“The sparks that kindled the fire in me:” Reading, Love and Conversion in Augustine’s *Confessions* and Dante’s *Commedia*

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Among the many influences on the poetics of Dante’s *Commedia*, St. Augustine’s *Confessions* certainly holds a key place. Dante is indebted to Augustine not only for the basic schema of his interior or autobiographical epic but also for his treatment of such themes as truth, beauty, knowledge, speech, love, and conversion, or the turning of the soul.[1] One important dimension of Dante’s poetic interaction with the *Confessions* is his emphasis on the connection between reading, love, and conversion. In the *Confessions*, a handful of encounters with texts structures the entire narrative, from Augustine’s early preoccupation with the *Aeneid* to his enthrallment with Cicero’s *Hortensius* to his reading of the Psalms and the writings of Paul.[2] Similarly, in the *Commedia*, reading

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[1] On Dante’s use of the *Confessions* as a model for autobiographical narrative, see (inter alia) John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), esp. 1-28; Freccero, “Allegory and Autobiography,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 161-168; John F. Took, “Dante and the Confessions of St. Augustine,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 8 (1990): 360-361; and Shirley J. Paolini, *Confessions of Sin and Love in the Middle Ages: Dante’s* Commedia *and St. Augustine’s* Confessions (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), esp. x., 19-23.

Jennifer Petrie, in her article on “Conversion” in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (New York: Routledge, 2010), defines the term as “a radical change of outlook from some form of worldliness or pride to a life governed by Christian faith” (222). While this definition may be helpful for some purposes, I construe the term more broadly here, according to its basic etymological sense of “turning” (expressed in the *Commedia* by terms such as *tornar*, *ritornar*, *volgere, rivolgere*; in the *Confessions* by *torquere*, *vertere*, *revertere*, *divertere*, *avertere*, *flectere*, *redire*, and the like).

both sets in motion and carries forward the process of conversion. Here we may think of texts like the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere, the inscribed images in the terrace of pride—"speech made visible"—and the Scriptural and liturgical passages recited by purgatorial souls.[3] In each case, reading stimulates, forms, or reforms the loves and desires of the human soul. Augustine, for instance, "was inflamed by [the Psalms] with love for [God]," while Francesca was fired with lustful passion by the tale of Lancelot.[4]

To go a step further, the three-fold connection between reading, love, and conversion helpfully illuminates some of the ways in which Dante integrates and, at points, recreates Augustine's own conversion story. Several specific instances of conversion-through-narrative in the *Confessions*, particularly Augustine's poignant reading of the *Aeneid* and his transformative reading of the Apostle Paul, inform and deepen the most important moments of conversion in the *Commedia*. Three particular passages in the *Commedia* illustrate the interplay of reading, love, and conversion in Augustine and Dante. Each is of central importance for the entire work; further, each contains strong resonances of both the *Confessions* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. The first moment is Dante's encounter with Francesca, who retells how her reading of the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere served as a catalyst for a conversion to Hell. The second is Statius' two-fold conversion through reading the *Aeneid* and the *Eclogues*. The final moment is Dante's encounter, at the end of *Purgatorio*, with Beatrice's "holy speech," which reforms the protagonist as lover, reader, and author. At these three critical

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[2] James J. O'Donnell, in his outstanding commentary to the *Confessions*, offers a helpful list of such text-encounters: "1.13.20, the *Aeneid*; Hortensius and scripture [in 3.4.7]; 5.3.3, 'multa philosophorum'; 7.9.13, 'platonicorum libros'; 7.21.27ff., Paul (esp. 8.12.29-30, garden scene); 9.4.8, Psalms, esp. Ps. 4; and Gn. 1 in Bks. 11-13 (with most of Bk. 12 (12.14.17-32.43) discussing proper methods of reading)" (*Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. [Oxford: Sandpiper, 2000], 2:163). To this list one should add Augustine's reading of Aristotle's *Categories* in 4.16.28-31. Ralph Flores makes a strong argument that the structural unity of the *Confessions* is explicable on the basis of patterns of reading and speech; see Flores, "Reading and Speech in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," *Augustinian Studies* 6 (1975): 1-13.

[3] *Purgatorio*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 10.95. All English and Italian citations of the *Commedia* are taken from the Hollanders' edition.

[4] Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 9.4.8.

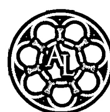
junctures in the *Commedia*, Dante-poet reenacts Augustine's literary encounters with Virgil, Cicero, and Paul in order to map the purgation and reformation of Dante-pilgrim's love.[5] Like Augustine, Dante progresses as reader and lover from improper love of earthly beauty for its own sake to ordered love, love of God and of earthly things in Him. In this process of conversion, divine speech exercises a "reformative" power which reverses the problems stemming from Dante's incomplete education in love through the "formative" tragic poetry of Virgil. Beatrice's heavenly poetics, like Paul's holy writings, qualifies Dante to be an inspired author capable of writing and speaking, like Augustine, for the reformation of his readers. Such divine speech/writing reforms the human being by illuminating the present misalignment of the soul's loves and inducing penance. This illumination and repentance, in turn, make possible a spiritual death and rebirth—the excision of unclean eros and the infusion of heavenly charity.

I. *Inferno* 5: Dido, Francesca, and the Dante's Tragic Reading of the *Aeneid*

Dante's meeting with Francesca—his first contact with infernal storytelling—occurs in the context of a figurative text-encounter containing resonances of the Dido episode in the *Aeneid* and Augustine's reading of that episode in the *Confessions*. In the second circle of Hell, Dante encounters a catalogue of licentious souls, among whom Dido is the most prominent. The poet draws special attention to Dido by identifying her with a telling periphrasis, "she who broke faith with the ashes / of Sichaeus and slew herself for love," before naming her explicitly as the circle's key figure.[6] While the

[5] The resonances of Augustine's conversion story in Dante's *Commedia* have been well documented and explored (see n.1). Rarely, however, have commentators noted the complex way in which Dante reproduces and rereads Augustine's narrative in tandem not only with Biblical texts but also with Virgil's *Aeneid*. This essay proposes a reading of the *Commedia* which appreciates this pattern of dual integration: Dante simultaneously alludes to the *Confessions* and the *Aeneid*, using both of them to inform his own narrative while also allowing them to criticize one another.

[6] *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 5.61-62,85.



mention of infidelity to Sychaeus' ashes evokes a Virgilian line—"I broke my promise with dead Sychaeus"—the second turn of phrase, as Tristan Kay observes, comes not from the *Aeneid* but from the *Confessions*, where Augustine makes reference to "Dido, who killed herself for love."[7] Dante-poet has integrated into this passage a near-perfect literal citation of the Augustinian text. Further, Dido and her lustful counterparts function in this scene like a metaphorical Virgilian text. As he beholds the lustful and hears Virgil identify them, Dante is reading the history of the souls, and in Dido's case at least, the story is already familiar to him from his previous reading of the *Aeneid*.

The pilgrim's response to this implied text (or texts) re-enacts the young Augustine's reaction to the Dido story in a way that reveals the problematic character of Dante-pilgrim's eros.[8] Dante records, "When I heard my teacher name the ladies / and the knights of old, pity overcame me / and I almost lost my senses [*e fui quasi smarrito*]."[9] The loaded term *smarrito*, like the phrase *nostra vita* earlier in the canto, links Dante's state of stupefaction here with his dire condition at the beginning of the *Commedia* when "the straight way was lost" and suggests that erotic love somehow contributed to Dante's fallen condition in canto 1.[10] Beyond that, the protagonist's poignant sympathy for the lustful reflects a crucial scene from Augustine's *Confessions*, one which helps to illuminate the entire *Commedia*. Upon reading the *Aeneid*, Augustine recalls, "I was forced . . . to weep over Dido, who killed herself for love, when all the while in my

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[7] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Sarah Ruden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4.552; *Confessions*, 1.13.20; Tristan Kay, "Dido, Aeneas, and the Evolution of Dante's Poetics," *Dante Studies* 129 (2011): 131.

[8] John Freccero observes that there are two Augustines in the *Confessions*, just as there are two Dantes in the *Commedia*. Italian editors of the *Confessions* distinguished *Agostino narrato* from *Agostino narrator* (Freccero, "The Portrait of Francesca: *Inferno* V," *MLN* 124, no. 5 Supplement [2009]: S7-S38, reprinted in *The Inferno*, ed. Patrick Hunt [Pasadena, CA: Salem, 2012], 184-185). I follow Robert McMahon in adopting John J. O'Meara's helpful distinction between "the young Augustine" (Augustine the pilgrim) and "Augustine the bishop" or "Augustine the narrator" (Robert McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent: Augustine, Anselm, Boethius, and Dante* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006], 45).

[9] *Inferno*, 5.70-72.

[10] *Inferno*, 1.3.

intense misery I put up with myself with never a tear, as I died away from you, O God, who are my life."[11] Earlier, Dante's periphrastic reference to Dido established a link between the *Commedia* and the *Confessions*. Now, his allusion to Augustine's misdirected pity highlights the specific import of that Augustinian episode for Dante-pilgrim. Augustine confessed to weeping over Dido "while I myself was abandoning you to seek the last dregs of your creation."[12] Dante-poet implicates Dante-pilgrim's loves by alluding to this incident in the *Confessions*. Just as Augustine bewailed Dido's tragic love while remaining unmoved by his own lack of love for God, so Dante-pilgrim reacts with pity to the tragic stories of the lustful. The allusion suggests an important inference about the pilgrim's spiritual condition. Dante is unduly preoccupied with Dido's fate while insufficiently attuned to the state of his own soul, enamored with the beauty of tragic poetry and the lustful Dido yet unkindled by love for God.

The self-condemnatory import of this Augustinian allusion also appears from the way both Augustine the narrator and Dante the poet read their own stories in terms of Aeneas' journey. Describing his struggle with lust in the *Confessions*, Augustine established a correlation between his journey and that of Aeneas: "So I arrived at Carthage [*veni Carthaginem*], where the din of scandalous love affairs raged cauldron-like around me."[13] This phraseology suggests a link between Augustine-pilgrim and Virgil's Aeneas, who also came to Carthage. Earlier in the *Confessions*, as he described his reading of the Dido episode, Augustine raised "the question whether the poet spoke truly when he affirmed that Aeneas once came to Carthage [*Aenean aliquando Carthaginem venisse*]."[14] As the parallel between these two passages suggests, Augustine the bishop reads his past in specifically Aeneadic terms. Virgil's text becomes the framework for Augustine's own pilgrimage: Aeneas' destined voyage from Troy to

[11] *Confessions*, 1.13.20.

[12] *Confessions*, 1.13.21.

[13] *Confessions*, 3.1.1. Latin insertions are taken from O'Donnell's text.

[14] *Confessions*, 1.13.22.

Rome symbolizes Augustine's spiritual progression to the heavenly Jerusalem, and both journeys converge here in the earthly city of Carthage, where the young Augustine's sordid servitude to lust replays Aeneas' passionate love in the *Aeneid*.

Inferno 5 presents a similar reiteration of Aeneas' entanglement with Dido, but with an additional level of complexity: Dante is, simultaneously, both Augustine and Aeneas. As readers of the *Commedia* have long recognized, the pilgrim's disclaimer at the beginning of his journey—"I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul"—is really a programmatic line for the entire poem, in which Dante-pilgrim simultaneously reenacts the journeys of Aeneas and Paul.[15] Aeneas embarked upon a divinely-willed voyage from Troy to Rome in order to found a new race; Paul undertook a providential spiritual journey—emblemized in his experience on the Damascus road—from persecutor to preacher. It is this pair of journeys which Augustine adopted as the leitmotif of his *Confessions*. If Dante took Augustine's spiritual journey as an archetype for his own, it is equally true that he identified himself with Augustine's models, Paul and—most relevantly here—Aeneas. Hence, we can associate Dante-pilgrim's reaction to Dido not only with the sinful sympathy of Augustine but also with the disordered passion of Aeneas. In the Francesca encounter, Dante-pilgrim is both a second Augustine, enticed by youthful lusts into "the crooked path of those who do not keep their eyes on you," and a Christian Aeneas, confronted by a sympathetic lover who would turn him away from his destined journey.[16]

If Dante is a second Aeneas in *Inferno* 5, then Francesca da Rimini, the amorous lover, is a second Dido, whom Dante "reads" sympathetically in Virgilian terms. Appealing to Dante's sympathy, Francesca relates, with powerful anaphoric repetition of the word *Amor*, how she was overcome by Love's irresistible power:

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[15] *Inferno*, 2.32.

[16] *Confessions*, 2.3.6.

> Love, quick to kindle in the gentle heart,
> seized this man with the fair form taken from me.
> The way of it afflicts me still.
> Love, which absolves no one beloved from loving,
> seized me so strongly with his charm that,
> as you see, it has not left me yet.
> Love brought us to one death.[17]

Francesca exemplifies disordered love, love of earthly beauty for its own sake, without reference to God.[18] Her idolatrous affection for Paolo is resolutely self-centered. Since her "love was sheer appetite," Chiampi comments, "it terminated in the possession of the desired object—the body—and did not reach God."[19] Dante's response to this sweet-speaking but corrupt lover parallels his earlier reaction to Dido and the other exemplars of lust: "Francesca, your torments / make me weep for grief and pity."[20] This second echo of Augustine's weeping over Dido confirms Francesca's figuration as Dido. Dante "reads" Francesca—as he and Augustine "read" Dido—in terms of Virgil's sympathetic portrayal of erotic love, one of pagan provenance and dubious veracity.

Francesca's speech reflects Virgil's understanding of love as an irresistible power and his sympathetic portrayal of the lover as a helpless pawn. That Virgilian paradigm of tragic love has formed Dante as a reader and a lover—but it is inherently flawed. This, after all, will be the authoritative judgment of Dante-poet when, in an illuminating passage in *Paradiso*, he condemns the "ancient error" of the "ancient peoples" who "believed / that the fair Cyprian beamed rays of maddened love."[21] There the poet makes explicit reference to Dido and to Cupid who set her ablaze with passion for the Trojan hero. As Dante's gloss suggests, Virgil understood Amor as an irresistible

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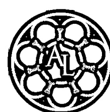
[17] *Inferno*, 5.100-106.

[18] For a fuller discussion of Francesca's disordered love along similar lines, see Nancy Enright, "Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and the Redemption of Beauty," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2007): 6-7.

[19] James Chiampi, *Shadowy Prefaces: Conversion and Writing in the "Divine Comedy"* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1981), 62.

[20] *Inferno*, 5.116-17.

[21] *Paradiso*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 8.1-4.



power. Hence the Roman poet's sympathetic depiction of Dido: a helpless pawn of Venus, forced to follow Amor's dictates and lacking the freedom to do otherwise. Given this paradisal gloss, Dante-pilgrim's sympathy for Francesca—a lover who eloquently expresses precisely this Virgilian outlook on Amor—not only blinds him to his own loveless relationship with God but also reveals the problem with his habit of reading. Dante has formed himself as a reader through the poetry of the *Aeneid* with its flawed portrayal of love as a heartless and irresistible god. He has read and uncritically accepted Virgil's concept of maddened love, so memorably etched in the depiction of the passionate queen of Carthage. Consequently, Dante now "reads" and interprets the lustful souls, Dido and Francesca, as tragic figures. He pities them as innocent pawns helpless before the godlike power of love. Already in *Inferno* 5, then, we have a suggestion of how erroneous reading can deform the soul.

II. *Inferno* 5: Francesca's Antitypical Conversion through Reading

If Dante's reaction to Dido and Francesca shows how a flawed or incomplete education-through-reading can tarnish the way a person envisions, loves, and sympathizes, Francesca's tale of adultery shows that (mis)reading can incite perverse love and thus convert the soul to spiritual death. At the same time, through another Augustinian allusion, Francesca's story indirectly gestures toward an alternative kind of reading that can redeem sinful love and produce a salvific conversion: turning-from-sin and turning-to-God. Francesca describes her fall with selective detail:

> One day, to pass the time in pleasure,
> we read of Lancelot, how love enthralled him.
> We were alone, without the least misgiving.
> More than once that reading made our eyes meet
> and drained the color from our faces.
> Still, it was a single instant overcame us:
> When we read of how the longed-for smile
> was kissed by so renowned a lover, this man,
> who never shall be parted from me,

> all trembling, kissed me on my mouth.
> A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it.
> That day we read in it no further.[22]

The book referred to in these lines is the Old French tale *Lancelot of the Lake*, which tells how Guinevere betrayed her husband Arthur by an adulterous affair with the knight Lancelot. Francesca's fateful reading of that book constitutes a parodic analogue of Augustine's conversion-to-God through a Scriptural text condemning carnal lust.[23] Wretched in the captivity of his sin, Augustine was "weeping in the intense bitterness of [his] broken heart" when he heard a child's voice repeating the simple words, "Pick it up and read." He hastened to pick up a book containing Paul's epistles: "I snatched it up, opened it and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted: *Not in dissipation and drunkenness, nor in debauchery and lewdness, nor in arguing and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires*."[24] The applicability of this Biblical text to the Francesca scene is immediately clear, and as T. K. Swing first observed, Augustine's next words make the parallel unmistakable: "I had no wish to read further, nor was there need. No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away."[25] Scarcely could two acts of reading produce more opposite effects.

By alluding, at this key moment in the *Commedia*, to Augustine's conversion, Dante-poet suggests a positive alternative to the destructive conversion-through-

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[22] *Inferno*, 5.127-138.

[23] This remarkable connection was first noted by T. K. Swing (*The Fragile Leaves of the Sibyl: Dante's Master Plan* [Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962], 299) and has since become nearly a commonplace in discussions of the canto. For further treatments, see Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's "Commedia"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 112-113; Hollander, *Inferno* 110, 5.138n; John A. Scott, "Dante's Francesca and the Poet's Attitude Towards Courtly Literature," *Reading Medieval Studies* 5 (1979): 13-14; Paolini, *Confessions of Sin and Love*, 85.

[24] *Confessions*, 8.12.29.

[25] *Confessions*, 8.12.29; Swing, *The Fragile Leaves of the Sibyl*, 299.

reading portrayed in *Inferno* 5. Paolo and Francesca are reading for delight, "to pass the time in pleasure." Augustine, by contrast, was reading in anguish of soul, earnestly searching for divine illumination. In both cases, reading transforms the soul instantaneously—but the effects are vastly different. Augustine, feeling that he was the captive of his sins, sought for and found liberation.[26] The lovers of Rimini, on the other hand, are "seized" by lust and, upon death, enter into eternal captivity in the second circle of Hell.[27] Paolo and Francesca's "conversion" to lust through the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere thus constitutes a negative antitype of Augustine's conversion from carnal love to spiritual love through reading Romans 13. As Robert Hollander puts it, "The Bible performed the ultimate instruction of Augustine; the Lancelot story, by giving delight rather than instruction, helped to perform the ultimate destruction of Francesca, who read about the wrong garden and who loved the wrong Paul."[28] Both acts of reading transform the soul by setting up a picture for imitation. For Dante, as for Augustine, reading kindles love and leads to imitation: "one lover can be set on fire by another."[29] This process, though, can work in both positive and negative fashion. In Augustine's case, a text fosters chastity and charity, love of God for His own sake. By contrast, Francesca, who reads with lustful inclinations and deformed imagination, is turned to embrace earthly beauty for its own sake.

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[26] *Confessions*, 8.12.28.

[27] The complex dynamic of freedom and captivity in canto 5 is wonderfully captured in the simile of the dove. The poet likens Paolo and Francesca to doves who are both "summoned by desire" and "borne by their will" (*Inf.* 5.82,84). A few lines above, Dante learns he must entreat Paulo and Francesca "by the love that leads them" (77-78; cf. also 94-95,113). The infernal soul, even in Hell, possesses a certain sort of free choice, but it is free to move only in accord with its desire—and at death, the order of the soul's desires becomes fixed and permanent. Paradoxically, Paolo and Francesca find themselves inescapably driven by the desires they freely embraced. Hence Dante's "affectionate call" (87), which addresses them in the language of their own longing, draws them with "force," yet "by their will."

[28] Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's "Commedia"*, 113.

[29] *Confessions*, 4.14.21. There another powerful example of this elsewhere in the *Confessions*—the conversion of Ponticianus and his companions through reading the Life of Antony (8.6.15).

Francesca's pathos-filled speech, which aims to elicit Dante-pilgrim's sympathy, evokes a reaction that further clarifies Dante's disordered love by linking him to both Dido and Augustine. The tortured Francesca begins her appeal to the protagonist with a Virgilian proem: "But if you feel such longing / to know the first root of our love, / I shall tell as one who weeps in telling."[30] These opening lines clearly allude to another part of the Aeneas-Dido episode, where Aeneas recounts to Dido how he escaped from Troy.[31] The change of figurative identities is significant: Francesca adopts the words of Aeneas, thus figuring herself—not Dante—as heroic Aeneas and identifying the pilgrim—rather than her lustful self—with the sympathetic Dido. The pilgrim obligingly reacts to Francesca's speech with a third upsurge of Dido-like pity which reduces him to deathly stupefaction: "While the one spirit said this / the other wept, so that for pity / I swooned as if in death. / And down I fell as a dead body falls."[32] As Hollander observes, Dante's death-like swoon over Francesca, the analogue of lustful Dido, "has him experiencing something akin to the death in sensuality experienced by Francesca and Paolo."[33] Francesca's words have figuratively converted him to death, just as the words of romantic literature brought about Francesca's death in lust. Dante's swoon also brings to mind, once again, Augustine's own weeping at the Dido narrative. Augustine bemoaned that, while weeping over Dido, "I put up with myself with never a tear, as I died away from you, O God, who are my life."[34] The words of Augustine the narrator condemn Dante-pilgrim's tears as well as those of the young Augustine. Dante, like Francesca, is controlled by concupiscent love rather than love for God, the highest Good and the supreme Beauty. Francesca's tale and Dante's "Augustinian" reaction thus illuminate the disordered love in the pilgrim's soul.

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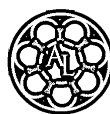
30 *Inferno*, 5.124-126.

31 *Aeneid*, 2.1-12.

32 *Inferno*, 5.139-142.

33 Hollander, *Inferno*, 111; 5.141n.

34 *Confessions*, 1.13.20.



III. *Purgatorio* 21 and 22: Virgilian Poetics and Statius' Two-fold Literary Conversion

If *Inferno* 5 illustrates how texts can kindle disordered passion or the love of earthly things at the expense of God, a second highly important conversion in the *Commedia*, that of Statius, shows that literary texts—particularly classical epic—can kindle poetic genius. Statius encounters the *Aeneid* and, deeply moved by Virgil's poetry, is converted to the poetic vocation:

> The sparks that kindled the fire in me
> came from the holy flame
> from which more than a thousand have been lit—
> I mean the *Aeneid*. When I wrote my poems
> it was my *mamma* and my nurse.
> Without it, I would not have weighed a dram.[35]

Statius describes the converting power of this text with the imagery of fire, a powerful symbol in the *Commedia*. The "holy flame" kindled by the *Aeneid* contrasts with the fire of passion that was "kindled" in Francesca's heart by Amor and was further sparked by her reading of *Lancelot*.[36] While Francesca's reading of romantic literature aroused lustful cupidity, Statius' reading of Virgilian poetry stimulates *ingegno*, the faculty for producing beautiful art.[37] For him, the *Aeneid* plays a formative role, rousing creative, aesthetic activity.

From Statius' claim about Virgil's formative poetic influence, we can glean an important insight into how Dante himself interacted with Virgilian poetics, both as reader and author. "Statius' reading of Virgil's text mimics Dante's own reading of that

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[35] *Purgatorio*, 21.94-99.

[36] *Inferno*, 5.100.

[37] *Ingegno* is a centrally important concept in the *Commedia*. Robert M. Durling defines "poetic *ingegno*" as "the faculties of sense perception, imagination, and memory," which are "gifts of nature that developed under the influence of the heavens" (*The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Lansing, 116). Dante invokes *ingegno* as his poetic Muse in *Inferno*, 2.7-9, and characterizes the journey of the poem as *la navicella del mio ingegno* at the beginning of *Purgatorio*, 1.1-3. The humbling of the poet's *ingegno* constitutes a key part of his spiritual maturation (cf. *Purgatorio*, 11.7-9; 12.64-66; *Paradiso*, 5.88-90). See also *Paradiso*, 22.112-114.

text," as Simone Marchesi aptly observes.[38] As the first canto 1 of the *Commedia* revealed, Dante's "long study and great love" led him to delve deeply into Virgil's volume, from which he derived "the noble style" that brought him honor.[39] The story of Statius thus offers insight into Dante's own education and formation through Virgilian epic. Like Statius', Dante's close reading of the *Aeneid* qualified him as an author and enabled him to write poetry, imitating the "noble style" of classical epic.

While Statius' reading of the *Aeneid* kindles a love for artistic creation, his encounter with a second Virgilian text shows that pagan literature, when properly read and understood by a discerning reader, can illuminate the path to God. Statius reads the early pastoral works of Virgil and is struck particularly by the Fourth Eclogue:

> It was you who first
> set me toward Parnassus to drink in its grottoes,
> and you who first lit my way toward God.
> You were as one who goes by night, carrying
> the light behind him—it is no help to him,
> but instructs all those who follow—
> when you said: "The centuries turn new again.
> Justice returns with the first age of man,
> and new progeny descends from heaven."[40]

Statius presents a positive exemplar of a literary conversion, summed up in the famous line, "Through you I was a poet, through you a Christian."[41] The most striking aspect of this conversion-through-literature is that the deep meaning of Virgil's text was unapparent to its author yet picked up by his understanding reader. Dante offers the intriguing suggestion that pagan texts can illuminate the truth of the Christian faith in ways unintended by—and unavailing for—their own authors, but apprehensible to those who read them closely. In the superintending providence of God, the text

[38] Simone Marchesi, *Dante and Augustine: Linguistics, Poetics, Hermeneutics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 119.

[39] *Inferno*, 1.82-87.

[40] *Purgatorio*, 22.67-72.

[41] *Purgatorio*, 22.73.

contains meaning beyond the authorial intention of its human writer.[42] Dante's appraisal of classical literature thus posits a qualified inspiration of pagan authors and ascribes real spiritual value to their texts.

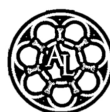
This insistence that pagan literature can illuminate divine truth applies equally to Augustine's *Confessions*, where the philosophical and literary wisdom of the ancients plays an illuminative role in the conversion of the soul to God. In fact, the image of the lamp in *Purgatorio* 22, which picks up the pictorial figuration of the *Aeneid* as a holy flame in the previous canto, seems to be drawn from a powerful passage of the *Confessions* describing Augustine's own encounter with pagan literature: "I had turned my back to the light and my face to the things it illuminated, and so no light played upon my own face, or on the eyes that perceived them."[43] Statius' reading of pagan literature served as an instrument for his conversion-to-God. Similarly, Augustine's efforts to find the truth through the liberal arts, though stymied at first by his own pride and perverted dualistic philosophy, "were necessary, instrumental in producing his advancement towards God."[44] The function of moral or philosophical literature in Augustine's *Confessions* might best be described as illuminative and stimulatory. Pagan writings can show the path to God and spur the reader to embark on the journey, but they cannot themselves convey the reader to the destination point. A good example is Augustine's reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*—a parallel to Statius' reading of the *Eclogues*. The *Hortensius* "kindled in me" a "love for wisdom," Augustine recalls; "by its call I was aroused and kindled and set on fire to love and seek and capture and hold fast and strongly cling not to this or that school, but to wisdom itself, whatever it might be."[45] The language of fire, which matches Statius' description of his own literary conversion,

[42] This too is an important idea for Augustine; cf. *Confessions*, 12.24.33-12.25.35.

[43] *Confessions*, 4.16.30. The context of this quotation is Augustine's reflection on his reading of the books of the liberal arts (*libros artium quas liberales vocant*) and specifically (earlier in the chapter) his reading of Aristotle's *Categories*.

[44] Marchesi, *Dante and Augustine*, 124.

[45] *Confessions*, 3.4.8.



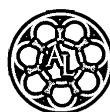
conveys the vibrant power of pagan literature to stimulate positive, if incomplete, love and to aid the soul on its journey to God.

Statius' encounter with Virgil and Augustine's encounter with Cicero both direct the readers toward God, yet in each case another text is needed—divine speech, the *re*formative words of the Christian gospel. After explaining how the Fourth Eclogue directed him toward God, Statius relates to Virgil, "the words of yours I have just recited / did so accord with the new preachers / that I began to visit them."[46] Again, the parallel from the *Confessions* is revealing. Augustine, after reading the *Hortensius*, visited Ambrose to listen to him preach. Augustine "began to feel affection for him" and so continued listening, "delighting in the sweetness of his discourse" but indifferent to his teaching.[47] However, unwittingly the young rhetorician came to embrace the spiritual message of Ambrose as well: "as his words, which I enjoyed, penetrated my mind, the substance, which I overlooked, seeped in with them, for I could not separate the two."[48] The encounter with a Christian text—in this case, a sermon—gave rise to the 'seed' of understanding which later came to fruition when Augustine encountered another text, Romans 13, and was thereby converted. In the *Commedia* as in the *Confessions*, this "reformative" power of divine speech, conveyed through human instruments like Paul and the preachers of *Purgatorio* 22, proves to be the decisive factor in the conversion of the soul to God.

IV. *Purgatorio* 30 and 31: Beatrice and the Redemption of Dante as Lover, Reader, and Author

The paradigm of conversion through divine speech, illustrated by Statius and Augustine, reappears in cantos 30 and 31 of *Purgatorio*—a third key sequence of conversion in the *Commedia*, in which the "reformative" words of God through Beatrice

46 *Purgatorio*, 22.79-81.
47 *Confessions*, 5.13.23.
48 *Confessions*, 5.14.24.



redeem the improper loves associated with Virgil's tragic poetry. This important sequence of conversion begins with the exposure, at the moment of Beatrice's entrance into the poem, of the protagonist's disordered love:

> And in my spirit, which for so long a time
> had not been overcome with awe
> that used to make me tremble in her presence—
> even though I could not see her with my eyes—
> through the hidden force that came from her I felt
> the overwhelming power of that ancient love.[49]

This is the language of amatory poetry and, indeed, of Dante's own early poetry: his ninety-first *Rime* opened with the words, "So much do I feel Love's mighty power."[50] Dante's description of "ancient love" with its "mighty power" finds its closest analogue perhaps in Francesca's depiction of Amor in *Inferno* 5. Francesca envisioned love as overwhelming and irresistible, overmastering human beings and bringing them under its inexorable sway. As Beatrice approaches, Dante's first reaction is one of love, but it is not properly ordered love. To apply again the illuminating categories of *Paradiso* 8, Dante's "ancient love" might be likened to the "maddened love" associated with Venus and Dido, the source of mankind's "ancient error." It is *cupiditas*, carnal love, rather than *caritas*, the pure, heavenly love typified by Beatrice.[51] As Hollander observes, "Dante's concupiscent memories and thoughts are at odds with the nature of Beatrice."[52] Even here at the top of Mount Purgatorio, Dante's eros is closer to the blind passion of Francesca and Dido—and the young Augustine in the *Confessions*—than to the purified love that is the proper endpoint of his journey.

If these introductory lines, with their language of overpowering love, hint that Dante harbors a concupiscent eros like Dido's, the next few tercets clarify the Virgilian

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[49] *Purgatorio*, 30.34-39.
[50] Kay, "Dido, Aeneas, and the Evolution of Dante's Poetics," 151.
[51] *Paradiso*, 8.2,4.
[52] Hollander, *Purgatorio*, 680; 30.39n.

background and, through a remarkable allusion to Statius' "poetic conversion," point again to the way Dante's reading of Virgilian poetics has malformed him as a lover and author:

> As soon as that majestic force,
> which had already pierced me once
> before I had outgrown my childhood, struck my eyes,
> I turned to my left with the confidence
> a child has running to his *mamma*
> when he is afraid or in distress
> to say to Virgil: "Not a single drop of blood
> remains in me that does not tremble—
> I know the signs of the ancient flame."[53]

"*Conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma*:" the words are a direct citation of Dido's famous profession of passion in the *Aeneid*, "*Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae*."[54] The pilgrim's startling adaptation of that line associates him again with the circle of the lustful and particularly with Dido, that tragic character in the *Aeneid* whose story so deeply influenced both Augustine-pilgrim and Dante-pilgrim. The "flame" in *Purgatorio* 30 thus symbolizes both the illicit love of the passionate queen, which ended in self-destructive fire, and the *Aeneid* itself, Statius'—and Dante's—*fiamma* in *Purgatorio* 22.

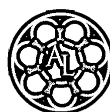
In light of that symbolism, it is highly significant that Dante's first motion when he comes under the power of Beatrice is to turn to Virgil like "a child . . . running to his *mamma*."[55] The author of the *Commedia* has previously used this kind of filial/maternal language to figure Virgil as poetic progenitor of Dante-pilgrim and of Statius. And in fact the Statius episode is clearly in view at this moment, for, as Marchesi notes, Dante here employs the exact same rhyme scheme of *mamma-dramma-fiamma* that Statius used in describing the *Aeneid* as the spring of his poetry.[56] This striking correlation ties

53 *Purgatorio*, 30.40-48.

54 *Aeneid*, 4.23.

55 *Purgatorio*, 30.44.

56 Marchesi, *Dante and Augustine*, 119.



together Statius' poetic genesis, Dante's Virgilian education and formation, and the fiery love of the *Aeneid*, that maddened passion which our poet's authorial voice will soon associate with mankind's "ancient error." Dante's "ancient flame" is the *Aeneid*—his "great love"—together with the kind of disordered eros represented by Virgilian tragic poetry and expressed in Dante's own earlier poetic works, like the *rime* and the *Vita Nuova*. Virgil, as *mamma*, is the source and inspiration of Dante's poetry, meaning that Dante has been nurtured, both as reader and author, by an incomplete and even erroneous understanding of love.

To remove any doubt about the problematic character of the pilgrim's attachment to Virgilian poetry, Dante follows these Aeneadic lines with another allusion to the *Confessions*. The allusion again highlights Dante's disordered affections by linking his sorrow at the loss of his poetic "father," Virgil, to Augustine's misguided sympathy for Dido:

> But Virgil had departed, leaving us bereft:
> Virgil, sweetest of fathers,
> Virgil, to whom I gave myself for my salvation.
> And not all our ancient mother lost
> could save my cheeks, washed in the dew,
> from being stained again with tears.[57]

Again, the paternal/maternal imagery calls for careful consideration. Virgil, as the progenitor of Dante's poetry, is both *mamma* and *patre*.[58] The "ancient mother" is Eve, matriarch of humankind. Atop Mount Purgatorio, Dante has theoretically regained the heavenly Paradise which Eve, his spiritual parent, tragically lost, yet he is preoccupied with the loss of his poetic parent, Virgil. Just like Augustine in the *Confessions*, he weeps over tragic romance but does not shed a tear for the sins that have separated him from Paradise and the presence of God. His tears thus merit a strong rebuke from

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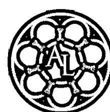
[57] *Purgatorio*, 30.49-54.
[58] *Purgatorio*, 30.44,50.

Beatrice: "Dante, because Virgil has departed, / do not weep, do not weep yet— / there is another sword to make you weep."[59] Beatrice's threefold repetition of *pianger* parallels the threefold mention of Virgil's name a few tercets earlier and simultaneously alludes to the Orpheus narrative, but this is also yet another controlling allusion to the *Confessions*.[60] Augustine recalled his tears for Dido in these words: "What indeed is more pitiful [*miserius*] than a piteous person [*misero*] who has no pity [*miserante*] for himself?"[61] Dante's weeping is like Augustine's weeping: both bemoan Virgilian tragic love without a thought to the disordered state of their own love.

For these erroneous loves to be redeemed, heavenly speech is required. Beatrice's voice, the voice of rebuke, functions as a kind of holy, divine speech that remakes Dante as a lover. First, her "Augustinian" rebuke moves Dante to real penitential sorrow, evidenced in a new outflow of tears that atone for his self-centered, misdirected lament over tragic poetry and the loss of Virgil. At the angels' song, Dante recalls, "the ice that had confined my heart / was turned to breath and water and in anguish / flowed from my breast through eyes and mouth."[62] Given the constant association of love and fire in the *Commedia*, the revelation that Dante has ascended Purgatorio—the mountain which fosters ordered love—with a heart encased in ice confirms the barrenness of true heavenly affection in the protagonist's soul. Now his penitential tears, an expression of proper sorrow over sin rather than misdirected sympathy for sinners, link him to the Augustine who wept over his spiritual brokenness in the moment of turmoil that preceded his liberating conversion to God: "But as this deep meditation dredged all my wretchedness up from the secret profundity of my being and heaped it all together before the eyes of my heart, a huge storm blew up within me and brought on a heavy rain of tears. . . . I went on . . . weeping in the intense

[59] *Purgatorio*, 30.55-57.
[60] Astutely noted by Marchesi, *Dante and Augustine*, 179-180.
[61] *Confessions*, 1.13.21.
[62] *Purgatorio*, 30.97-99.



bitterness of my broken heart."[63] Augustine's weeping over his sin atoned for the tears of misdirected pity he shed over Dido. In the same way, Dante's penitential tears redeem his storm of passion before Dido and Francesca in *Inferno* 5 and his tears of sorrow at the loss of Virgil. His new tears, like Augustine's, point to a new self-knowledge about the condition of his heart and specifically the status of his loves. Dante now heeds the rebuke of conscience, which reveals the malformation of his inner desires, and exhibits true repentance.

After moving Dante to penitence, Beatrice illuminates the essential problem with his past loves: images of earthly things drew him away from contemplation of the supreme Good. Beatrice's beauty was intended to lead Dante on to something higher: love of the supreme Beauty itself. The proper movement of the pilgrim's love was *upward*: from "deceitful things," he was to "ris[e] up" to follow Beatrice, and then to "love that good / beyond which there is nothing left to long for."[64] Dante's error, accordingly, consisted in a *downwards* motion from Beatrice to "false images of good / that bring no promise to fulfillment."[65] In turning away to these "false images," the pilgrim left the path of spiritual ascent rather than pressing heavenward. As Dante confesses to Beatrice, "Things set in front of me, / with their false delights, turned back my steps / the moment that Your countenance was hidden."[66] Preoccupation with mere images of earthly beauty played a key role in Dante's negative "conversion," his turning away from the path of return to God. This perspective on the pilgrim's loves retroactively sheds light on the problem with his earlier habit of reading and writing. As a reader, Dante was preoccupied with the representation of beauty in Virgilian poetry, even as Augustine delighted in the arresting, poignant images of the *Aeneid*, "as

[63] *Confessions*, 8.12.28-29.

[64] *Purgatorio*, 30.56; 31.23-24.

[65] *Purgatorio*, 30.131-132.

[66] *Purgatorio*, 31.34-36.

empty as they were entertaining,"[67] without proceeding to love of God, the highest Good and the supreme Beauty. The same misalignment of love limited Dante as an author, preoccupied with physical and earthly beauty yet paying no attention to the spiritual and heavenly beauty to which Beatrice pointed.

Having exposed the fundamental error in Dante's loves, Beatrice, with her holy, reformative words, now works to remake and order the pilgrim's loves through a death and rebirth like that of Augustine. At the sight of Beatrice's beauty, Dante recalls,

> The nettle of remorse so stung me then
> that whatever else had lured me most to loving
> had now become for me most hateful.
> Such knowledge of my fault was gnawing at my heart
> that I was overcome, and what I then became
> she knows who was the reason for my state.[68]

Dante the lover is redeemed through the excision of his unholy affections. His conversion involves a spiritual death like that of Augustine, who felt himself, at the moment of his conversion, "dying that I might live."[69] The old, habitual loves of Dante's soul—and especially his preoccupation with objects of sense—must die so that new and pure affections can arise, borne from the love of God. Beatrice's holy words bring about the reformation of Dante's disordered affections in a similar way to that in which the "reformative" power of Paul's inspired words realigned Augustine's sinful loves in the *Confessions*. In place of the old attachment to sensual objects of love, the converted Dante is able to correctly appraise and appreciate earthly goods in light of the highest Good. This redeemed perspective on love appears most clearly in Dante's exam with St. John in *Paradiso*, where he confesses, "I love the leaves with which the garden / of the eternal Gardener is in leaf / in measure of the good He has bestowed on them."[70]

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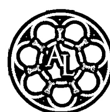
[67] *Confessions*, 1.13.22.

[68] *Purgatorio*, 31.85-90

[69] *Confessions*, 8.8.19.

[70] *Paradiso*, 16.64-66.



The encounter with Beatrice furnishes the pilgrim with a principle of order by which he subjects the love of legitimate earthly goods to love of God Himself.

The confessional sequence with Beatrice not only redeems Dante as a lover but also recreates him as an author, offering him a new kind of poetic power that parallels the newly ordered love in his soul. At the key moment of confession, Dante's power of speech (*virtù*) is "confounded" when he stutters, unable to find words.[71] The encounter with Beatrice stops up Dante's eyes (vision) and tongue (speech), those all-important qualities of a poet emphasized over and over in the *Commedia*. Yet Dante's poetic powers are not destroyed but redeemed, for at the end of this second *cantica*, Beatrice promises a revival of "the powers [*virtù*] that are dead in him."[72] Again, Dante's redemption follows an Augustinian parallel: Augustine too, immediately after his conversion, found himself deprived of the power of speech by divine action, in the form of a toothache. The supernatural power that stripped the converted rhetorician of the faculty of speech—and, hence, of the old mode of speaking to which he was accustomed—also restored to him the power of speech and, at the same time, instilled a new and redeemed mode of speaking.[73] Just as Augustine acknowledged to God, "you detached my tongue from that bond whence you had already delivered my heart,"[74] so Dante's tongue will be loosed to speak, from a soul cleansed of improper love and imbued with love of God.

As a corollary to both the reformation of his disordered love and this new infusion of poetic power, Dante is qualified to become the scribe of a heavenly "text" that will reform his readers. Hence, the recreated poet receives a new authorial mission: "Therefore, to serve the world that lives so ill, / keep your eyes upon the chariot and

[71] *Purgatorio*, 31.7.
[72] *Purgatorio*, 33.129.
[73] *Confessions*, 9.4.12.
[74] *Confessions*, 9.4.7.

write down / what now you see here once you have gone back."[75] Earlier, Dante declared himself the scribe of Amor; when Bonagiunta pointed him out as the author of new rhymes about love, Dante declared, "I am one who, when Love / inspires me, take note and, as he dictates / deep within me, so I set it forth."[76] The old Dante, scribe of earthly Amor, wrote in the language of Virgilian poetry, but the new Dante, the scribe of heavenly words, will write in a higher and holier tongue. He is not inspired by Amor, the god of Love invoked by Francesca, but by God Himself, the "Primal Love."[77] Dante's power as a writer, like Paul's and Augustine's, now derives from a divine source. Dante's imitation of Scriptural language throughout the *Commedia* is a striking indication that his speech has been elevated and sanctified by divine inspiration in a way similar to the authors of Sacred Writ.[78]

Having progressed from Parnassus, the mount of classical inspiration, to Purgatorio, the mount of divine inspiration, a reborn Dante, equipped to serve as God's scribe, is now able to exercise the same converting influence on his readers that he himself experienced in the presence of Beatrice. As a reformed lover, Dante writes—as did Augustine—not for the praise of men, nor from a desire for honor, but "out of love for loving [God]."[79] Like the converted Paul and the converted Augustine, the converted Dante can now write a reformative book, a "sacred poem."[80] In the words of James Chiampi, "The reformation of the poet that permits the sole object of love—divine goodness—to shine through his being guides the spiritual glance of the reader to

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[75] *Purgatorio*, 32.103-105.

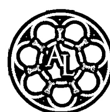
[76] *Purgatorio*, 24.52-54.

[77] *Inferno*, 3.6.

[78] In this respect too, we find the closest affinity between Dante and Augustine, who not only melds his speech with Scriptural citation and allusion throughout the *Confessions*, but also consciously likens himself to Biblical authors like Moses and Paul (see, e.g., *Confessions*, 12.26.36).

[79] *Confessions*, 2.1.1.

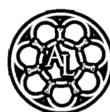
[80] *Paradiso*, 25.1.



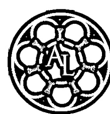
God."[81] The *Commedia* itself is, in a profound way, the product of Dante's own conversion, both a testament to the way Dante has been reformed through divine speech and an instrument to bring about reformation in his readers.

Dante masterfully interweaves the key moments of conversion-through-text in Augustine's *Confessions* into the *Commedia* so as to illuminate the reformation of Dante-pilgrim's loves from love of earthly beauty to love of God for His own sake. *Inferno* 5, where Dante's reaction to Dido and Francesca poignantly recalls Augustine's reading of the tragic Dido in the *Confessions*, exposes the protagonist's disordered passion—his preoccupation with objects in the world instead of and apart from God—while also suggesting the way Virgilian tragic poetry distorted his vision of the world. In the same canto, Paolo and Francesca's conversion to lust through reading a tale of adulterous eros—a striking inversion of Augustine's positive conversion through a Biblical text which condemns lust—powerfully illustrates how reading can move the soul to an improper love of lower incarnations of beauty. The Statius narrative in *Purgatorio* emphasizes that pagan literature can positively direct a reader toward God, but also reveals the need for "reformative" divine speech to recreate the soul. Dante himself encounters precisely this kind of "reformative" speech at the end of *Purgatorio*, where his encounter with Beatrice reverses the problematic text relationships of *Inferno* 5, redeems his attachment to Virgilian tragic poetry, excises his disordered love of earthly things, and recreates him as an author. We may justly conclude that Augustine's narrative forms a master pattern for the *Commedia*, mapping the progression in Dante-pilgrim from education through a flawed text, which limited and even malformed him as a reader, author, and lover, to reformation through the transformative and holy words of Beatrice. Within this perspective, the *Commedia* itself becomes a testament to

[81] Chiampi, *Shadowy Prefaces*, 48.



the power of divine, "reformative" speech to convert the soul, reform its loves, and make it an agent of further transformation.



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