dante, in the *Commedia*, is – by including classical figures – attempting to unite the learned and popular traditions, to aspire to the grandeur of a classical epic.<sup>25</sup>

There is, I think, much more to Dante’s innovative inclusion of classical figures in his vision of the afterlife than literary ambition. Indeed, arguably more startling than Dante’s inclusion of classical figures is the location in which over half of them (fifty-one), and over a sixth of the total characters in the poem, are to be found: limbo, the first circle of Dante’s Hell. The representation of limbo, of itself, was unproblematic. It was conventionally identified with ‘Abraham’s bosom’, the place inhabited by faithful Jews (the *limbus patronum*) until the harrowing of Hell. That limbo was still occupied in 1300, the date of the poem, was also unproblematic. Many thirteenth-century theologians supported the hypothesis that unbaptised infants, dying with original but not personal sin, would eternally occupy limbo (the *limbus infantium*) suffering the lack of the vision of God, but no exterior or interior pain. But that limbo should be occupied in 1300 by grown men and women, and pagans to boot, was – as the reception of Dante’s first readers testifies – deeply problematic and troubling.<sup>26</sup> Augustine

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<sup>22</sup> See Morgan, pp. 72-73: ‘Contemporary characters [...] make up a greater proportion, numerically, of the inhabitants of the other world in previous representations than in the *Comedy*; in this respect Dante’s originality has hitherto been greatly overestimated.’

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, pp. 51-53.

<sup>24</sup> Morgan, p. 54. It is important to register, however, that although pagans may not be present in the hundred or so popular visions of the afterlife that Morgan examines, the issue of pagan salvation or the fate of pagans in the afterlife was in other, more learned texts. For an examination of ‘the problem of paganism’ up to and beyond the time of Dante, see John Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers: The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Morgan, p. 58. See also *Ibid.*, p. 72: ‘Dante’s introduction of classical figures is innovatory, and consonant with the aim of writing a work which would rival the classical epic as well as take account of the classical revival of the twelfth century.’

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Guido da Pisa, gloss to *Inf.*, IV. 82-84: ‘Sed nostra fides non tenet quod ibi sint nisi parvuli innocentes’ [But our faith does not hold that in Limbo there are any souls except innocent children].



explicitly ruled out the possibility of a limbo, equivalent to the *limbus infantium*, for pagans as ‘shameless presumption’ because all pagan virtue is contaminated.<sup>27</sup> Aquinas was perfectly comfortable with pagan salvation, and had developed a sophisticated theory of implicit faith whereby a pagan, even if he believed only in Divine providence, could be seen implicitly to believe in Christ to come.<sup>28</sup> But Aquinas argued that it would be simply impossible for an adult, having reached the age of discretion, to avoid personal sin and die only with original sin.<sup>29</sup> Dante, however, adopts precisely this state as the moral situation of the virtuous pagans in the *Commedia* and, as importantly, rejects the theory of implicit faith, thereby damning the ‘virtuous pagans’ to limbo eternally.<sup>30</sup>

Why does Dante include so many classical figures (itself unprecedented) in the afterlife and, against major theological authorities, locate the majority of these (fifty one) in, of all places, limbo? The answer, I believe, lies in Dante’s dualistic theory, for which an eschatological poem created an intellectual conundrum: how to represent a secular, this-worldly goal in a poem which depicts an other-worldly afterlife? Dante’s entirely original creation of a limbo of the virtuous pagans is, I believe, his response to precisely this paradox: Dante uses the virtuous pagan – to whom the spiritual goal, divine revelation and the institutional Church were of course unavailable – to represent figuratively secular human flourishing (man’s earthly goal) in a poem which literally depicts the afterlife.<sup>31</sup>

For the overall topology and structure of Dante’s Hell, two occupants of Limbo are particularly significant: the first is Dante’s guide, Virgil, and the second is Aristotle. For visionaries of the twelfth- and early thirteenth centuries, the choice of guide was typically fulfilled by a guardian angel, a local saint, church patron, or founder of an order.<sup>32</sup> Although Dante absorbs many of the characteristic features of the relationship between visionary and guide, his choice of guide, then, is striking: not an angel or a saint but, instead, a pagan who, as we soon discover, is eternally damned. Why Virgil? Clearly, at a meta-poetic level, Dante borrows extensively from Virgil’s depiction of the pagan underworld (Hades) in book six of

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Contra Iulianum haeresis Pelagianae defensorem*, IV. 3. 26.

<sup>28</sup> See Kenelm Foster’s seminal analysis of Aquinas’ doctrine of implicit faith in relation to Dante’s treatment of virtuous pagans, in *The Two Dantes*, pp. 156-89 (especially p. 172).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 24, a. 12. Through his free will, man may avoid sin in individual instances but, without grace, he cannot avoid – at some point – falling into sin (‘nisi per gratiam a peccato liberetur, in aliquod peccatum mortale quandoque incidet’).

<sup>30</sup> For a fuller discussion, see ‘The *Limbus Gentilium Virtuosum*’, in George Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus: A Dualistic Vision of Secular and Spiritual Fulfilment* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), pp. 123-29.

<sup>31</sup> This area of limbo is, indeed, implicitly compared to Virgil’s Elysian fields and contains, alongside illustrious poets, two further groups: noble pagans who exemplify moral virtue and a ‘philosophical family’ which exemplifies intellectual flourishing.

<sup>32</sup> See Morgan, pp. 84-107 (esp. pp. 93-94).

the *Aeneid* to construct his own vision of Hell; at a narrative level, this is embodied by Dante literally following Virgil. But, once again, there is more to it. For, in the *Commedia*, Virgil identifies himself not as the poet of the pagan underworld (important though that is) but, rather, as the poet of Roman Empire: ‘cantai di quel giusto / figliuol d’Anchise’ [I sang of that just son of Anchises] (*Inf.*, i. 73-74). This reflects the fact that Dante treats Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in his prose works as in the *Commedia*, as a divinely revealed text in which God authorises and legitimates the Roman Empire as *imperium sine fine*.<sup>33</sup>

Dante’s eulogy to the pagan poet Virgil, as ‘lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore’ [my master and my author] (*Inf.*, i. 67-87), is matched only by his eulogy to the pagan philosopher Aristotle in limbo itself, as ‘‘l maestro di color che sanno’ [the master of those that know] (*Inf.*, iv. 130-32). This reflects another remarkable feature of Dante’s vision of Hell in relation to its wider context. As Morgan has demonstrated, most of the sins punished in Dante’s hell are found in popular Christian visions of the other world, or are listed in twelfth- and thirteenth-century confession manuals.<sup>34</sup> What is innovative, in Dante’s vision, is the subordination of this Christian material to a distinctively pagan moral categorization taken principally from Aristotle. In *Inferno* xi, when Dante asks about the moral ordering of evil in Hell, Virgil responds with reference – not to Christian Scripture – but to natural philosophy, citing Aristotle’s *Ethics*, his *Physics* and, arguably, his *Metaphysics* within just twenty lines.<sup>35</sup> Dante’s emphasis on Aristotle as philosophical authority and Virgil as poet of Roman Empire reflects his conviction, born from experience, that ethics without power is weak, while power without ethics is dangerous (*Conv.*, vi. 17). For Dante, then, it is the emperor’s duty ‘to put the ethical teachings of philosophers, especially Aristotle, into effect.’<sup>36</sup>

Nowhere is this imperial polemic clearer than in the final climax, or rather anti-climax, of Dante’s Hell: the depiction of Satan. With regard to the visionary tradition, that Dante’s

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<sup>33</sup> Thus, in the *Convivio*, Dante defends his argument that the Roman Empire was established by Divine Providence rather than by brute force with reference to the authority of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: ‘A costoro – cioè alli Romani – né termine di cose né di tempo pongo; a loro ho dato imperio sanza fine’ [To them – that is to the Romans – I set neither boundary in space or time: to them I have given power without end] (*Conv.*, IV. iv. 11). See also Edward Moore, *Studies in Dante. First Series* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 167: ‘[Virgil’s] *Aeneid* is] like a Scripture text, [...] a direct proof of God’s purpose for the universal empire of Rome’.

<sup>34</sup> See Morgan, pp. 108-43 (p. 131).

<sup>35</sup> *Inf.*, xi. 80: ‘la tua Etica’; xi. 101: ‘la tua Fisica’; xi. 97: ‘Filosofia’. Giovanni Busnelli argues that the reference to philosophy must refer specifically to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and not to Aristotelian philosophy in general (see Giovanni Busnelli, *L’Etica Nicomachea e l’ordinamento morale dell’Inferno di Dante* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1907), p. 128).

<sup>36</sup> See Davis, ‘Dante and the Empire’, in Jacoff, p. 259. See also Charles Till Davis, *Dante’s Italy, and other essays* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), p. 38: ‘Just as Augustus had prepared the earthly stage for Christ’s first coming, the “King of the Romans and the Christians” must make the world ready for his final descent’.

Satan should digest sinners is unremarkable.<sup>37</sup> His image of Satan's three mouths endlessly chewing three sinners, moreover, seems to derive directly from the vivid mosaics in the baptistry of Florence. What is extraordinary, rather, is the identity of two of the three sinners. At the centre, unsurprisingly, is Judas, who betrayed Christ. But, on either side, are the pagan Roman republicans Brutus and Cassius. Where Shakespeare would allow Brutus to justify his tyrannicide by his love for republican Rome ('Not that I lov'd Caesar less, but that I lov'd Rome more'), Dante considers Brutus and Cassius the very worst sinners precisely because, betraying Julius Caesar, they sought to frustrate the divinely ordered establishment of a universal Roman ruler.

Julius Caesar himself is amongst the 'virtuous pagans' in limbo: 'Cesare armato con li occhi grifagni' [Caesar in armour with hawklike eyes] (*Inf.*, iv. 123). Indeed, of the pagans referred to for their moral virtue in limbo (*Inf.*, iv. 121-129), all – with the exception of Saladin who is alone and to one side ('e solo, in parte, vidi 'l Saladino.'; 129) – are connected to the history of Troy and Rome. Conversely, of the twenty-nine classical figures condemned to corporeal punishment in Hell, many – like Brutus and Cassius – frustrated or sought to frustrate the providential emergence of Roman Empire. Their attempts are portrayed by Dante as entirely futile. Thus, in the first circle of lust, we encounter Helen and Paris, whose elopement led to the destruction of Troy; Dido, whose love Aeneas had to overcome to found Rome; and Cleopatra who, with Mark-Anthony, turned against Julius Caesar's nephew, Augustus. In the eighth circle of fraud, moreover, Ulysses, Diomedes and Sinon are punished for their role in the deception of the Trojan horse. But, in Dante's providential view of human history, the consequent defeat of Troy would ultimately lead to the emergence of the Roman race which, in turn, would eventually subjugate the Greeks to its imperial rule.<sup>38</sup>

Although the vast majority of Dante's classical figures are to be found either in limbo (fifty-one) or the rest of Hell (twenty-nine), there are, however, three notable exceptions: Cato of Utica, the custodian of Purgatory's shores, and Ripheus and Trajan, who are amongst the Just in Paradise. Strikingly, Cato is the next character encountered by Dante-character on his other-worldly journey after Brutus and Cassius. Like them, Cato was a staunch republican and enemy of Julius Caesar. If not in Satan's jaws (he was, after all, no traitor), he should surely, following Augustine's specific condemnation of him as a famous suicide, be condemned with

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<sup>37</sup> See 'The Presentation of Satan', in Morgan, pp. 21-23.

<sup>38</sup> Ulysses and Diomedes are punished amongst the counsellors of fraud (*Inf.*, xxvi), while Sinon is punished amongst the falsifiers of words, the final of the ten 'evil-pockets' (malebolge) which make up the eighth circle of simple fraud (*Inf.*, xxx. 91-148).

the violent-against-themselves in circle seven.<sup>39</sup> And, if not there, he should, at the least, be with Lucretia (another Roman suicide whom Dante, unlike Augustine, deems virtuous) in the first circle of limbo. Instead, Dante choreographs an elaborate narrative eulogy to Cato on the shores of Purgatory (*Purg.*, i. 13-84), a decision that, for the poem's first readers, carried with it more than a whiff of heresy.<sup>40</sup> Why, then, Cato's startling presence here? The reason is that Cato signifies the secular perfection of human nobility which Dante, in his dualistic ethical theory, distinguishes from man's eternal, Christian beatitude. Following Roman authors, and with scant regard to subsequent Christian critique, Dante presents Cato, indeed, as the quintessential pattern of pagan virtue.<sup>41</sup>

It is not just Cato's presence on the shore of Purgatory, however, which is entirely surprising. The liminal region he guards – conventionally referred to as Ante-Purgatory – is Dante's completely original invention, with no obvious precedent in popular visions or in learned discussion about the afterlife. Dante only uses the noun 'Purgatory' ('Purgatorio'; *Purg.*, vii. 39; ix. 49) to refer to the seven terraces of the mountain of Purgatory. In Purgatory-proper (*Purg.*, x-xxvii), souls experience the *poena damni* (the lack of the divine vision) and, also, corporeal pain (the *poena sensus* or *poena corripentis*) which, according to its intensity, punishes a sinner's guilt and, according to its duration, purifies a sinner's vicious dispositions. Although his arrangement of Purgatory into seven terraces according to the seven capital vices is innovative, Dante's underlying rationale for the suffering of Purgatory is, then, conventional. Not so for Ante-Purgatory. Dante condemns five groups of souls to this region: the spiritually tardy (who must wait at the mouth of the river Tiber for their ferry crossing to the shores of Purgatory), the excommunicates (*Purg.*, iii), the lazy who delayed repentance (iv), those who repented at the last-minute, even at point of death (v-vi), and the negligent rulers (vii-viii). In Dante's imagined eschatology, the souls in this region are temporarily deprived of the purifying pain of sense (*poena sensus*) and are seemingly forced to experience exclusively the lack of the divine vision (*poena damni*).

There is, in this way, a direct correlation between Hell-proper (circles 2-9) and Purgatory-proper (the seven terraces) and between Limbo (circle 1) and Ante-Purgatory. Hell-proper and Purgatory-proper are both characterised by the pain of loss with corporeal pain; Limbo and Ante-Purgatory are both characterised by the *poena damni* without the *poena sensus*. There is

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<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I. 22-24 (23).

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Benvenuto, gloss to *Purg.*, i. 28-33, *Dartmouth Dante Project* (<http://dante.dartmouth.edu/>): 'quae videtur sapere haeresim' [which seems to have the flavour of heresy].

<sup>41</sup> For an analysis of Dante's reception and representation of Cato of Utica, see 'Cato', in Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus*, pp. 129-33.

also, in each case, a subtle difference. The corporeal pain of Hell-proper is eternal and unredeeming whereas the pain of Purgatory-proper is temporary and salvific; the *poena damni* of the souls in limbo is eternal: they ‘live without hope in desire’ (‘che senza speme vivemo in disio’; *Inf.*, iv. 42) whereas the *poena damni* of the souls in Ante-Purgatory is temporary: they live, with hope, in desire for the beatific vision, and it is this hope that makes their waiting bearable.

The eternal damnation of Virgil and the other virtuous pagans in limbo is one of the key dramatic and narrative concerns of Dante’s poem. And it has also exercised critics, many of whom, even from the early commentators, have tried ‘to save Virgil’!<sup>42</sup> Although there are two virtuous pagans, Ripheus and Trajan, who are amongst the blessed in Dante’s Paradise, this is due to two exceptional miracles which serve to accentuate, and prove, the general rule (*Par.*, xx. 106-29). It is crucial to reiterate, at this point, that the damnation of pagans (whether virtuous or not) was not an inevitable or irresolvable problem for Dante, as there were theological resources at his disposal, such as Aquinas’ theory of implicit faith, which he chose not to deploy. Dante’s original insistence, instead, that pagans could be both without personal sin and yet damned is, instead, a corollary of his dualistic ethical thought. On the one hand, it upholds pagan standards of virtue and philosophy as flawless and, therefore, a legitimate guide to man’s temporal felicity. On the other hand, it places an exclusive primacy on Christian faith for man’s eternal salvation: a man cannot be saved, no matter how perfect in the moral and intellectual virtues, without faith.<sup>43</sup> In short, Dante sacrifices the destiny of Virgil and of the virtuous pagans in general to the exigencies of his theological-political vision.

Dante’s exceptional presentation of pagans in the afterlife is, then, directly related to the theological-political world-view articulated in the *Monarchia*. It supports an ethical theory which Dante put at the service of an imperial political programme: namely, that, while the Church has spiritual power and responsibility for man’s eternal beatitude, the Empire is divinely ordained with exclusive temporal power and the ethical authority to guide man to his earthly felicity (*Mon.*, III. xv. 1-18). And it is no surprise that both the pagans exemplary for their moral virtue in Limbo (*Inf.*, iv. 121-129) and the four virtuous pagans we encounter outside Limbo – Virgil, Cato, Ripheus and Trajan – all played a critical role in the development of the Roman and Holy Roman Empires.

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Benvenuto, gloss to *Inf.*, iv. 43-45, *Dartmouth Dante Project* (<http://dante.dartmouth.edu/>).

<sup>43</sup> Dante insists, in the *Monarchia* and the *Commedia*, that ‘no one can be saved without faith (assuming that he has never heard anything of Christ), no matter how perfectly endowed he might be in the moral and intellectual virtues in respect both of his character and his behaviour’ (*Mon.*, II. vii. 4). See also *Inf.*, iv. 31-42 and *Purg.*, vii. 22-36.

### 3. Popes in Hell, and a celestial manifesto for the Roman Church.

Dante's inclusion of contemporary characters, as we have seen, is not original: on Morgan's analysis, they make up 69 per cent of the identified characters in popular visions and only 36 per cent in Dante's poem.<sup>44</sup> But, in her detailed comparison, there is one striking novelty within this category: no writer before Dante had dared to place contemporary popes in Hell. Dante not only damns Pope Nicholas III (b. 1225; papacy 1277-80) to Hell as a simoniac (one who sells spiritual office for material gain) but has him prophecy that the current Pope Boniface VIII (b. 1230: papacy 1294-1303) and the future Pope Clement V (b. 1264; papacy 1305-14) will join him there.<sup>45</sup> Dante also implies that Pope John XXII (b. 1244; papacy 1316-34), who was Clement V's successor after a two year *interregnum*, will also join him amongst the simoniacs: in *Paradiso*, St Peter refers to them both by their place of origin (Cahors and Gascony) as preparing to drink his blood (*Par.*, xxvii. 58-60).<sup>46</sup> Celestine V (b. 1215; papacy 1294), who was canonized by Clement V in 1313, is also condemned by Dante to Hell, residing among the pusillanimous 'neutrals', as one 'who in his cowardice made the great refusal' (*Inf.*, iii. 59-60). It was Celestine V's abdication, indeed, that led to the pontificate of Boniface VIII, Dante's *bête noire*.

Only two contemporary popes escape Dante's Hell. Adrian V (b. 1210/15; papacy 1276) does so, in Dante's account, only by a hair's breadth: for his entire ecclesiastical career culminating in the papacy ('fino a quel punto'), he had been wretched ('misera'), separated from God ('partita / da Dio'), and entirely avaricious ('del tutto avara'); in penance, he is presented in humiliating prostration on the terrace of avarice in Purgatory (*Purg.*, xix. 103-14). The only contemporary pope whom Dante places in Paradise is Pope John XXI: no reference at all, however, is given to his role as Pope or to his Papacy; rather, he is referred to as Peter of Spain ('Pietro Spano') and celebrated for his work of logic, the *Summulae logicales* (*Par.*, xii. 134-35). Of the fourteen popes in Dante's lifetime, then, seven are apparently allotted a place in Dante's vision of the afterlife: of these, two are already in hell in 1300, and two or three more are – we are informed – soon to follow. One, despite being a Pope, just gets into Purgatory through a late conversion, and one, with no mention of his having been a Pope, is in Paradise as a celebrated logician.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See Morgan, p. 60.

<sup>45</sup> See *Inf.*, xix. 31-87. See also *Par.*, xxx. 142-48.

<sup>46</sup> In addition, Dante probably refers to Pope John XXII at *Par.*, xviii. 130-32: 'Ma tu che sol per cancellare scrivi, / pensa che Pietro e Paulo, che moriro / per la vigna che guasti, ancor son vivi' [But you who write only to strike out, remember that Peter and Paul, who died for the vine you are laying waste, are still alive].

<sup>47</sup> The fourteen popes in Dante's lifetime (1265-1321) are as follows: Clement IV (1265-68); Gregory X (1271-

What underlines Dante's polemic against the popes of his day in his vision of the afterlife? His original, and striking presentation reflects more than a powerful sense that individuals are betraying their sacred office. Dante is arguing, instead, that the contemporary papacy is institutionally corrupt, and that it has lost its direction and betrayed its true purpose. Dante's scathing depiction of contemporary popes in the afterlife, like his innovative representation of pagans, forms part, in other words, of a theological-political argument with direct relevance for his immediate audience. As Nick Havely emphasizes, Dante wrote the poem (c. 1307-21) around the same time as controversies surrounding Franciscan poverty reached fever pitch: 'around 1309-12, when Clement V was formally investigating the Franciscan Spirituals; and from 1317 onwards, when John XXII was actively engaged in suppressing them.'<sup>48</sup> And, as Davis adds, 'it is Dante's singling out of particular popes as protagonists of an epiphany of evil that seems to correspond most closely to the Spiritual Franciscan view of ecclesiastical corruption.'<sup>49</sup> There is, then, a pamphlet-like immediacy to Dante's theological-political programme for the reform of the Roman church.

Dante's epistle to the Italian cardinals, written after Pope Clement V's death in 1314, does not just reflect, therefore, his direct engagement with contemporary events; it also provides a revealing commentary on the *Commedia*. Where, in the epistle, Dante chastises the cardinals for despising the heavenly fire (the holy spirit which descended on the apostles at Pentecost), and for selling doves in the temple, making a market of priceless spiritual goods (*Epist.*, xi. 6), in his other-worldly vision, he places their contemporary leaders deep in hell: as counter-punishment (*contrapasso*), the tongues of flame, instead of informing their words, scorch their feet (*Inf.*, xix. 22-30). In the epistle, Dante castigates contemporary prelates for having their backs and not their faces to the chariot of the church (*Epist.*, xi. 6); on the terrace of avarice, he represents Pope Adrian V with his backside grotesquely turned towards Heaven (*Purg.*, xix. 97-99). In the epistle, Dante laments the despicable state of the Roman Church and the transfer of the papacy from Rome to Avignon in 1309 (*Epist.*, xi. 1-4); in his poem, he presents an allegorical representation of the church's moral corruption, and clearly alludes to the Babylonian captivity through the sacred chariot's detachment from the tree (*Purg.*, xxxii.

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76); Innocent V (1276); Adrian V (1276); John XXI (1276-77); Nicholas III (1277-80); Martin IV (1281-85); Honorius IV (1285-87); Nicholas IV (1288-92); Celestine V (1294); Boniface VIII (1294-1303); Benedict XI (1303-04); Clement V (1305-14); John XXII (1316-34). Morgan erroneously states, first, that 'in his [Dante's] lifetime there had been six popes' (there were fourteen), secondly, that 'Giovanni XII, is allocated to Paradise' (it is John XXI), and, thirdly, that 'Celestine V and Nicholas III suffer in Hell for simony' (Celestine V suffers in Hell as a neutral).

<sup>48</sup> Nick Havely, *Dante and the Franciscans: Poverty and the Franciscans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, *Dante's Italy*, p. 63.

100-60). The final vision of the ‘whore’ (*puttana*; ll. 149 and 160), moreover, almost certainly refers to the papacy of Boniface VIII, while the ‘giant’ is conventionally interpreted to represent the Philip IV, successor to the French monarchy.<sup>50</sup>

Dante is equally forthright in highlighting the root causes underlying the church’s contemporary degeneracy: sloth and avarice. Where the church fathers searched for God, the modern prelates, in their spiritual sloth, desire only riches and worldly power: each one of them, Dante claims, has taken Cupidity as his wife (‘Cupiditatem unusquisque sibi duxit in uxorem’; *Epis.*, xi. 14-16). On both occasions that Dante treats sloth and avarice in the *Commedia* (implicitly in *Inferno* vii and explicitly in *Purgatorio* xix), he splices these capital vices together, structurally dividing in two a canto. And he polemically associates these vices, in both cases, with clerics: in *Inferno* vii, *all* the avaricious are tonsured clerics including popes and cardinals (‘Questi fuor cherci [...] e papi e cardinali / in cui usa avarizia il suo soperchio’). In *Purgatorio* xviii and xix, Dante sandwiches the siren between two clerics: an abbot (the *only* slothful soul identified) and Pope Adrian V (the *first* soul whom Dante encounters in the terrace of avarice). The Pope, as *successor Petri*, should, of course, be married to his flock (and the church, as a whole, to Christ as *sponsa Christi*) but, instead, he is paired to a whore (the siren is, by some early commentators, simply referred to as *meretrix hominum*). The papacy’s avaricious assumption of temporal power was, for Dante, the principal institutional cause of moral evil: ‘la vostra avarizia il mondo attrista, / calcando i buoni e sollevando i pravi’ [your avarice afflicts the world, trampling the good and raising up the wicked] (*Inf.*, xix. 104). And it underpinned his firm conviction that temporal and spiritual power should be divided between Empire and Church. Dante’s condemnation of the contemporary papacy arguably reaches its climax in St Peter’s denunciation of his current successors: in the eyes of the Son of God, the seat of the papacy is vacant, and his burial place has become a sewer (*Par.*, xxvii. 19-63).<sup>51</sup>

Dante’s afterlife is not just, however, a polemical vision of the contemporary church’s corruption: it presents, also, a manifesto of reform. In structuring Purgatory, Dante draws on two main developments in the Church’s ongoing renewal: first, the growing connection in thirteenth-century religious discourse between penitence and Purgatorial suffering; and second, the prominent use of the seven capital vices in the practice of confession. As the doctrine of Purgatory gained more prominence in the life of the Roman Church (it was only given the

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Davis, *Dante’s Italy*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>51</sup> Dante nonetheless held that Boniface VIII’s papacy was legitimate, as is evident from *Purg.*, xx. 85-90. For this important qualification, see, also, Davis, *Dante’s Italy*, p. 64: ‘St. Peter might complain in Paradise (supposedly in the year, ironically enough, of Boniface’s Great Pardon) that his place was vacant in the eyes of the Son of God, but he was speaking only in a moral sense.’



official stamp at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274), preachers sought to explain Purgatorial suffering through comparison with earthly penance. In response to the renewed emphasis on the practice of confession at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215-16), preachers found in the theory of the seven vices a popular approach to the Christian moral life. In opposition to a decadent Church in ‘captivity’, then, Dante arguably depicts in the seven terraces of Purgatory a moral vision of how the Church might fulfill its true divine mandate to lead sinners back to God.<sup>52</sup>

The structure of Paradise is similarly informed by Dante’s reforming theological-political programme. The second and sixth spheres foreground the Empire and political justice. In the second sphere of Mercury, Dante locates the corruption of the papacy in the donation of Constantine, he upholds Justinian as an ideal Emperor who reformed the civil law, and he models, in Pope Agapetus’s spiritual counsel of Justinian (in the form of a correction of heresy), the appropriate relationship he envisages between Pope and Emperor. Moreover, Dante represents the conquests of the Empire (embodied in the Imperial Eagle) as Divinely willed, and he reiterates his strange theory of the Atonement, according to which the universal jurisdiction of the Roman Empire under Augustus was necessary for Christ to have died for all.<sup>53</sup> In the sixth sphere of Jupiter, the dramatic appearance of Ripheus and Trajan, in the eye of the Eagle, highlights – as we have seen – the providential role of the Roman Empire in administering justice. Finally, the third and fifth spheres of Heaven, place emphasis on the cooperation of the Papacy and temporal power, in the persecution of heresy (Folco combats the heretic Cathars) and the liberation of the Holy Lands through the crusades (Dante presents his crusading ancestor Cacciaguida as a *de facto* martyr).

Dante’s Paradise also presents an other-worldly vision for the material poverty and spiritual evangelism he envisaged for the church on earth. The first, fourth and seventh of the planetary spheres place emphasis on religious orders: Piccarda and Constanza (in the first heaven of the moon) were Franciscan nuns, ‘Poor Clares’, before being violently abducted from their cloister; St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure (in the fourth heaven of the sun) praise the founders of each other’s orders, St Dominic and St Francis, while denouncing the subsequent degeneracy of their own; St Benedict, the founder of western monastic orders, and

<sup>52</sup> See also Corbett, ‘The Christian Ethics of Dante’s Purgatory’, 266- 87 (esp. pp. 271-73).

<sup>53</sup> Guido Vernani ridicules Dante’s bizarre argument that God’s justice would not have been fulfilled were the Romans not the universal governors of the entire human race: ‘Quis enim unquam tam turpiter erravit, ut diceret, quod poena debita pro peccato Originali, potestati alicuius terreni Iudicis subjaceret?’ [Who ever made such a disgraceful error as to say that the punishment due for original sin lay in the power of any earthly judge?]. See ‘Vernani’s *Refutation*’, II, 101-02 in Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, p. 188.

St Peter Damian, a rigorous reformer, extol the ascetic contemplative life in the seventh heaven of Saturn. Throughout *Paradiso*, Dante counterpoises the worldliness of the contemporary papacy with the asceticism of the early church and of the monastic and mendicant orders. The origins of the papacy in St Peter, of western monasticism in St Benedict, and of the mendicant orders in St Francis were all characterised, Dante claims, by material poverty (*Par.*, xxii. 88-93).

In *Paradiso*, Dante arguably not only presents St Francis and his order as a model for the contemporary church, but represents the pristine church in St Francis' image. Certainly, St Francis is given a unique prominence by Dante, named for the third time in the heavenly rose as second only to John the Baptist in the hierarchy of heaven.<sup>54</sup> In Dante's hagiography, moreover, St Francis is depicted as an *alter Christus*, and as a 'new sun' ('nacque al mondo un sole'; *Par.*, xi. 50), Dante's symbol *par excellence* for God.<sup>55</sup> St Francis' mystical marriage with Lady Poverty, furthermore, juxtaposes Dante's representation of the contemporary prelates as married to Cupidity. And Dante's panegyric is particularly striking for emphasising one detail. He claims that '[Lady Poverty], deprived of her first husband, had waited, scorned and obscure, without a suitor eleven hundred years and more until this man appeared' ('Questa, privata del primo marito, / millecent' anni e più dispetta e scura / fino a costui si stette senza invito'; *Par.*, xi. 64-66). In other words, Dante insists that Francis was only the second (after Christ himself) to embrace poverty. How so? While many saints before St Francis had embraced poverty as a mistress, only Christ and St Francis, according to Dante, made poverty the 'mother' of their spiritual children, their followers or disciples. St Francis's first congregation could not own material wealth (or its buildings) and was granted only the 'use' of it by the Church, a singular regulation confirmed by Pope Nicholas III's bull *Exiit qui seminat* (1279) but under threat in the early fourteenth century and effectively nullified in 1322, one year after Dante's death, by Pope John XXII's bull *Ad conditorem canonum*.

But it was precisely this model of Franciscan corporate poverty that Dante seems to envisage for the church as a whole in *De Monarchia*. In that treatise, he argues that the Holy Roman Emperor (holding all temporal land and power) would cede the use, but not the possession, of wealth and buildings to the Church. And by linking Christ and St Francis as the two husbands of poverty, he is emphasizing, once again in his *Commedia*, that Christ's

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<sup>54</sup> 'e sotto lui [Giovanni] così cerner sortiro / Francesco, Benedetto e Agostino, / e altri fin qua giù di giro in giro' [and below him in the same way Francis, Benedict, and Augustine have been assigned to divide, and others down to here from circle to circle] (*Par.*, xxxii. 34-36).

<sup>55</sup> See also Davis, *Dante's Italy*, p. 49: 'St. Francis occupies a position just under St. John the Baptist. He could not be Christ's prophet, like John, but he was apparently, in Dante's opinion, Christ's most faithful imitator.'

followers, the church, should follow him in institutional poverty.<sup>56</sup> This messianic theological-political programme, then, underpins Dante's depiction of the Christian afterlife from Virgil's prophecy of the 'veltro', who will chase the she-wolf of cupidity back down to Hell, through the apocalyptic prophecies in the Earthly Paradise, to his final representation of the blessed in the Empyrean.

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<sup>56</sup> Although Dante distances himself from schismatic Franciscan factions (Par., xii. 121-26), he is, then, 'in one important way [...] more radical even than the Spiritual Franciscans. He thought that the clergy as a whole should have remained poor, and should have shunned all temporal jurisdiction, from the time of Christ to the end of history' (Davis, *Dante's Italy*, p. 52). Davis also notes the irony of Dante making Aquinas the spokesman for this view of St Francis and apostolic poverty, a view Aquinas had himself opposed in the *Summa theologiae* (*Ibid.*, p. 50).

## Conclusion

The canonical and, even, ‘timeless’ status of Dante’s *Commedia* in Western European literature may distract us from the historical immediacy of its theological-political polemic. But, as I have argued, Dante’s otherworldly vision is best understood precisely in the context of the reforming, and sometimes radical, currents of his time. Dante seems to have believed, indeed, that a final, definitive eschatology through the culmination of human history in the Second Coming was near.<sup>57</sup>

In this chapter, I have focused on two novel aspects of Dante’s afterlife in relation to previous traditions about the otherworld, both popular and learned: Dante’s treatment of pagans and of contemporary popes. I have shown that these surprising innovations are direct consequences of his theological-political programme for urgent this-worldly renewal. Behind Dante’s naming of so many classical figures (eighty-four) in the afterlife, his creation of a heterodox region of limbo to accommodate the majority of them (fifty-one) and his emphasis on Aristotle as ethical authority and Virgil as poet of Empire lies a political conviction: namely, that only a restoration of the Holy Roman Empire, guided by philosophical teaching and with universal temporal jurisdiction, could bring about peace and justice. Behind Dante’s scathing treatment of contemporary popes and prelates, meanwhile, lies his conviction that their avarice was destroying the world and that their spiritual sloth was putting in jeopardy the eternal salvation of their flock. The structure of Dante’s Purgatory and Paradise, as I have shown, reflects the kind of ecclesial reform he envisaged. Most strikingly, Dante not only appears to adopt Franciscan communal poverty as a model for the church as a whole, but he seems to believe that only a restoration of the Holy Roman Empire may bring about this reform by forcibly stripping the church of its temporal power and material wealth.

In Morgan’s taxonomy of the different kinds of other-worldly visions associated with different historical eras, she associates the Carolingian era with written representations of the other world that are ‘political and satirical in nature.’<sup>58</sup> Although Dante’s poem shares other characteristics with many kinds of vision, it is worth stressing, in conclusion, its political-satirical vein which, I think, has been insufficiently examined in the critical tradition.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Thus, it is worth emphasizing that Dante probably did not envisage the longevity of his poem’s reception because he insists, in *Paradiso*, that the seats of the blessed are almost full with only a few souls still awaited in heaven: ‘vedi li nostri scanni si ripieni, / che poca gente più ci si disira’ (*Par.*, xxx. 131-32).

<sup>58</sup> See Morgan pp. 1-4 (p. 3).

<sup>59</sup> For an interest in genre, and satire in particular, in relation to Dante, see, for example, the contributions in *Libri poetarum in quattuor species dividuntur: essays on Dante and ‘genre’*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański, Supplement to *The Italianist* 15, 2 (1995). See especially, Zygmunt G. Barański: “‘Tres enim sunt materie dicendi...’ Some

However, there is one decisive difference between Dante's political satire and that of the Carolingian visions. Rather than the 'vision of the other world [becoming] a political weapon at the hands of the Church', Dante's otherworldly vision is decisively a political weapon for the Empire and, indeed, for his patron and the dedicatee of *Paradiso*, Cangrande della Scala, the leader of the Imperial faction in Italy. Whether or not Dante would have followed his patron in support of Louis of Bavaria's march into Italy in 1326, and his installation of the Spiritual Franciscan Pietro Rainalducci as Anti-pope Nicholas V, is a matter of conjecture, as Dante died five years earlier.<sup>60</sup> What is beyond conjecture, in my view, is that his *Monarchia* and his *Commedia* were potent ammunition to that cause.

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Observations on Medieval Literature, 'Genre' and Dante', in *Ibid.*, pp. 1-60 and Suzanne Reynolds, 'Dante and the Medieval Theory of Satire. A Collection of Texts', in *Ibid.*, pp. 145-57. More recently, this line of enquiry has been taken up convincingly by Ambrogio Camozzi Pistoja. See, for example, Ambrogio Camozzi Pistoja, '19. Inside Out', in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, ed. by George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), pp. 173-91.

<sup>60</sup> Cangrande declared his allegiance to Henry VII in December 1310 and was made an imperial vicar the following year; he was excommunicated by Pope John XII on 6 April, 1318; and supported Louis of Bavaria in 1326. See Nick Havely, *Dante* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 43-47.

