Dante's Divine Comedy
Introductory Readings II: Purgatorio
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XXVIII

Certified fit to travel alone by Virgil at the close of Canto 27, Dante strolls eagerly into the Garden of Eden. This shady forest atop Mount Purgatory is the setting for his meeting with a stunningly beautiful maiden who appears all alone, laughing and singing, on the other side of a two-pronged rivulet. As she gathers flowers to weave a garland, she reminds him of Persephone; her glance recalls Venus luminescent with love for Adonis. Dante, longing to step across the narrow stream, compares himself to Leander grounded upon the shore of the Hellespont by storm-swollen breakers, just where once Xerxes had traversed that same strait. The lady, whose name will be revealed as Matelda by Beatrice only in the closing moments of *Purgatorio* (33, 119), addresses Dante and his walking mates Virgil and Statius to explain why she laughs in this place chosen for human nature as its first «nest.» Then, answering Dante's curiosity, she recounts how God gave it to man in «earnest,» or as a pledge of eternal life, but man, for his «default,» dwelt here only briefly. So that nature would not «war against» him, the mount soars above earthly climatic variations. Here grow all manner of plants, including some not found in the inhabited world. They propagate spontaneously when struck by an airstream whose source is the whirling motion of the Prime Mover and whose music hums low in the pine boughs. No physical cycle of vaporization and rainfall waters the stream. Like the wind, it flows from above, from a spiritual source in the fixed fount of God. Lethe, one branch of the rivulet, takes away the memory of sin. The other, Eunoè, restores memory of all good deeds. Matelda concludes her lesson with a «corollary»: the ancients on Parnassus may have dreamt of this place of innocence, perpetual spring, and fertility, when they wrote poetry of the Golden Age: «Qui fu innocente l'umana radice; / qui primavera sempre e ogne frutto.» Her remembrance prompts Dante to look over his shoulder at Virgil and Statius, who have listened to her last «construct» with a smile. The canto ends as Dante turns his face again to «la bella donna.» In subsequent cantos she will pull him through Lethe and immerse him in Eunoè. Final stages in his purification, those bathings ready him for the procession in which, as a passenger on a gryphon-drawn chariot,

Beatrice will make her epiphany.

Close to seven centuries of commentaries have brought into relief predictable features of *Purgatory* 28. Prominent among them is the landscape, a pastoral oasis vivid in minds of later artists from Boccaccio to Poliziano and Botticelli, to Lord Byron and Gabriele D'Annunzio. Dante's «campagna santa» differs enough from the biblical description of Eden that, as he passes into the «thick and living» forest at dawn of his fourth day on Purgatory, he does not realize where he is until Matelda tells him. How far does the poet's conception of the place follow tradition, and when does it deviate? Where are Enoch and Elijah, Adam and Eve? Why only two rivers instead of four? Why represent the Garden as a wood?

Expositors also pay their due to the canto's geographic, historical, and mythological allusions. Dante's «divina foresta,» where breeze plays a «burden» of bass notes to the birdlets' high-pitched song, is like the pine forest on dunes at Classe, near Ravenna, a real place that the exiled poet knew from personal experience: «la pineta in su 'l lito di Chiassi, / quand' Ëolo scilocco fuor discioglie.» But its prevailing *scirocco* comes less from the southeast than out of a book, Virgil's *Aeneid* 1. The first simile in the canto, it reminds us of the tempest unleashed at Juno's instigation on the Trojan fleet by Aeolus, king of the winds, a disaster that beaches Aeneas at Dido's new Carthage and launches Virgil's epic. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* contribute three images to the canto. First is Matelda's similitude to the flower-maid Persephone, daughter of Ceres, whose abduction by Pluto down into Hades ended the Golden Age of perpetual spring and caused seasonal variation to enter the world (*Metamorphoses* V,385-571). Second is Matelda's likeness in beauty to Venus, accidentally pricked by one of her son's arrows and stricken with obsessive passion for Adonis (*Metamorphoses* X,525-532).

Third is Dante's temporary kinship with Leander. As he holds back on the bank of the rivulet that separates him from Matelda, he realizes what frustration Leander must have felt whenever turbulent waves stopped him from swimming the Hellespont for a night of love with Hero on the opposite shore (*Heroides* XVII-XVIII). Surprisingly, Dante then conflates Ovid's pathetic tale of Hero and Leander with a bellicose intruder from history, Xerxes. Orosius and Lucan told how he too crossed the Dardanelles, not for romance but conquest, moving his huge invading army on a pontoon bridge. Routed at Salamis by Themistocles, the Persian general was reduced to ignominious retreat in a tiny fishing boat. Although this reference to haughty Xerxes seems at odds with the Ovidian sexual allusions, it completes a symmetry in

Purgatorio 28. Two feminine comparisons for Matelda (Persephone, Venus) are balanced by two masculine analogies for Dante (Leander, Xerxes). Loss is the theme common to all of these myths, aptly remembered in the Earthly Paradise. Finally, Matelda's comparison of Eden with the Golden Age allows us to hear two ancient Parnassians in a perfect duet. Virgil, poet of the *Bucolics*, gives background harmony to an aria cited from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* I.

As glossing goes, our own century has seen a shift in emphasis, away from old-fashioned coverage that touched all the bases. Increasingly, one particular subject has usurped time from the others as an issue of controversy. It makes a perfect example of the tendency Leo Steinberg has put into an aphorism: «the interpretative tradition feeds on itself, with minimal interference from the object interpreted.» Now I don't mean to suggest that the *lectura Dantis* as a critical form has declined and mutated into a freakish beast, self-sustaining and self-perpetuating, headed away on a mad tangent from the poetry that originally set it in motion. But I do think that this lectural genre we continue to practice since Boccaccio inaugurated it in 1373 has produced some narcissistic offshoots. One of them is the body of writing that in the last hundred years or so has swelled around Matelda. *Dantismo*, ready to accommodate, has awarded single-minded scholars of Matelda their own special label, a coinage of Francesco D'Ovidio: they are the «Mateldisti.» Even though early commentators all understood who she was — to their satisfaction, in modern times doubts and disputes have arisen. Who is Matelda? Does she have a real historical identity, like Dante's other guides Virgil, Cato, Statius, Beatrice, Bernard? If so, is her existence part of Dante's personal life in the way that we suppose was true of Beatrice, or was she someone he knew as a literary figure, as was the case for all the others from Virgil to Bernard? Could she be purely symbolic? And if so, why does she have such an odd name as Matelda? Why, for that matter, do we have to wait so long to learn it, six cantos from the time she appears until Beatrice names her, a greater time lapse in anonymity than for any other character in the *Divine Comedy*? And whether she is historical or not, what role does she play in the allegory of the *Comedy*? These are questions to which I shall return, my hope being not to fuel the monster, but to help tame it.

The 148 verses of *Purgatory* 28 divide neatly into two halves. The first, Dante's description of the «divina foresta» and of Matelda, ends with line 75. Matelda's welcoming message to the newcomers, «Voi siete nuovi» (v. 76), opens part two, in which, after identifying her mountain top as Eden, she teaches its supernatural climatology and botany, a scientific lesson rounded off by her «corollary» on what

intimations of Christian immortality may have inspired the poets of pagan antiquity.

As the narrative advances from damsel in a landscape to Matelda the scholastic preceptor, so does Dante's language shift. First the canto is lyrical; later it is doctrinal. Doctrine, the intellectual «defogging» («disnebbiar») Dante gets from Matelda, devolves on a technical vocabulary cast in difficult syntax. I paraphrase some samples: «disturbance of the exhalation of water and earth that follow the heat,» «the plant percussed impregnates the air with its virtue,» «the earth conceives and filiates,» «a vein surges with vapor that converts to ice.» This scientific register, which Niccolò Tommaseo thought unbefitting a female spokesperson, contrasts with the more simple, transparent linguistic medium that carries the canto up to its midpoint. There Dante appropriates the style of the vernacular love lyric. His encounter with Matelda, amorous apparition in a spring landscape, repeats the stock motif of the *pastorella*, a poetic type that had passed down from the troubadours to the Tuscans. Portraying her as a Primavera figure, Dante points to Guido Cavalcanti's mistress of poesy, Giovanna-Prima Verrà, and he affectionately cites his friend Guido's *pastorella*, «In un boschetto trova' pasturella.» With lexicon he recurs to the Sìculo-Tuscan poets, whose typical forms echo in diphthongs of Latinate and Provençal origin: «lo suol che d'ogne parte *auliva*» in «un'*aura* dolce» made melodious by singing «augelletti.» In words like «dolce» and «riso» we hear regulation bisyllables from the vocabulary of the *Siciliani* and *dolce stil nuovo*, and another favorite trio find stronger places in rhyme position: «fiore»-«amore»-«core.» Diminutives are frequent: «augelletti,» «fiumicello,» «donna soletta,» «fioretti,» «novella [fede].» To intensify musicality Dante composes a fugue of sounds that link the first two *terzine* («Vago già di *cercar*,» «sanza più *aspettar*»), that elsewhere suggest internal rhyme («disvia / per maraviglia»), and that play deftly as paronomasia and polyptoton even in Matelda's didactics: «l'aere si volge con la prima volta.»

Duplications are striking, beginning with the rhythm of Dante's gait «lento lento» (v. 5). The adverbial doubling, which makes meaning emphatic, has the strength of a superlative «lentissimo.» It asks us to think by contrast of the haste enjoined upon Dante in his ascent of the mountain, voiced in Cato's rebuke down at the shore when a herd of souls paused seduced by the sweetness of Casella's song, «Che è ciò, spiriti lenti?» In other echoic couplings birds sing «di ramo in ramo»; pure water of the riverlet flows in the shadows «bruna bruna»; Matelda sings and gathers «fior da fiore»; she walks «piede innanzi piede.» Dante varies the device when he puts repetition to service in *rima equivoca* or

rime riche with homonyms on «mai»: «l'ombra . . . che mai / raggiar non lascia sole» and «i freschi mai» (vv. 32, 36). The word is used first as the adverb «never» and then as the noun «maio» in its plural form «mai,» a variant form of «maggio» that means «May branches» or «blossoming branches» and is a synecdoche for «trees in spring bloom.» Reiteration is concentrated in the first half of the canto, with one exception later, when the same phrase initiates two successive verses. It is the formidable anaphora referring to the «default» that caused man to fall and lose Eden: «*per sua difalta* qui dimorò poco; / *per sua difalta* in pianto e in affanno / cambiò onesto riso e dolce gioco» (vv. 94-96).

Why is repetition as a rhetorical figure so conspicuous in this canto? In one respect, Dante tropes the *pastorella* by Cavalcanti about his pliant shepherdess, «che *sola sola* per lo bosco gia.» In another, these reverberations help convey the dreamy atmosphere of the poet's experience in Eden, its hypnotic qualities and beauty, at once real and surreal. But the dualities are more than literary tribute and oneiric sound. They have thematic validity in their twofold landscape, a garden bisected by two rivers, «Quinci Letè; così da l'altro lato / Eünoè ... / quinci e quindi» (vv. 130-132). The two rivers themselves enter a larger pattern of dualism, stamped into the poem in other ways. Just before Virgil's dismissal, Dante had awakened in Canto 27 from his third night and prophetic dream on Purgatory, a vision of Leah and Rachel. Symbolically these two Old Testament women personify the active and contemplative lives, and commentators have always recognized how as a duo they anticipate respectively Matelda and Beatrice. Beatrice in turn will come on the processional chariot pulled by the gryphon, the bipartite creature formed of eagle and lion that symbolizes Christ in his divine and human natures.

Eden is itself ambivalent terrain, a sort of split land of double possibilities — before the Fall and after, then and now, innocence and temptation. Even more to the point, I think, the Earthly Paradise is just exactly what the two-ness of its name indicates, both earth and paradise. It is a composite, literally an oxymoron, a God-made paradox. The highest peak on the earth, nearly touching the moon, it is the vestibule of Celestial Paradise, the taking-off pad for a lightning-like launch into heaven. It partakes of both the natural and the supernatural, the corporeal and the spiritual. And now we see that the two halves of the canto are not just passively or arbitrarily contiguous. They constitute a logical sequence: from the idyllic landscape to its miraculous hidden mechanics, from the physical to the metaphysical. In that progression are encapsulated the dynamics of Dante's whole journey.

Why does Dante reach Eden in Canto 28 and on the seventh day of

his journey (counting from Maundy Thursday in Hell and adding the three days and nights he spends on Purgatory, starting Easter Sunday morning)? His entry into Eden and the canto begin simultaneously, not an unplanned coincidence. Moreover, 28 evidently enjoyed a privileged status in Dante's thinking. It was, for example, in chapter 28 of the *Vita Nuova* that Beatrice died. Among all the women of the *Comedy* tallied in my own census, Matelda *mirabile dictu* turns up in *Purgatorio* 28 as the twenty-eighth. We can approach these riddles through the Pythagoreans, who recognized the lunar month number 28 as «perfect» because it is the sum of its factors (28 = 1 + 2 + 4 + 7 + 14). Their idea doubtless resulted from the rarity of such numbers, there being only seven between 1 and 40,000,000. (The series is 6: 28: 496: 8,128: 130,816: 2,096,128: 33,550,336.) Inherited by the Church Fathers, this system was converted to Christian purposes. Thus Bede corroborates the perfection of 28 as the product of its divisors 7 and 4. In 7 he understands the Sabbath, the day of God's rest and hence eternity, which we reach via the four Gospels, the four Evangelists, and the four cardinal virtues. Actually, 28 can be equated symbolically with 7 in its meaning of eternity, insofar as 28 is the sum of the first seven numbers (28 = 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7).

Of course, Dante reserves his final vision of the Godhead for a nightless eighth day in Paradise, applying the formula articulated by Augustine, who reckoned the transition from 7 to 8 as our passage from the hebdomad of the created world to heavenly salvation, from mortal life to New Life. Dante's placement of Eden in *Purgatorio* 28 (a canto with 148 verses) and his meeting there with the twenty-*eighth* woman of the *Comedy*, while turning on 7 (7 x 4 = 28), also announce the fulfilling 8 to come. In 28 the poet has found a «perfect» number for Eden, that Garden at once material and eternal. Numerology here tends to confirm that he knew the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, an anonymous tenth-century travelogue to the Otherworld probably composed in Ireland. This widely read *Voyage of St. Brendan*, of which more than 120 manuscripts survive, describes how the saint and his companions sail until they discover Paradise, an island in mid-ocean. Bisected by a river that living humans are forbidden to cross, it is bathed in endless daylight and brightened by trees constantly bearing fruit. Brendan and his men reach the blessed isle in the last chapter of the tale, number 28, after a seven-year journey of four parts each, hence an odyssey with 28 fixed points.

Dante's Earth-Heaven is terrain much more complex, a field of tension. One line of narrative force draws us up and ahead in the poem; another pulls us down and back. The Latinate language Matelda speaks

in her lecture is a prelude of Paradiso, the canticle of abstract, philosophical discourse. At the same time, with *Purgatory* 28 we return to the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, to *Inferno* 1. Once again the wayfarer enters a springscape furnished with a mountain and forest as the sun is rising. But now Dante is on the summit, not «ruining» in a valley below. Now he is «vago» (line 1, word 1), not fearful; the air is sweet («dolce,» «soave»), not harsh and bitter («aspro,» «amara»); pleasantly shaded («ombra perpetua»), not wild and dark («selvaggia,» «oscura»). When he awoke lost in the dark wood, Dante could not say how he had wandered in: «Io non so ben ridir com' i' v'intrai» (1,10); in Eden, he walks contentedly so far along that he can't see where he entered: «tanto, ch'io / non potea rivedere ond' io mi 'ntrassi» (vv. 23-24). There his way was blocked by wild animals, first the she-leopard: «Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar de l'erta, / una lonza leggiera e presta molto» (1,31-32); but here he is stopped by a stream: «ed ecco più andar mi tolse un rio» (v. 25). Each place is the scene of a sudden apparition. In Inferno Virgil appears before Dante's eyes: «dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto / chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco»; in Eden it is Matelda: «e là m'apparve ... una donna soletta.» She warms herself in «*raggi* d'amore,» which must remind us of those beneficent «rays of the planet that leads on the straight path» rising over the mountain in *Inferno* 1: «vidi le sue spalle / vestite già de' *raggi* del pianeta / che mena dritto altrui per ogne calle.» By poetic association, Matelda becomes a loving source of enlightenment.

The «selva oscura» of *Inferno* 1, grotesquely replicated in the dead wood that holds souls of the suicides in *Inferno* 13, now has returned verdant as «la selva antica» (v. 23). Here in the delightful pine forest Dante will be for a time «silvano» before he «comes out of the woods» to receive his permanent citizenship in Christ's Rome: «Qui sarai tu poco tempo silvano; / e sarai meco sanza fine cive / di quella Roma onde Cristo è romano» (*Purg*. 32,100-102). Thus the forest of entrapment in Hell that was the labyrinth of this world finds its redeeming counterpart in «la divina foresta» (v. 2) with breeze, birdsong, brightly colored flowers. In the system of the *Comedy*, each wood illuminates the other, as Boccaccio recognized when he glossed «selva oscura» in his *Esposizioni* 1,1,6: «a differenzia d'alcune selve, che sono dilettevoli e luminose, come è la pineta di Chiassi.» *Inferno* 1 depicts a moral landscape with no literal model on earth. Unlike the forest at Lake Avernus where Aeneas enters the Underworld, Dante's dark valley, his Anti-Eden, is nowhere. Eden, by contrast, has a specific geographic location. It is at the center of the hemisphere of water, at the antipodes of Jerusalem, and it rises in solid bilateral symmetry to the conical

concavity of Hell. While drawing on a rich medieval tradition for his ubication of the Earthly Paradise — a locale separated from the inhabited world, sometimes by an expanse of water, land so high it almost touches the sphere of the moon — Dante crafts his own personal cosmography bound and unified by textual typology.

The forest of Eden was judged by Ruskin, «so far as I know, the sweetest passage of wood description which exists in literature.» Many other readers have admired Dante's depiction of nature here because it is the most «natural» place in the whole *Comedy*. Paradise is immaterial, pure spirit. Hell is the poetic realm of *adynata*, the natural world inside-out, upside-down, a zoo of horrifying monsters. It rains fire; a river boils with blood; dead trees encase living souls that spout sap, blood, and words; a pope top-down in a hole talks through his flaming feet; a man's head is connected to the poisonous tail of a scorpion, a mouth still talks after decapitation. In Earthly Paradise nature is neither warped and twisted as in Hell, nor virtual and abstract as it is in Paradise. Here is the happy medium with changeless conditions in an ideal, vernal balance. Although man fell out of this nest, it is not a place of sadness. Matelda does not mourn; on the contrary, she praises the Creator in the *Delectasti* Psalm she sings, «For thou, Lord, hast made me glad through thy work» (Ps. 92). Her laughter shows outwardly the joy in her soul, true to Dante's own definition in *Convivio* 3,8,11: «E che è ridere se non una corruscazione de la dilettazione de l'anima, cioè uno lume apparente di fuori secondo sta dentro?»

To put it simply, here is the happiest place possible on the earth. How could Dante convey that extreme *gaudium* without such dazzling devices and grandiose effects as the gems and gold in Ezechiel's vision of the promised land, a festive throng of the saved, music *in chorale* resounding like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir? He could not pull out all the stops because he had to save his real fireworks for Paradise. They flash before us as we read on upward through the skies, psychedelic displays of souls that as points of twirling fire light heaven in three images summing up the Middle Ages — Cross, Eagle, Ladder; then, at the rim of the planetary universe, angels flit as bee-like jewels in a torrential lightfall whose rays refracted rise to form the amphitheater of the heavenly rose, home of the blest in the Empyrean. Still, even if things have to improve in Paradise, it seems as if Dante has been awfully restrained in his picture of Eden. There is not very much here: a forest, songbirds, a breeze, grass, red and yellow flowers, a bifurcating streamlet, one smiling maiden. This enviable economy of means is deceptive in its simplicity. The minimal landscape and its single

inhabitant all carry maximal allusive value. What seems most natural is in fact most symbolic.

Each detail resonates with multiple meanings. A mountain summit is sacred because it brings man close to God, as when Moses received the Law on Sinai; or Christ dwelt in the Mount of Olives, preached a Sermon on the Mount, and suffered Crucifixion on Golgotha. For the Anonymous Florentine commentator, the mountain means that the farther the soul is from sin, the closer it is to reason and the Creator; mountain climbing is the path to self-knowledge; attaining the peak signifies the moral perfection of man in this life. As for the forest «thick» and «living,» Dante's qualifiers imply an isolated spot, an arcadia fenceless and pathless, uncontaminated and unspoiled by too many people. Early commentators said the trees, like the flowers and birds, are «virtues» that spread their seeds over the earth, that is, sow the impluse to good in human hearts. (Such beneficence counters the «discord» and «scandal» disseminated by sinners hacked, truncated, and headless in *Inferno* 28.) Flowering and fruit-bearing, they are fair signs of spring, rebirth, and fertility. While the forest-labyrinth stands for this world, from Augustine forward through Aquinas the Garden was envisioned as a «shady grove» («terra nemorosa»; «fructuosis nemoribus opacatum»), its «legna» (cf. Latin *lignum* = «tree») linked both with the Fall and with the wooden Cross of redemption. Whoever held in memory Ambrose's *Hexameron* (5,36), would know that the reason birds sing at dawn is to praise the Creator and remind us to praise the Lord by chanting Psalms.

If the stream, three feet wide but an impassable barrier for Dante, is a separator between time and eternity, the breeze he feels against his «forehead» complements those angels' wings that had brushed his «fronte» on each terrace in the ascent and confirms invisibly the erasure of his sins. It is a soft, low, steady air current, not wind as we know it — unpredictable, gusting, turbulent. Easterly in one of its vectors, it blows from the direction of God and signifies rational restraint, temperance as opposed to impulse and unleashed passions. Taken overall, the Garden is a *locus amoenus* and majestic *lento* that marvelously combines ingredients from nature, the Bible, medieval legend, and classical myth. In allegory it may be a symbol of just government, and it is certainly emblematic of harmony in the soul. According to what Dante wrote in his *De monarchia* 3,15,7, the Earthly Paradise signifies «virtue in operation,» which is to say, «happiness.»

And Matelda? Dorothy Sayers expostulated for many readers when she wondered with some irritation «who the blazes Matelda is.» I like, too, Arturo Graf's smiling preface to his speculations: «Se Dante, per

prima cosa, avesse chiesto a Matelda: Chi sei? e che fai costì? avrebbe risparmiata molta fatica ai commentatori e fatto a noi un grande servizio. Ma altre furono le sue domande.» Alas, Dante does not oblige us with any such banalities. He dispenses with the usual courtesies and proceeds directly to voice his puzzlement at the wind and water, circulating in apparent contradiction to what Statius had taught him about unchanging weather conditions above the mountain gate (*Purg.* 21,40-57). If Dante recognizes her, why does he not introduce her? If she is a stranger to him, why not inquire about her credentials before the weather? Since she is all alone, no one else can perform the formalities. Of course, she could perfectly well name herself, as do many others, like Pia and Piccarda. Can Dante possibly have forgotten our curiosity as readers? Why does the poet not pronounce her name, at least for our benefit? We remember other encounters where names are not hidden, whether spoken by Virgil, Dante, or announced by their interlocutors: «Vedi là Farinata che s'è dritto»; «Là dentro si martira / Ulisse e Diomede»; «Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?» «Venedico se' tu Caccianemico»; «son Vanni Fucci / bestia»; «ricorditi di me, che son la Pia»; «i' son Piccarda.»

Some commentators have suggested that Dante withholds her name to challenge us, to make us think *what*, not *who* she is and sublimate the woman into a symbol. But there are two problems with this. First, it would mean that Matelda differs from Dante's other guides, being the only one without a prior historical existence. Virgil is «Reason,» but Virgil is also Virgil; Cato is «Freedom,» but Cato is also Cato of Utica. Second, if Eden's lone resident is purely symbolic, why is she eventually christened Matelda? Why not a more obvious and euphonious sign of personification, say, Grazia or Letizia?

Answers will require some «Mateldismo.» Now to be consistent with the other characters in Dante's *Comedy*, this lady must have two identities, one historical or literal, the other symbolic or moral. By consensus in the commentary tradition, from its origins to the end of the nineteenth century, she is the Countess Matilda of Canossa (d. 1115), a powerful noble faithful to the Church who ruled generously from her Tuscan stronghold. All take the connection for granted (e.g., the Anonymous Florentine, Jacopo della Lana, Pietro di Dante, Buti, Landino, Daniello, Tommaseo, Andreoli). Although Boccaccio's public readings never extended beyond *Inferno* 17, we know that he agreed with his learned colleagues because he anticipates his *lectura* on *Purgatorio* 28 in a discussion of Guelfs and Ghibellines prompted by the Farinata episode. His praise is typical: «Fu in Italia, già son passati dugento anni, una nobile donna e di grande animo e abondantissima di baronie e

delle mondane riccheze chiamata la contessa Matelda, delle cui laudevoli operazioni distesamente si dirà nel canto XXVIII del *Purgatoro*» (*Esposizioni* 10,1,44). But this venerable line was broken as our century began when called into question by D'Ovidio, who could not see in such a «soave giovinetta» the fierce old warrior dame of Tuscany. Thereafter the Countess of Tuscany fell out of fashion as Matelda's historical congener. Attilio Momigliano, bothered by the gap between the maid's beauty and her flat, philosophical speech, could hardly have been more blunt: «Whoever thinks that Matelda is Matelda of Canossa has a mind surrounded by cold shadows. It is laughable.»

But if not the Countess of Tuscany, then whom do we have here in such a privileged role? She could be a friend of Beatrice (recall that she will lead Dante to Beatrice and it is Beatrice who names her), perhaps any one of several ladies from the *Vita nuova*, possibly the «gentil donna» or Giovanna-Primavera, she who «comes before» Beatrice again in the *Comedy*. Or she could be a thirteenth-century German mystic, two of whom have been nominated: Mechtild of Magdeburg and Mechtild of Hackeborn. The latter was D'Ovidio's substitute, and he has found some thoughtful followers, including very recently the Dominican sister Mary Jeremy Finnegan. What, though, would Dante's enticing young girl, a picture of springtime, have in common with a German woman who mortified the flesh in her cloistered cell? Parallels between Dante's scene and Mechtild of Hackeborn's *Liber specialis gratiae* are too fragmentary and generic to clinch the matter: in one vision she sees herself on a mountain for forty days and nights; it has seven levels and seven fountains; first is the fountain of humility, which washes the soul of pride; other fountains above cleanse ire, envy, disobedience, avarice, carnality, accidia. Even more implausible than these Northern nuns are assorted remaining alternatives: Eve, assuming that Cato plays Adam and Dante is «Adamesque» (but Adam appears in *Paradiso* 26 and Eve, denied a speaking part, enacts the Eva-Ave palindrome as she sits below Mary in the celestial rose); Leah, no matter that Leah has already just appeared as herself in the preceding canto; Mary Magdalene; Matilda, virgin daughter of the German Emperor Henry I (first half of the 10th c.), Dante's mother, Bella; Dante's wife, Gemma.

Uncertainties being what they are about her literal existence, it goes without saying that Matelda's status in allegory is far more bemused. But again, the befuddlement is ours as moderns, for consensus united the older commentators, who called her the Active Life and connected her with Leah, making Matelda-Leah complement Rachel-Beatrice as the Contemplative Life. Outside that, she has been forced into a whole wardrobe of symbolic costumes, some sensible

enough, but others oddly colored, ill-fitted, or downright outlandish. Thus Matelda has been named Earthly Happiness Before the Fall, Earthly Happiness in the Natural State, Perfect and Happy Human Nature, Innocence, Natural Innocence, Primitive Innocence of Humanity, Return to Primitive Innocence, Perfect Purification, Astrea or Original Justice, the New Eve, Christian Doctrine, Doctrine of Holy Church (either read by studious men of letters or understood and learned by the unlettered from public preaching), Love of the Church, Practical Theology, The Priesthood, Working Charity, the Catholic Life, Mysticism, Path to Paradise, Contemplation (in the transition from the fifth to the sixth degree), the Soul of Paradise, a Cherub with a Flaming Sword, Provisional Happiness, Grace, Prevenient or Cooperant Grace, Habit of Good Choice, Monarchic Principle, Philosophy reconciled with Theology, Docility, Art Born of Learning, Imagination, She who Glorifies God's Wisdom, Wisdom, Woman.

Exposed to such a parade of personalities, no wonder most readers nowadays confess to feeling at an impasse. Time has come to cut loose from this masquerade that marches dizzily with the critics in lengthening file. If we double back to Dante, *his* Matelda need not elude us. Precursor to Beatrice, she who «comes before» is by gender feminine, and by rank she holds the summit of a hierarchy. Like old Cato at the mountain base, she cleanses and has presided since before Christ as «Genius» or «Guardian Spirit» of her place. Her name, scrutinized and dissected, contains letters that give the anagram «Ad Letham,» appropriate for one who leads «to the Lethe.» Etymologically, Mat(h)elda seems to be cognate with the Greek root «math» («learning») and so could mean «Love of Wisdom.» Buti, whose information may have come from John of Salisbury's *Policraticon* or Uguccione's *Derivations*, explained Matelda as «mathesim laudans,» that is, «lodante la divinazione or scienza di Dio» [praising prophecy or God's wisdom]. And knowledgeable indeed she is, so primed with scientific erudition that Peter Dronke has called her «the resident physicist» of a Christian Eden.

In view of her gender, her placement at the peak, her «mathematical» name, and her lecture, she must symbolize «Wisdom.» Scripture and Dante's *Convivio* offer plentiful support for this identification, proposed by Luigi Pietrobono, accepted by Mario Casella, and persuasively buttressed by Peter Armour. Matelda bears an uncanny resemblance to her Biblical ancestress, hymned in the Wisdom of Solomon: «He who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty ... She goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths... The beginning of Wisdom is the most sincere

desire for instruction» (6:14-17); from God Wisdom knows «the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots» (7:20); Wisdom is «more beautiful than the sun» (7:29). It was this sapiential beauty who earlier inspired Dante's love for Dame Philosophy, as his allegoresis in *Convivio* 3,8,3-5 confirms with quotes from Ecclus : «La sapienza di Dio, precedente tutte le cose, chi cercava?» (1:3); «Più alte cose di te non dimanderai e più forti cose di te non cercherai» (3:22). When Matelda appears beauteous with love in the Garden, we recognize her resemblance to «Filosofia» from the *Convivio*, whose face showed forth the pleasures of Paradise: «ne lo suo aspetto appariscono cose le quali dimostrano de' piaceri di Paradiso.»

Matelda, I find then, is *ad litteram* the Countess of Tuscany and *spiritualiter* Wisdom. If the former died after an active life at an advanced age, the latter is firstborn and eldest of all God's creatures: «The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth» (Proverbs 8:22-23). Yet she appears to Dante as young. We can suppose the Countess has risen in youth, as souls will according to Thomas Aquinas, who puts our ideal, resurrected age at around thirty. And for Dante's portrait of Sapientia, no more in allegory than theology would an old woman be suitable. So he has conceived a *puella-senex*, maidenly in body and mature in spirit, comely precisely because she is wise. She who was with Him at the Creation and delighted in it, lives on joyfully in the *Comedy* with endless juvenescence. If anything, the canto is «old» — in Antonio Enzo Quaglio's phrase «scattered with ancient poetic flowers»— pointers to the past in linguistic Provençalisms and Latinisms, allusions to classical myth, to Xerxes, to Parnassus, to the Golden Age. Matelda herself, ancient of days, sings from two Old Testament Psalms (*Purg*. 28,80; 29,3), and she will set Dante into the dancing circle of the four Pre-Christian Virtues (*Purg*. 31,103-104).

Ten times Dante refers to Matelda in the *Comedy*, but only once is she named. To Beatrice, who utters «Dante» in its sole occurrence (*Purg*. 30,55), will go the honor of one time declaring «Matelda» (*Purg*. 33,119). Every culture ritualizes naming — who can bestow a name, when a name can be spoken or written, or when it must be withheld and kept in silence, as sometimes the name of God. Always attuned to symbolism in nomenclature, medieval poets kept the process under tight control, witnessed by the fraught moment of the narrator's self-naming in the *Comedy*. Thus if Dante delays naming Matelda, it is not because her name is simply unimportant, as Momigliano opined. On the contrary, Dante wants to heighten her stature, so he deliberately postpones the revelation and saves it for a solemn *hapax legomenon*. By

keeping us in curiosity and suspense, he creates a mystery around her name, and when we finally hear it, we must understand that Beatrice intones it not by accident. What entitles her to disclose Matelda's identity? Although the historical Beatrice (d. 1290) could not have known the Countess Matelda, there is nonetheless a logic of homonymy to unite them. Armour has pointed out in a wonderful *aperçu* that Matelda of Tuscany was the daughter of a Beatrice. Thus as her mother, Beatrice, named her Matelda, Dante's Beatrice «names» Matelda in the *Comedy*. The two ladies gravitate into another alliance on allegorical ground. There Beatrice is familiar with Matelda and her habits, as we can infer from the *tu*-form command to dip and revive Dante in Eunoè, the task she is wont to perform for all souls who pass through the Garden: «menalo ad esso, *e come tu se' usa*, / la tramortita sua virtù ravviva» (*Purg*. 33,128-129). At the spiritual level of meaning in the *Comedy*, to sum up in schematic terms, we can say that Virgil-Reason leads Dante to Matelda-Wisdom, who will bring him face-to-face with Beatrice-Revelation.

The return to Eden is the attainment of wisdom. But it is nothing like a dry cerebral conquest. Matelda has in Dronke's phrase «spellbinding physical seductiveness,» a magnetism also felt by Charles Singleton, who rightly understood how Dante is attracted to her sexually. (Momigliano would have frowned; Matelda, he maintained, was an emblem of purity in a forest that is merely a state of mind.) Yet Dante is explicit. She radiates love, like Venus at her most intensely amorous, at the onset of her obsession with Adonis: «Non credo che splendesse tanto lume / sotto le ciglia a Venere, trafitta / dal figlio fuor di tutto suo costume.»

As much as Matelda, the canto of *Purgatorio* 28 is thoroughly sensual and Venerean. But by now in the journey, erotic love at the literal level implies Platonic love in allegory; sensuality transmutes to spirituality. In Canto 27 a dream of «Cytharea» anticipates the power of Venus over Canto 28, where Ravenna's pine grove, apart from its autobiographical resonance, is a forest of seed-hung conifers sacred to Venus. Blooming branches, «i freschi mai,» allude to May first, the day of the feast of Venus. Pluto smitten by Cupid's arrow at the behest of Venus snatched Persephone on the Sicilian plain beneath Eryx, the city famous for its temple to Venus; Persephone ate a pomegranate, seed-filled fruit of fertility; Cupid's arrow scratched his own mother, in whom Adonis obliterated all thought of anything else; Leander risked his life, and would eventually drown, swimming to meet Hero, a priestess of Venus. The magically fertile flora of Eden, Matelda explains, is a «seeding» («semenza») that «impregnate» the air, then

«conceive» and «filiate» throughout the earth. This canto appeals felicitously to every one of our five senses with its «painted» flowers (sight), birdsong (hearing), fragrance (smell), breeze (touch), and even though Dante does not eat or drink, he is exposed to both recollection and anticipation of gustatory delight, the most exquisite imaginable, from the Golden Age of «fruit» and «nectar,» and still to come from Eunoè, all other tastes surpassing («tutti altri sapori esto è di sopra»). Yet, as we have seen, the canto's language and imagery taken from vernacular love lyric cede in the second part to *terzine* paced for scholastic disquisition. While Dante cites the *pastorella*, his sylvan scene, unlike Cavalcanti's, does not culminate with seduction. Being in Eden, he and Matelda behave. His Matelda, a miraculous paradox, is both Venerean and virginal.

In closing, I return to the first simile in the canto. Little songbirds warble greeting to the morning and their Father's world up in branches that accompany them with a continuous wind-blown bass line, technically called «burden.» One is to think, as Singleton suggests, of the kind of music on two registers produced by bag pipes. «Li augelletti» (16-21):

> con piena letizia l'ore prime,
> cantando, recevieno intra la foglie,
> che tenevan bordone a le sue rime,
> tal qual di ramo in ramo si raccoglie
> per la pineta in su 'l lito di Chiassi,
> quand' Èolo scilocco fuor discioglie.

What makes the *basso continuo* in the pine boughs is a breeze sweet and steady («sanza mutamento,» «soave vento») that originates at the remote fringe of the cosmos in the *primum mobile*, generated as that Ninth Heaven whirls within its orbital radius all the lower planetary spheres. Likened to *scirocco*, a wind that blows from the southeast, this is a gentle warm air current. Dante wants us to contrast it with the gelid drafts that spirate from below, at the center of the universe, from Dis locked frozen in the pit of Hell.

Dante's similes, heightened rhetoric that signals intensified meaning, are stylistic embellishments significant both for their content and placement. We all well understand now, especially thanks to studies of Singleton and John Freccero, how powerful the first epic simile of the *Comedy* is. It functions proleptically. The sinner's near death as if by drowning in a shipwreck points ahead to Ulysses's failed navigation and sinking ship, the negative counterpart to providentially authorized missions by Aeneas and by Dante. What significance does the first

simile in *Purgatorio* 28 have? How does it illuminate the poem on a larger scale?

With his mention of Aeolus, Dante nods to Virgil and the storm unleashed on Aeneas's fleet as they sailed from Troy to Carthage. Juno, vengeful as usual, enlists Aeolus to help her plottings against the Trojans. She goes to Aeolia, mother-land of storm clouds (*Aen.* I,52ff):

Here in his vast cavern, Aeolus, their king, keeps under his sway and with prison bonds curbs the struggling winds and the roaring gales. They, to the mountain's mighty moans, chafe blustering around the barriers. In his lofty citadel sits Aeolus, sceptre in hand, taming their passions and soothing their rage; did he not so, they would surely bear off with them in wild flight seas and lands and the vault of heaven, sweeping them through space. But, fearful of this, the Father omnipotent hid them in gloomy caverns, and over them piled high mountain masses and gave them a king, who, under fixed covenant, should be skilled to tighten and loosen the reigns at command.

It should go without saying that Dante adduces Virgil not plain, as I have quoted him, but Virgil in the mantle of allegory that commentators from Servius onward tailored to his verses. Already Servius on *Aeneid* 1,57 says that Virgil has Aeolus tame the passions of the winds («mollitque animos») to show that the vices of nature can be mitigated. Starting with Fulgentius, in the tradition that reads the first six books of the *Aeneid* as an allegory of human life from birth to maturity, the winds are fleshly libido. Thus the so-called Bernard Silvestris (12th c.), who follows and expands on Fulgentius, says Aeolus symbolizes birth, when the human spirit leaves its celestial home and takes on the burdens of fleshly libido, represented by the release of the winds.

Petrarch, in both the *Secretum* and his *Seniles* (4,5), understands the tempest in *Aeneid* 1 as an allegory of human passions, and so does Boccaccio, who dedicates an entire chapter to Aeolus in his mythographic encyclopedia, *Genealogia deorum gentilium.* Aeolus, he reports, was the thirty-eighth son of Jove, or as Pliny had it, a Greek who explained the causes of the winds and ruled in the Aeolian Islands, near Sicily. «The poets say he was king or god of the winds. Virgil, describing his kingdom and duty, says of him, 'Eoliam venit; hic vasto rex Eolus antro Luctantes ventos tempestatesque sonoras Imperio premit ac vinclis et carcere frenat...'». Some take this passage in Virgil to mean: Aeolus, residing in his high citadel, is reason, which has its seat in the head; the winds are the enticements of appetite («illecebres appetitus») tumultuous in the human cave of the chest, which, unless reason («ratio») restrain them, bring us down in a fatal fall...'. For we have been well apprised what came of the ill-loosed libido of Paris, what

from the stolid presumption of Xerxes, king of the Persians («De Eolo,» *Gen.* 13,20). And in *Esposizioni* 2,2,36, Boccaccio exploits the same favored epic *locus*, to show why Virgil came as Reason to Dante in the dark forest of error, to regulate the wayfarer's passions and movements of his sensuality. He says that reason is placed in the head, man's highest part, because it should rule us from a seat where it is most needed, just as a monarch makes his capital in the part of his kingdom where the subjects are likely to be most restless. In the head Reason's realm is constantly under attack from the senses, also housed there — eyes, ears, mouth, and all the other bodily senses. «E questa sedia della ragione essere nel nostro celebro, e perché quivi, ottimamente sotto maravigliosa fizione dimostra Virgilio nel primo dell'*Eneida*, dove dice: Eoliam venit: hic vasto rex Eolus in antro.»

Dante himself exploits this well defined cultural framework in the first simile of the *Comedy*. Comparing the wayfarer to a man who almost perished in a storm at sea, he alludes to the *fluctus concupiscentiae*, or tumults of passions, that have threatened to swallow the pilgrim. Naturally, Dante's early commentators saw how, by the dawning day he reaches the Earthly Paradise, his problem has been corrected. There reason dominates sensuality. For Buti the Earthly Paradise is, in allegory, the state of innocence; for the Anonymous Florentine, there are no storms in the Earthly Paradise to signify allegorically that in the state of innocence there are no bodily passions and hence no sin; Buti and Landino agree that «whoever has raised himself from the earth, that is, from cognition of earthly things, and has made sensuality obey reason and unified himself so that the flesh does not fight the spirit, has a tranquil spirit free from winds of appetite, from waters of sadness, and from every perturbation.» For Benvenuto, Eden figures the happy state of perfect virtue, remote from climatic alterations because not subject to the passions.

Contrary to the «bufera infernal» of *Inferno* 5, the storm that relentlessly buffets Francesca, Paolo and all «Dido's troop» on winds of passions, the breeze in Eden is moderate, tempered. It is small, we could say, as are the waters diminutive — «un rio» with «piccole onde» only three steps across. For Dante it might as well be a gulf as wide as the Dardanelles or the Red Sea. He keeps his place, restrains himself, holds back in humility — unlike prideful Xerxes and unlike Ulysses, who had in hubris flown madly over the ocean and transgressed the pillars of Hercules. Wind and waters are symbols of the passions, their tumult and storms here tamed. In fact, the Garden as a whole is of relatively diminished dimensions: contrast the wild beasts of *Inferno* 1 with the «birdlets» of *Purgatorio* 28. Dante's pilgrim has travelled a great moral

distance. As Emerson Brown has noticed, there is indeed an undercurrent of sensuality here, but each of Dante's Ovidian similes, if fully read, hints at loss while focusing on the moment before the loss: Proserpina *before* Pluto abducted her, Venus with beauty augmented by love for Adonis *before* her grief at his bloodly death; Leander facing the Hellespont *before* his fatal plunge into the storm-tossed waters, emblem of his own indomitable passions. Dante and Matelda together belong to these «befores»: she because she has never been corrupted, he because he has been purged and verges on recovery of the primal innocence that she personifies. Thus stylistic economy of means in *Purgatory* 28 is poetic simplicity that complements the small proportions of the things depicted. They are contained within downsized limits to reflect what the pilgrim has achieved morally to this point in his journey, the capacity to contain his passions and restrain himself. Virgil as Reason has led him to Wisdom. Crowned and mitred, Dante is his own king, he rules himself.

At the end of the canto, Dante calls us back from the scholastic lesson on meteorology to «his poets,» Virgil and Statius. Matelda, anticipating that her smile might strike them as discordant in this place of the Fall, had addressed all three newcomers early in the canto (vv. 76 & 79): «Voi siete nuovi, e forse perch' io rido ... tienvi alcun sospetto.» But immediately after (v. 82), she directs her words just to Dante, who stands in front of them, «E tu che se' dinanzi.» Virgil and Statius, still with him here in the Garden, are nonetheless fading into the background. As it happens, neither will speak again in the poem. Present but silent, no longer leading (or at Dante's side), now they take position behind him. Dante, who had thrilled to trail along after Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, and Virgil as he walked through the first circle of Hell, «sixth among so much wisdom,» now above the highest terrace of Purgatory, stands alone, at the forefront. He precedes and overshadows Statius and Virgil. He, Dante, is first. He allows us to glimpse for a moment Parnassus, to see in our memory's eye the ancient poets assembled and dreaming there in an image that would inspire Raphael. After all the theologizing, the lecture on the nature of Eden with its erudite sources in Isidore of Seville, Peter Lombard, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Alanus of Lille — we return, as we must always in Dante's *Comedy*, to poetry.*

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