Re-presenting What God Presented: The Arachnean Art of Dante’s Terrace of Pride

TEODOLINDA BAROLINI

Dante deals with representation most overtly on Purgatory’s terrace of pride, where the pilgrim encounters a series of marble engravings that are rendered ecphrastically by the poet, one form of representation thus representing another. This paper will explore the implications of that encounter, viewed as an authorial meditation on the principles of mimesis as they apply to Dante and to his art.¹ As traditionally constituted, the principles of mimesis are here immediately violated; instead of art being inferior to nature, the art of the first terrace is such that it puts nature to shame: “non pur Policleto,/ma la natura li avrebbe scorno” (Purg. x, 32-33).² By proposing an art that surpasses nature, Dante proposes an art that is capable of going beyond verisimilitude, representation, to become presentation, the ver itself—as though Nimrod (who figures prominently among the examples of pride) had succeeded in his quest “to surpass with his art not only nature but also nature’s maker.”³ What kind of art equals reality, and succeeds in making the dead look dead and the living alive (“Morti li morti e i vivi parean vivi” [Purg. xii, 67])? Not until he has devoted much of Canto x to a detailed representation of three reliefs does the poet reveal their miraculous and literally supernatural status, conferred by their divine artifex: “Colui che mai non vide cosa nova/produisse esto visibile parlare, /novello a noi perché qui non si trova” (Purg. x, 94-96).⁴ Concentrating on the fact that the engravings are God’s handiwork, Dante exegesis, which has a tendency to focus on what Dante says at the expense of
what he does, has traditionally read the terrace of pride as an exercise in humility, and viewed the reliefs as a decorative way of underscoring Oderisi's remarks on the vanity of all human achievement. But why does Dante choose to use the concept of God as artist precisely in these cantos? Most crucially, why does he choose to posit a kind of supreme realism that is God's art, deliberately putting himself in the position of having to re-present God's realism with his own? If we argue, as does a recent article on these cantos, that "Verisimilitude sets terrible traps into which even the most accomplished of readers can tumble," we maintain the illusion of a poet who is never compromised by his own actions. Reasoning thus, we allow Dante to write the history of the criticism of his poem, as he wrote the history of the criticism of the poems that precede his. The point is that verisimilitude sets traps into which even the most cautious of poets can tumble—and Dante is not a cautious poet.

As examples of humility, the engravings of Canto x are set forth in a leisurely crescendo that devotes 12 lines to the Annunciation, 15 to David dancing before the arc of the covenant, and 21 to the story of Trajan and the widow. The tableaux are said to affect the pilgrim's senses: whereas the account of the first engraving begins modestly enough, claiming only that the angel and the Virgin seem to speak, and thus that the pilgrim seems to hear, the second engraving not only confuses his ears, which seem to hear singing, but also his nose, which seems to smell incense burning. The struggle between the pilgrim's eyes, which know they are looking at an engraving, and his ears, which insist on the presence of sound, is rendered through a miniature debate between eyes and ears: "a' due mie' sensi/faceva dir l'un 'No,' l'altro 'Sì, canta'" (Purg. x, 59-60). The confusion over the incense causes a similarly described discord between eyes and nose ("li occhi e l' naso/c al si c al no discordi fensi" [Purg. x, 62-63]). The pilgrim's sense of sight, still capable of fighting the illusion of reality in front of the second engraving, succumbs to the magic of the reliefs in the third, where he believes that he sees the emperor's banners moving in the wind: "e l' aguglie ne l' oro/sov' essi in vista al vento si movieno" (Purg. x, 80-81). Dante thus takes pains to depict a gradual overcoming of three of his five senses. Nonetheless, in the summarizing tercet that follows, he baptizes the engravings "esto visibile parlare" (Purg. x, 95), a phrase that insists on the representation of speech, rather than on the representation of incense or moving ban-
ners. The reason for this is that speech is a verbal medium, and—whereas
the poet cannot attempt to recreate God's incense for the reader—he can
attempt to recreate God's speech.

God produced visible speech ("produsse esto visibile parlare"), and
Dante's way of reproducing it is to resort to dialogue:

La miserella intra tutti costoro
pareva dir: "Segnor, fammi vendetta
di mio figliuol ch'è morto, ond'io m'accoro";
ed elli a lei rispondere: "Or aspetta
tanto ch'i' torni"; e quella: "Segnor mio,"
come persona in cui dolor s'affretta,
"se tu non torni?"; ed ei: "Chi fia dov'io,
la ti farà"; ed ella: "L'altrui bene
a te che fia, se 'l tuo metti in oblio?"
don'delli: "Or ti conforta; ch'ei convene
ch'i' solva il mio dovere anzi ch'i' moova:
giustizia vuole e pietà mi ritene."
(Purg. x, 82-93; italics mine)

This passage is Dante's attempt to make speech visible; his means is direct
discourse held together by narrative connectors that become ever less
obtrusive, eventually diminishing into the almost invisible "ed ei," "ed
ella," "ond'elli."7 Indeed, the shift to dialogue is intended to inscribe the
illusion of time into the text, to project it—like God's "visibile parlare"
—into the fourth dimension. The text mimics speech, as the poet strives
to recreate for the reader the confusion experienced by the pilgrim.8 We
recall that earlier the pilgrim's confusion was rendered by debates
between his warring senses; the poet will use this topos again toward the
canto's end. Significantly, whereas the earlier sensory debates were
triggered by the engraving of David's dance, thus by "art," the visual
debate ("tencione") of which Vergil speaks in line 117 is caused not by
art but by "life" (or, more precisely, by life after death)—that is, by the
confusing shapes of the souls who inhabit the terrace.

The pilgrim's uncertainty as to what he sees—"non mi sembian persone,
/e non so che, si nel veder vaneggio" (Purg. x, 113-114)—is redressed by
Vergil, who, after noting that his eyes too "prìa n'ebber tencione" (117),
instructs his charge to look carefully and distinguish the human forms
underneath the heavy stones they carry: "Ma guarda fiso là, e disviticchia
/col viso quel che vien sotto a quei sassi" (118-119). Vergil's clearheaded-
ness is, however, not reinforced by the poet, who ends Canto x by once more blurring the distinctions between art and life; as earlier he accomplished this by way of an art that is described as real, now he turns to describing reality in terms of art. Thus, the contorted bodies of the approaching sinners are described as grotesque caryatids,9 in a simile that forces us to think about what is real and what is not:

Come per sostenar solaio o tetto,
per mensola talvolta una figura
si vede giugner le ginocchia al petto,
la qual fa del non ver vera rancura
nascere 'n chi la vede; così fatti
vid'io color, quando puosi ben cura.

(Purg. x, 130-135; italics mine)

Although the caryatids are not real, the realism of their suffering bodies, their chests bent over to their knees, is such that it causes real pain in those who look at them: from their nonreal suffering—“del non ver”—comes the real distress—“vera rancura”—of the observer. This line, “la qual fa del non ver vera rancura,” epitomizes the theme at the heart of this canto, the question the poet is posing throughout: what is reality, what is truth? The real people seem like sculptures, and the sculpted reliefs seem like real people: which is imitation and which is being imitated?

The canto’s final sentence, following the simile of the caryatids, begins with “Vero è,” a phrase that echoes “del non ver vera rancura” three lines above, and subtly reinforces the narrator’s claim to be a teller of truth, not merely a maker of art; the sentence continues by describing the appearance of the penitent prideful in greater detail:

Vero è’ che più e meno eran contratti
secondo ch’avien più e meno a dosso;
e qual più pazienza aveau ne li atti,
piangendo parca dicer: “Più non posso.”

(Purg. x, 136-139)

Canto x thus ends with a line of dialogue—“Più non posso”—ascribed by the narrator to the sufferers he observes, but presented, interestingly, as direct discourse.10 The phrase used to set up the direct discourse, “piangendo parca dicer,” is much the same as that used earlier to set up
the first words of the widow to the emperor: "La miserella intra tutti costor/pareva dir" (82-83; italics mine here and above). The presentation of the real sinners seems intended to recall the representation of the figured vedovella, as the use of direct discourse at the end of the canto recalls the divine dialogue of the third engraving. God's art is real, unlike other art; but then Dante's art, his text, is also an art that is charged with representing reality—as on this terrace it is charged with representing the reality of the reliefs. And so we find the programmatic use of a lexicon that blurs the boundary between the divine mimesis and the text that is charged with reproducing it: God's sculpted art is strangely textual, referred to as "un'altra storia ne la roccia imposta" (52), and "un'altra istoria, che di dietro a Micòl mi biancheaggiava" (71-72; italics mine here and above). While the first two engravings are engraved, intagliati (the angel is "quivi intagliato in un atto soave" [38], the cart carrying the arc of the convenant "Era intagliato lì nel marmo stesso" [55]), the third is storìata," in the only use of storiare in the poem: "Quiv' era storìata l'alta gloria/del roman principato" (73-74; italics mine).11 Thus, the storia of Trajan and the widow is storiata, as though it were made of words rather than marble—as indeed it is.

The presentation of the examples of pride in Canto xii is also marked by an insistently representational lexicon. The sculpted vices are not on the cornice's walls but trampled underfoot; as tombs bear signs identifying the remains within them ("portar segnato quel ch'elli eran pria" [Purg. xii, 18; italics mine]), so these slabs are figured ("figurato") with designs that are more beautiful than those of earthly tombs because of the artistry—Dante uses "artificio," a hapax in the Commedia—of their divine maker:

si vid' io li, ma di miglior sembianza
secondo l'artificio, figurato
quanto per via di fuor del monte avanza.
(Purg. xii, 22-24; italics mine)

The figured ground is imitated by the figured text, which now launches into its own artificio, the acrostic;12 of the 13 tercets devoted to the 13 examples of pride, four begin with "Vedea," four with "O," and four with "Mostrava," so that the first letters of the first 12 tercets spell VOM or UOM, graphically illustrating the role of pride in man's history.13 The thirteenth tercet repeats the acrostic in condensed form, beginning each line with one of the three key words:
Dante Studies, cv, 1987

Vedeva Troia in cenere e in caverne;
o Ilión, come te basso e vile
mostrava il segno che lì si discerne!
(Purg. xii, 61-63; italics mine)

The *segno* representing Troy ("mostrava il segno": the representational thrust of the reiterated "mostrava" hardly needs underscoring)\(^{14}\) echoes the descriptions of Niobe, "*segnata in su la strada*" (38), and Rehoboam, whose *segno* no longer threatens: "O Roboâm, già non par che minacci/quivi 'l tuo segno" (46-47; italics mine here and above).\(^{15}\)

Rehoboam, son of Solomon, seems to have been assimilated to the sign that represents him: "'l tuo segno" establishes an identity between *res* and *signum* that reminds us that this is God's art, an art in which there is no gap between representation and representation, is and as. It is noteworthy in this context that *segno* appears in the *Commedia* most often in the canto of providential history, *Paradiso* vi, where it refers to the imperial eagle: the "sacrosanto segno" (32), the "pubblico segno" (100), not a mere representational sign but the emblem inscribed by God into the textuality of existence. The poem's most concentrated use of *segno* and *segnare*, surpassing even that of the terrace of pride, belongs to the heaven of justice, the eagle's home; indeed, if viewed from the perspective of representational issues, this heaven seems fashioned as a kind of celestial extension of the terrace of pride. Not only does it contain the *Commedia's* only acrostic outside *Purgatorio* xii,\(^ {16}\) but also Dante's only use of the term *storia* outside *Purgatorio* x: in *Paradiso* xix, *storia* refers to the actual events accomplished on earth by the eagle of justice, the events that men praise but fail to emulate ("commendan lei, ma non seguon la storia" [18]). In fact, this heaven is full of pictorial, representational, textual, linguistic and even grammatical terminology: we note *favella, figura, image, imagine, vocale, consonante, verbo, nome, emme, I, vocabol, lettere, volume, penna, scrittura, contesto, dipingere, dipinto*, and even *rappresentare*, in one of its two appearances in the poem. Some relatively common words, like *scrivere*, appear in this heaven in unusual density; others, like *vocale, consonante*, and *contesto* (the past participle of *contessere*) constitute hapax legomena.

The concern for representation that all this lexical activity denotes finds its fullest expression in the divine script whose letters are formed by the souls of this heaven:\(^ {17}\)
Moving into the shape of an eagle, the souls become a pictogram of sorts: “la testa e l’collo d’un’aguglia vidi/rappresentare a quel distinto foco” (Par. xviii, 107-108). As God is an artist on the terrace of pride, so here he is a writer and painter: “Quei che dipinge li, non ha chi ’l guidi” (Par. xviii, 109). And, lest we miss the connection to Purgatorio x, it is underscored again in Paradiso xx, where we find among the just souls of this heaven the same two figures who, with the Virgin, served as purgatorial examples of humility: the introduction of David as “il cantor de lo Spirito Santo,/che l’arca traslatò di villa in villa” (Par. xx, 38-39) cannot but recall the second engraving, in which David performed his humble dance before the arc; likewise Trajan is “colui che . . . la vedovella consolò del figlio” (Par. xx, 44-45), in an overt reprise of the episode that forms the subject of the third relief.18

Dante’s transposition of representational concerns from the terrace of pride to the heaven of justice reflects a move from the sign in “art” to the sign in “life.” The storia told by the eagle does not seem to be but is God’s providential history; the segno of Purgatorio vi is not an artifact but the eagle—history—itself. When God chooses to write, the signs he uses are human souls. At the same time, however, that there is a bow toward the mimetic hierarchy implicit in this transition, Dante’s design works dialectically, for the whole point regarding the divine art of Purgatorio x and xii is that it is equivalent to reality. The mimetic hierarchy is invoked only to be undercut: this is art that is not so much lifelike (“verisimilar”) as somehow akin to life (“ver”) itself. This crucial fact about God’s art is stated conclusively at the end of the episode, where the submerged paradox is fully articulated: “Morti li morti e i vivi parean vivivi: non vide mei di me chi vide il vero” (Purg. xii, 67-68). The onlooker who witnessed these events when they first occurred, when they were “true”—“chi vide il vero”—did not see more clearly than the pilgrim who observes
them now, produced by God in such a way that what seems—"Morti li morti e i vivi parean vivi"—is also what is: "non vide mei di me chi vide il vero." In God's representation art and truth, seeming and being, have merged, have become one, so that there is ultimately no difference between being a sign in God's reality and being a sign in his art: Rehoboam, the segno etched by God in the marble of Purgatorio xii, is as much a part of the providential design as the souls in the eagle, the segno fashioned by God in Paradiso xviii. But the dialectical nature of Dante's design incrribes an even more radical suggestion into our consciousness: the various techniques for blurring the boundary between art and life employed in the representation of the reliefs also serve to blur the distinction between God's representation and the representation that represents it. The speech patterns of the real sinners recall those of the vedovella for the same reason that the poet follows God's art with the simile of the caryatids, designed to sustain rather than lessen our confusion regarding the relative status of art and nature, imitator and imitated. Dante thus suggests an analogy between God's art and his own, the storia in which God's storia is storiata; his strategies for rendering the visibile parlare of the engravings work to suggest the interchangeability of the two artists, and to approximate on the page what God did in stone.19 And, indeed, what are Dante's textual goals if not the achievement of a supreme realism, an art in which "the dead seem dead and the living alive" (and—I cannot resist adding—in which the dead are alive and the living, occasionally, dead)?20

Dante is not unaware of the dangers inherent in such goals, the dangers, indeed, of claiming that his subject is "quella materia ond'io son fatto scriba" (Par. x, 27).21 His awareness causes him not to desist from what he is doing, but to invoke the figure of Ulysses, who in my opinion functions in the Commedia as a lightning rod placed in the poem to attract and defuse the poet's consciousness of the presumption involved in anointing oneself scriba Dei. Among the examples of pride, therefore, we find Arachne, accompanied by the adjective folle, which signals Ulysses and reminds us that she is his surrogate in the sphere of art:22

O folle Aragnc, si vedea io te
già mezza ragna, trista in su li stracci
de l'opera che mal per te si fè.

(Purg. xii, 43-45)
Although commentators have routinely indicated the *Metamorphoses* as the source of this exemplum, none to my knowledge has noted that Ovid’s account of Arachne and Dante’s terrace of pride share an authorial self-consciousness that is underscored by their common use of ephrasis, or that the Ovidian story demonstrates the dangers of human representation in a way that is extremely suggestive in the context of *Purgatorio* x-xii. Like Daedalus, Arachne is famous for her art (“non ulla loco nec origine gentis/claara, sed arte fuit” “she was famous not for place of birth or ancestry, but for her art” [7-8]), the art of weaving in which she will yield pride of place not even to Minerva. Like Phaeton, whose steeds run wild (“ruunt” [ii, 167, 204]), Arachne, called “temeraria” (“reckless” [32]), rushes to her fate: “in sua fata ruuit” (51). Ovid’s language underscores the connection between textile pursuits and textuality: when Arachne challenges the goddess to a contest, the narrator describes how the contestans set up their webs (“intendunt . . . telas” [54]), how different colors are woven (“texitur” [62]) onto the loom, and finally how each embroider into her fabric an ancient story (“vetus . . . argumentum” [69]). As God inscribes his warnings into stone, so Minerva (for whom Ovid interchanges verbs like “pingit” and “inscribit”) attempts to warn her rival (“aemula” [83]) with embroidered examples (“exemplis” [83]). But, if the goddess’s work is so effective that one of her figures appears to weep (“lacrimare videtur” [100]), Arachne’s is such that not only does Europa seem to be looking back and calling to her companions on the shore, but an observer would think that the bull and the sea were real: “verum taurum, freta vera putares” (104).

Arachne, *aemula* indeed, matches verisimilitude with greater verisimilitude. Thematically, too, Arachne is the goddess’ rival, answering Minerva’s pictures of stately gods and humbled mortals with pictures of deceitful gods and violated mortals. Minerva’s “text” is double: it shows the gods gathered for an artistic creation of sorts, the naming of Athens, and, in the corners, it depicts men and women changed from their original forms as punishment for their presumption; those who dared to emulate the gods (“nomina summorum sibi qui tribuere deorum” “who attributed to themselves the names of the most high gods” [89]) have become a frame to set off the gods’ accomplishments. Arachne counters with an act of creation that is not only as accomplished as Minerva’s—“Non illud Pallas, non illud carpere Livor/possit opus” (“Not Pallas, not Envy, could criticize that work” [129-130]) — but that sets out to expose
the gods' failings; her Olympians use their powers not to create a great city, but to adopt other shapes in order to deceive and seduce. Both embroiderers weave miniature versions of the text that tells their tale. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Minerva shows the metamorphoses of men, Arachne the metamorphoses of gods, Ovid the metamorphoses of both.25 In this passage, Ovid's *Metamorphoses: Minerva shows the metamorphoses of men, Arachne the metamorphoses of gods, Ovid the metamorphoses of both.*25 In this passage, Ovid—like Dante on the terrace of pride—depicts a depicting strangely like his own; like Dante, he seems aware of the perils of his own project.

In the Latin poem, Minerva, enraged at the perfection of Arachne's mimesis, destroys her rival's representations ("rupit pictas" [131]); in *Purgatorio* xii, the Arachnean designs that proudly decorated Geryon's flanks have become "stracci/de l'opera che mal per te si fé," tattered remnants of the ill-conceived project on which she embarked. Arachne's will to transgress is crushed, like Ulysses'. The terrace of pride is laced with Ulyssesian language because of the poet's consciousness of being on the edge: is not his attempt to ford the boundary between reality and the art, truth and imitation, a *varco folle?*26 Thus, Dante's comparison of himself and Odrisi to yoked oxen ("Di pari, come buoi che vanno a giogo" [*Purg.* xii, 1]) is part of a strategy to counter the charge that he is like presumptuous Uzzah: Uzzah's presumption is explicitly evoked in Canto x's second engraving of "lo carro e' buoi, traendo l'arca santa, /per che si teme officio non commesso" (*Purg.* x, 55-57; italics mine); Uzzah was struck down for daring to steady the arc of the covenant, and his fate serves as a warning to those who would take on offices that have not been expressly assigned to them. Dante worries that he is considered a presumptuous Uzzah in the Epistle to the Italian cardinals, but, as he explains, the analogy is not apt, because he directs his attention not to the arc itself but to the recalcitrant oxen who lead it astray.27 Because Dante-poet's extraordinary handling of the terrace of pride cannot fail to make us wonder whether his is an *officio commesso*, he lets us know that he is not like Uzzah (or therefore like the other examples of pride whom Uzzah anticipates), nor like the recalcitrant oxen of the Epistle, but rather like a humble and well-behaved ox doing its assigned job, its *officio commesso*.28 For the same reason, Vergil addresses his charge in language that establishes him as a positive Ulysses, "Lascia lui e varca; /ché qui è buono con l'ali e coi remi,/quantunque può, ciascun pinger
su barca" (Purg. xi, 4-6): here, in purgatory, it is good—quì è buono—to do what Ulysses should not have done. The most explicit Ulyssian caveat to be woven into the terrace’s textual fabric is the apostrophe to folle Aragne, which culminates a series of innuendos, including the verses that elaborate on the Lord’s prayer in the opening of Canto xi. Here the extended gloss on humility takes on a pointedly Ulyssian tone: “Vegna ver’ noi la pace del tuo regno,/ché noi ad essa non potem da noi, /s’ella non vien, con tutto nostro ingegno” (Purg. xi, 7-9; italics mine). By warning us that God’s kingdom cannot be achieved “con tutto nostro ingegno,” the souls recall the failed journeys of those who attempted to fly on what Beatrice will call the short wings of reason (Par. ii, 57).

Dante’s evocation of a figure whom he associates with his own writerly presumption—Uzzah—serves warning regarding the tensions at the core of this episode. At the center of Purgatorio xi, and thus at the center of the cornice, is Oderisi’s famous speech on the “vana gloria de l’umane posse” (91), a speech that picks up the admonition inscribed into the Lord’s prayer and—combined with the chastening effect of God’s miraculous art, an art that literally flanks Canto xi—serves to bring us back to the idea of this terrace as an extended exercise in humility. And yet, also in Oderisi’s speech, also at the terrace’s center, are words that alert us to the fact that Dante’s handling of this terrace is supremely dialectical. I refer to the words Dante puts into the miniaturist’s mouth regarding a third poet who will surpass his predecessors in “la gloria de la lingua” (Purg. xi, 98); as Giotto surpassed Cimabue, so Guido Cavalcanti has surpassed Guido Guinizzelli, “e forse è nato/chi l’uno e l’altro caccerà del nido” (98-99). This veiled but nonetheless powerful reference to his own poetic supremacy in prideful terms on the terrace of pride is far from casual; in fact, Dante will shortly tell us that when he returns to Purgatory he expects to spend time on the terrace of pride, thus confirming the self-portrait generated by the assertion of his poetic pride in Canto xi. The poet deliberately writes Oderisi’s prideful words and places them at the center of the terrace where they are most apposite but least expected, for the same reason that he makes the question of art and representation central to this terrace alone. For, although we find figures of poets elsewhere, and the thematization of poetic concerns, nowhere else in the poem does the poet dramatize representation as he does on the terrace of pride. This is because there is no issue that cuts so close to the marrow of his own poetic pride: Dante celebrates himself as
the poetic correlative of Giotto, an artist who was celebrated for aspiring to total verismilitude, because he knows—perhaps better than we—what is at stake in his imitation of the divine mimesis, as he knows that he has surpassed Guinizzelli and Cavalcanti, and as he knows that Oderisi’s words on the vanity of earthly fame apply to no one as little as to himself. The answer to Oderisi’s rhetorical question, “Che voce avrai tu più, se vecchia scindi/da te la carne, che se fossi morto/anzi che tu lasciassi il ‘pappo’ e ‘l ‘dindi,’/pria che passin mill’ anni?” (Purg. xi, 103-106), may be, for most of us, that it would make no difference at all whether we died as infants or as old men, but Dante knows—and intends us to know that he knows—that he is one for whom this rule does not hold. Oderisi’s framing of the question in verbal terms—his reference to dying young as dying when one’s speech is limited to babtalk, to “in-fancy” in its etymological sense of speechlessness, and his use of “voce” for “fama”—heightens our awareness of the passage’s dialectical thrust: with respect to a divinely inspired poet, one invested with a divinely sanctioned poetic mission, it is important that he live beyond the ability to say pappo and dindi, and it will be important in a thousand years.

The theme of fame running through these cantos takes the form of an emphasis on names that first surfaces in Canto xi, where Omberto Aldobrandesco, after referring to the pilgrim as one “ch’ancor vive e non si noma” (Purg. xi, 55), sets up the relation between names and pride: “Guglielmo Aldobrandesco fu mio padre;/non so se ‘l nome suo già mai fu vosco” (59-60). Later on, Oderisi’s deflating discourse will provide a gloss to these verses by establishing the vanity of all names. First pointing to the mute Provenzan Salvani as one whose name once resounded through all Tuscany, but now is barely remembered (“Toscana sonò tutta;/e ora a pena in Siena sen pispigia” [110-111]), Oderisi makes fame a function of one’s name: “La vostra nominanza è color d’erba,/che viene e va” (115-116). Oderisi’s point is that our “nominanza”—our fame, our glory, our “nameability”—is, like all human constructs, evanescent. This precept is frequently perceived as the central lesson of this terrace. But, in a prime example of how isolating a moral dictum from the prismatic polysemy of the text may prevent us from appreciating the implications of its unfolding action (and, in this sense, from noticing what the poet has actually done as compared to what he says), exclusive focus on Oderisi’s words fails to take into account the challenge the text poses the miniaturist’s lesson. Thus, although Omberto condemns the
excessive pride that was his undoing, he does not recoil from suggesting that his death is known to all the Sienci and to every person (but note Dante's choice of the term "fante": literally, every speaker) in Campbellagno: "ch'io ne morì, come i Sanesi sanno, e sallo in Campagnatico ogne fante" (65-66). The fact that his death—and thus his name—is on every tongue (hence the use of fante) contrasts with Oderisi’s statement, in the canto’s next sequence, on the vanity of all names. By the same token, immediately following Oderisi’s discourse, in fact right after he has explained that our “nominanza è color d’erba,” the pilgrim responds by thanking the miniaturist for the lesson in humility (“Tuovo vero dir m’incora/bona umiltà” [118-119]), and then asks, despite our nominanza being the color of grass: “ma chi è quei di cui tu parvari ora?” (120). “Quelli è,” Oderisi answers, “Provenzan Salvani” (121), and once more the drama has exploded the moral lesson, for, in order for his presumption to be indicted, Provenzan’s name must be registered.

My point is that, despite Oderisi’s speedy substitution of his own name by Franco Bolognese’s, and despite his insistence that earthly fame is but a breath of wind (“Non è il mondan romore altro ch’un fiato/di vento” [100-101]) that brings new names to the fore arbitrarily, merely because it changes its location (“e muta nome perché muta lato” [102]), the text, being historically grounded, requires names, indeed cannot help but celebrate them. The same paradox may be observed in Paradiso xvi, where the listing of Florentine families by name celebrates their historical specificity at the same time that it dramatically highlights their evanescence—these are names we no longer know. Since the nomina—the signs—used by this poet are grounded in things, are consequentia rerum, according to the dictum of the Vita Nuova, they are not mutable, not mere breaths of wind. In this text, names stand for historical existences, names are tied to essences, and essences are not evanescent, but irreducible. Thus, Omberto, Provenzan, even Oderisi are nomina that must have their nominanza, for they are names in a text whose mode is akin to that of the reliefs, a text whose art is grounded in reality.32 If one is such an artist, may not one be legitimately proud of one’s nominanza? This is the question that haunts the absent name at the heart of this terrace, an absent name that is still in the poet’s thoughts a few cantos later, when the pilgrim refuses to oblige Guido del Duca by stating his name, and seems motivated less by humility than by the thought that he has not yet made a sufficient name for himself, i.e., that his fame has not
yet achieved its full dimensions: “dirvi ch’i’ sia, saria parlare indarno, /ché ’l nome mio ancor molto non suona” (Purg. xiv, 20-21). Although the use of the verb suonare echoes Oderisi’s description of the renown once accorded Provenzan Salvani (“Toscana sonò tutta”), the pilgrim does not seem to have internalized the miniaturist’s moral, at least not with respect to his identity as a poet. The verse’s apparent humility and prideful core—“l nome mio ancor molto non suona”—provides an emblem for the terrace of pride, where on the one hand the pilgrim learns humility while on the other the poet reproduces the divine mimesis: life itself.

Dante knows that the words Beatrice speaks to Vergil, when she greets him as one “di cui la fama ancor nel mondo dura, e durerà quanto ’l mondo lontana” (Inf. ii, 59-60), are true of himself. He knows that whatever fame can be had will be his. He does not consider this unimportant; rather, he deals with this self-knowledge by trying to put it into perspective, for instance by comparing textual life to eternal life in the Brunetto Latini episode. He also deals with it by confronting it, in episodes like that of the terrace of pride, where he lets us know that his pride exists for good reason: if anyone’s fame will endure, it will be his; if anyone’s mimesis can rival God’s, it is his. On the one hand these cantos tell of the enforced humility of the human artist, who—no longer tempted to “fly like Daedalus” in the fashion of the falsifiers of Inferno xxix—accepts his limits, constrained by a miraculous art, more real than nature herself, that he can never emulate. On the other hand these cantos speak of Dante’s greatness, and they establish the poet as an Arachne, as aemulus; indeed, they constitute in themselves an Arachnean act of emulation. Thus, Dante’s representation of God’s art in Purgatorio xii takes the form of a rivalling artificio: the acrostic spelling uom, a form of visual poetry signifying man’s sinful tendency toward pride, is also an example of the very pride it condemns, since it affords the poet—through the design of the letters on the page—a way of inscribing a visual art of his own into his representation of God’s visual art, and so of further conflating the two artists and their work. Similarly, the acrostic in the heaven of justice can be seen as the poet’s imitation of the divine sky-writing of that same heaven; by carving the letters lue into the text of Paradiso xix Dante creates a visual reminder of and analogue to the letters Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram formed by the souls and written by God in the preceding canto. From this perspective, even the Lord’s
prayer in Purgatorio xi may be viewed dialectically.\(^\text{36}\) Why is the only prayer to be cited in full in the Commedia found on the terrace of pride? Although the glosses added to the words of the prayer are exhortations to humility, the presence of the prayer in Canto xi ensures that the terrace's central canto will contain an instance of the Arachnean art that distinguishes Cantos x and xii: an instance of God's art (in this case, an instance of his verbal rather than visual art) elaborated, extended, commented on—in short, re-presented—by a man.

How then does Dante resolve the issues he seems to hold in unresolved resolution on the terrace of pride? What prevents us from concluding with the words Dante imagines in the mouths of the indignant Italian cardinals: “et quis iste, qui Oze repentinum supplicium non formidans, ad arcam, quamvis labantem, se erigit?” (“Who is this man who, not fearing the sudden punishment of Uzzah, raises himself toward the arch, wavering though it be?” [Ep. xi, 9]).\(^\text{37}\) His method is to extend the balanced tension of these cantos and, by embracing explicit paradox, to make it rigorous. The swath of metapoetic passages inscribed by Dante into his poem’s core reaches its dénouement on the terrace of wrath, at “live” center as it were, where not insignificantly the pilgrim experiences examples of meekness and anger in the form of ecstatic visions. These visions, which I believe Dante views as analogous to the Commedia itself, are dubbed “non falsi errori” (Purg. xv, 117), in an elaboration of that original textual conundrum from the Geryon episode, “ver c’ha faccia di menzogna” (Inf. xvi, 124).\(^\text{38}\) With the paradox of non-false error Dante expresses the dilemma of art and provides the formula that synthesizes the various facets of the terrace of pride: all art is error, but some art—like his and God’s—is non-false.

New York University
New York, New York

NOTES

1. Nancy J. Vickers has dealt insightfully with the canto’s reflexive components in “Seeing Is Believing: Gregory, Trajan and Dante’s Art” (Dante Studies, ci [1983], 67-85); concentrating on the “multiple categories of subtext—epic, hagiographical, Scriptural and sculptural” (p. 67) that inform the reliefs, Vickers notes that Dante’s reader “confronts a sequenced unit of verbal images representing sculpted images illustrating texts which in turn describe events” (68).

3. In the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante refers to mankind’s presumption in constructing the tower of Babel in terms that strikingly anticipate *Purgatorio* x’s apparent overturning of the mimetic hierarchy: “Presumpsi ergo in corde suo incurabilis homo, sub persuasione gigantis Nembroth, arte sua non solum superare naturam, set etiam ipsum naturantem, qui Deus est” (i, vii, 4; in the edition of Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *Opere minori*, Tomo ii, Vol. v of *La letteratura italiana: storia e tesi* [Milano: Ricciardi, 1979]).

4. The verb *trovare*, with its technical thrust as the Romance equivalent of *invenire*, informs a passage in the *Convivio* where Dante explicitly opposes men—“trovatori”—to God, “fattore”: “però che di queste operazioni non fattori propriamente, ma li trovatori semo. Altri l'ordinò e fece maggior fattore” (iv, ix, 6-7; quoted from G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli, 2nd ed. rev. A. E. Quaglio [Firenze: Le Monnier, 1964]). The same opposition is found in *Purgatorio* x, where men, *trovatori* by nature, are not able to “find” such art, and God is not a finder but a maker, a “fabbro” (99).


6. This is the opening sentence of Migiel’s article.

7. Isella notes the “nelli elementari” of the dialogue, suggesting that they help to create the scene’s “illusoriats sensoriale” (156), while Vickers claims that the scene of Trajan and the widow “erases its own narrative to leave us listening to a dialogue depicted by God, His ‘visible speech’” (69). The reader at this stage already struggling to keep a grip on reality; as Chiampi points out, the language of the canto’s opening sequence confuses the reader both spatially, by making the mountain appear to move, and temporally, by indicating the time in a less than straightforward periphrasis. Indeed, notes the critic, “This is a region where all things are uncertain, even at the most mundane level, for common sense itself seems unable to establish what is real and what unreal” (99).

8. Although the term caryatids is generally reserved for the draped female figures of classical architecture, discussions of *Purgatorio* x frequently appropriate the usage; see Valerio Mariani, *Enciclopedia Danteasca*, 6 vols. (Roma: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970-1978), sub voce.

9. With respect to these words spoken by the sinners, Toscano notes that “ancora un discorso immaginato chiude il canto del ‘visibile parlare’” (439). Giovanni Fallani has drawn attention to the caryatids of Civita Castellana, one of which bears the inscription “Non possum quia crepo” (*Dante e la cultura figurativa medievale*, 2nd ed. [Bergamo: Minerva Italica, 1976], pp. 193-197).

10. Although *storia* and *storiato* were employed in the Middle Ages for graphic representations with an extended or “narrative” dimension, the term certainly conserves a textual orien-
presentation for Dante, who uses it as "narrazione" in the Convivio with respect to his own poetry and that of others; see Domenico Consoli, Enciclopedia Dantesca, sub voce. The past participles "intagliato" in verses 38 and 55 and "storlata" in verse 73, which initiate each of the three scenes, are part of a series of past participles that bear the representational burden in Purgatorio x and xii: "intagliato" (x, 38), "imaginate" (x, 41), "imposta" (x, 52), "intagliato" (x, 55), "imaginate" (x, 62), "effigiate" (x, 67), "storlata" (x, 73), "atteggiata" (x, 78), "segnato" (xii, 18), "figurato" (xii, 23), "segnata" (xii, 38).

12. In his defense of the artifice of Purgatorio xii on the basis of medieval delight in ornamentation, E.G. Parodi comments that "se si parla di artifici e di ricercatezze, non è il principio del secolo ventesimo che abbia il diritto di scagliare la pietra" ("Gli esempi di superbia punita e il 'hello stile' di Dante," in Poesia e storia nella Divina Commedia [Napoli: Perrella, 1920], p. 238; italics mine); he refers again more than once to the artificio that informs the examples of pride. What interests me is that these references to Dante's artifice harbor no sense of its self-consciousness, as witnessed by the fact that Dante was the first to use the word artificio in the context of these exemples. In the same way, Carlo Delcorno calls the examples of pride "tra le più artificiosi prove di bravura che Dante abbia tentato," noting that "i critici hanno ben avvertito che qui agisce scopertamente un gusto medievale" ("Dante e l'"Exemplum' medievale," Lettere Italiane, xxxv [1983], 15). It is important to bear in mind that the depiction of the exempla is artificioso for good reason: Dante is here imitating divine artificio.

13. The acrostic of Purgatorio xii was first noted by A. Medini in 1898 (see Lia Baldelli in the Enciclopedia Dantesca, sub voce "acrostico"; Delcorno cites Moore's contribution as well [17]). A more recent claim for an acrostic diq in Purgatorio x, 67-75, intended to stand for diq in contrast to uum in Purgatorio xii, is wholly unconvincing (Philip R. Berk, "Some Sibylline Verses in Purgatorio x and xii," Dante Studies, xlc [1972], 59-76). Equally farfetched is Richard Kay's claim to have discovered an acrostic system that works as a key to the sources of the entire poem ("Dante's Acrostic Allegations: Inferno xi-xii," Alighieri, xxii [1980], 26-37). In fact, the arbitrariness with which these modern exegetes posit acrostics strikes one as the latest manifestation of the ancient art of perusing Dante's text less for its poetic than its cryptographic value. Whereas the alleged acrostics of Berk and Kay are based on the single appearance of the first letter of a tercet, in Purgatorio xii we find words rather than letters and multiple rather than single appearances. Four repetitions of the word Vedea, four repetitions of the vocative particle O, and four repetitions of Mostrare. To posit an acrostic on the basis of single letters is to reduce the poet to a maker of crossword puzzles; for this reason, and because I see no substantial gain as far as the reading that would result, I also find unconvincing J.P. Th. Dreyo's suggestion that the initials of the tercets that run from Paradiso xxxii, 19-33 spell Iosep, although the proposed word is per se more persuasive than diq ("Un acrostico nella preghiera di San Bernardo," in Miscellanea dantesca [Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1965], pp. 103-113).

14. It should be noted that the words Dante chooses to build the artificio of Purgatorio xii reflect the terrace's visual (vedere) and representational (mostrare) themes, with the result that the acrostic is not an arbitrary appendage but is fully integrated into the text. Dante's sense of mostrare as linked to representation is illustrated by his statement, from the Convivio, that "le parole sono fatte per mostrare quello che non si sa" (i, ii, 7).

15. If we were to apply the three categories of pride that we find in Canto xi—pride of family (Omberto Aldobrandesco), pride in art and self (Oderisi), and pride of power (Provenzan Salvani)—to the examples of Canto xii, the "artistic" or vainglorious group would consist of the central tetrachyl: Niobe, Saul, Arachne, and Rehoboam. Arachne is such a compelling example of artistic hubris that her presence makes the scheme seem to work; although the others are not artists, Niobe's pride in her children is pride in artistry of sorts, and Saul's self-involvement is suggested by his death "in su la propria spada" (40; italics mine). Also interesting in this regard is the textual lexicon ("segnata," "segnò") that distinguishes this group.

16. The invective against the Christian princes in Paradiso xix contains three tercets that begin with "Li si vedrà," followed by three that begin with "Vedrassi," and three that begin with the conjunction "E" (115-141). This acrostic, which spells LVE, plague, because the Chris-
4. The representation of the heaven has been noted by John Levey, "Derrida and Dante: Difference and the Eagle in the Sphere of Jupiter," MLN, xcI (1976), 60-68, and, more substantially, by John Ahern, who comments that "The Heaven of Jupiter is the most important single episode in an elaborate, self-referential strategy which unfolds in the Comedy's last eighteen cantos" ("Dante's Last Word: The Comedy as a liber coelestis," Dante Studies, cIII [1984], 9).

18. For the suggestion that Trajan is the common denominator of the Commedia's three instances of divine writing, identified as the inscription on the gate of Hell, the visible speech of the terrace of pride, and the script of the eagle in the sphere of Jupiter, see Robert Hollander, Allegory in Dante's Commedia (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 297-300.

9. A related strategy may be found in the inventive of Paradiso xix where Dante insists that the corrupt princes whom he is condemning in his book will also be condemned in God's book, "quel volume aperto/nel qual si scrivon tutti suoi disprezzi" (113-114), thus suggesting the interchangeability of the two books. Very interesting in this context is Robert Hollander's relating of the above verses to the crux of Inferno xxix. 57, regarding the location of the adverb "qui" in "infallibil giustizia/punisce i falsador che qui registra." Hollander resolves the crux in favor of "here" being "the text of Dante's poem" ("Dante's Book of the Dead: A Note on Inferno xxix, 57," Studi danteschi, LV [1982], 39), thus providing another instance in which the poet's book becomes the equivalent of God's: a book in which justice registers the truth. In the inventive of Paradiso xix Dante further reinforces the complicity of the two authors and their books by describing the sins of the European princes in bookish metaphors: a pen will move to record Albert's destruction of Bohemia (115-117); the good deeds of Charles II of Anjou will be marked with the letter i, signifying one, while his evil deeds will be marked with the letter m, signifying one thousand ("segnata con un i la sua bontate, quando l' contrario segnerà un emme" [128-129]); the indictment against Frederic II will be registered in the book of justice with shortened cut-off letters, in order to indicate his insignificance by writing much in a small space ("la sua scrittura fia lette mozze, /che noteranno molto in parvo loco" [134-135]).

10. I am thinking of Dante's unorthodox handling of Branca d'Oria, whose soul is in Cocytus while "in corpo par vivo ancor di sopra" (Inf. xxxiii. 157).

21. Regarding the issue of the Commedia's truth claims and its relation to the allegorical debate whose major titles are sufficiently well known to preclude further recitation here, see my "Dethelologizing Dante: For a 'New Formalism' in Dante Studies," Quaderni d'italianistica, forthcoming.

22. Although I will not tax the reader with a full resume of the Ulysses querelle at this juncture, it should be noted that my view of Ulysses as a trapassator del segno places me, grosso modo, in the camp of Bruno Nardi ("La tragedia d'Ulisse," Dante e la cultura medievale, 2nd ed. rev. [Bari: Laterza, 1949], pp. 153-165) as compared to that of Mario Fubini ("Il peccato d'Ulisse" and "Il canto xxi dell'Inferno," in Il peccato d'Ulisse e altri scritti danteschi [Milano: Ricciardi, 1966], pp. 1-76; see also "Ulisse" in the Enciclopedia Dantesca). The alignment of Arachne with
Ulysses (for which see also Roberto Mercuri, Semantica di Gerione [Roma: Bulzoni, 1984]) supports the reading of Ulysses as a transgressor; we remember that Arachne/Ulysses is among a group of sinners headed by Lucifer. In the study of the Commedia's narrative art to which this essay will eventually belong I try to show that, if the pilgrim learns to be unlike Ulysses, the poet becomes ever more conscious of being like him. For the association of the adjective folle with excess and intellectual pride, see Umberto Bosco, "La 'follia' di Dante," 1958, rpt. in Dante vicino (Caltanissetta-Roma: Scascia Editore, 1966), pp. 55-75. Other Ulyssian surrogates in the Commedia are the "failed flyers" Icarus and Phaeton.

23. The self-conscious components of Arachne's tale have been much discussed by students of Ovid; see especially Eleanor Winsor Leach, "Ekphrasis and the Theme of Artistic Failure in Ovid's Metamorphoses," Ramus, iii (1974), 102-142, who comments that ekphrases "offer the artist an opportunity to speak in propria persona and to make us aware of the self-consciousness of his art through his attention to the fictional artistry of some other creator" (104). For further discussion of the relationship between the two poets, see my "Arachne, Argus, and St. John: Transgressive Art in Dante and Ovid," Mediaevalia, xiii (1989), 207-226.


25. In response to W.S. Anderson's suggestion that Ovid's own art is like Arachne's asymmetrical and "baroque" tapestry, as compared to Minerva's balanced and "classicistic" work, Leach comments that "it is not Arachne's tapestry alone, but the two scenes in combination that form a mirror of the Metamorphoses" (117); for Anderson, see his review to Brooks Otis, Ovid as an Epic Poet, American Journal of Philology, lxxxix (1968), 93-104. Ovid's identification with Arachne is sustained also by Leonard Barkan, The Gods Made Flesh (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 1-4.

26. Varco or varcar (associated with Ulysses' "varco/folle" of Par. xxvii, 82-83) appear in each of this terrace's three cantos, the only such geographical concentration of these terms in the poem.

27. "Nec Oze presumptio quam obiectandum quis crederet, quas temere prorsumpetem me inficit sui tabe reatus; qua ille ad arcam, ego ad boves calcitrantes et per abvna distrahanentes attendo" (Ep. xi, 12; in the edition of Arsenio Frugoni and Giorgio Brugnoli, Opere minori, Ricciardi).

28. The same language has already been employed to communicate the all-important fact that Dante received his marching orders from on high; Vergil explains to the centaurs that "Tal si parti da cantare alleluia/ch'ei mi commise quest'officio novo" (Inf. xii, 88-89; italics mine).

29. Note the wave-like rock through which the travelers must pass: "una pietra fessa,/che si moveva e d'une e d'altra parte,/si come l'onda che fugge e s'appressa" (Purg. x, 7-9). Given the canto's insistence on the supernatural, it is worth mentioning that the traveler heard this expressive refrain: "si come l'onda che fugge e s'appressa..." (Purg. x, 7-9). Given the canto's insistence on the supernatural, it is worth mentioning that the traveler heard this expressive refrain: "si come l'onda che fugge e s'appressa..." (Purg. x, 7-9). Giving the canto's insistence on the supernatural, it is worth mentioning that the traveler heard this expressive refrain: "si come l'onda che fugge e s'appressa..." (Purg. x, 7-9).

30. For the commentary tradition with respect to the identity of the unnamed poet, see Dante's Poets, p. 127, note.

31. See Purgatorio xiii, 136-138. One could make a case for Canto xiii as a "backup" canto that works to reinforce the themes of the terrace of pride (whose paradigmatic function is underlined by the neat breakdown, exclusive to it, of narrative components by canto: examples of the virtue corresponding to the vice in Canto x, encounters with souls in Canto xi, examples of the vice in Canto xii). Thus, in addition to the confession of the pilgrim's own leaning toward pride, we find: the use of segno in xiii, 7 and 146; the reference to the pilgrim as a "cosa nuova" (xiii, 145), echoing "Quel ci mai non vide cosa nova"; the emphasis on the
idea *nomina sunt consequentia rerum* in xiii, 105-110; and the presence of Sapia who, with her "ardita faccia" (xiii, 121), is a worthy aunt for the "presuntuoso" (xiv, 122), Provenzan Salvani.

32. The point that the text is grounded in reality is neatly underscored at the end of Canto xi, where Oderisi tells the pilgrim that life itself will gloss his obscure words: "Più non dirò, e scuro so che parlo;/ma poco tempo andrà, che 'tuoi vicini/saranno si che tu potrai chiosarlo."

33. Dante is extremely candid about his own fame in a passage of the *De vulgare eloquentia*, where he claims that the *vulgare illustre* confers on its practitioners greater fame than that of kings: "Nonne domestici sui reges, marchiones, comites et magnates quoslibet fama vincunt?" (i, xvii, 5).

34. Brunetto’s claim to “live” in his text (“Sieti raccomandato il mio Tesoro,/nel qual io vivo ancora" [Inf. xv, 119-120]) echoes the end of the *Metamorphoses*; Ovid will live (the poem’s last word is “vivam”) as a result of the fame procured by his *indelebile nomen*. That Dante associated the concept of *nominanza*—the fame one can achieve through one’s name—with his classical authors is demonstrated by the fact that he uses the word *nominanza* on only one other occasion; in Inferno iv, 76-77, it is also coupled with the verb *suonare* and refers to the classical figures of Limbo. This association is significant: the same tensions that afflict Dante with regard to his classical authors afflict him with regard to *nominanza*. Indeed, Dante’s relationship to his own fame is far more complex and tortured than is implied by the cliché that views him as delegating fame univocally to hell.

35. Alberti notes that “God's message formed by the stars on the sky corresponds to the acrostic on the reader's page” (9).

36. The prevalingly negative critical reaction to Dante’s version of the Lord’s prayer is noted by Mario Marti, who ascribes it to a misunderstanding of the poet’s intent: “S’è voluto mettere a confronto le terzine di Dante col derrato evangelico, come se il poeta avesse presunto di poter gareggiare e rivaleggiare con la spoglia essenzialità di Matteo” (“L’effimero e l’eterno: la meditazione elegiaca di *Purgatorio* xi,” in *Studi su Dante* [Galatina: Congedo, 1984], p. 102). In taking us to task for thinking that the poet might have presumed to rival the Gospel of Matthew, Marti unwittingly formulates the essence of this terrace’s Arachnean poetics.

37. Dante answers this question by saying that he is one of the least of the sheep of Christ’s flock. The continuity between the Epistle and the *Commedia* thus includes the poet’s identification first with one humble animal and then with another.

38. For some of the implications of this verse, see Dante’s *Poets*, p. 214 and passim.